

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Nosedá Conducts Schnittke's First Cello Concerto and the Complete Firebird

Sunday, May 16, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican

Gianandrea Nosedá, conductor · David Cohen, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	SCHNITTKE 1934–1998 <i>Cello Concerto No. 1</i>	38'
2	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>"L'Oiseau de feu" (The Firebird), Ballet Music (complete)</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		83'

Alfred Schnittke

1934–1998

Cello Concerto No. 1

38 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

In the spring of 1985 Alfred Schnittke began a cello concerto for Natalia Gutman, on a commission from Munich, where the new Gasteig cultural centre was about to open. He had

sketched a work in three movements when, in July, he suffered a severe stroke. He was fifty. He spent weeks in hospital and came close to death; when he recovered, with his health permanently damaged, he took the concerto up again where he had left it. It was finished the following year and first played in Munich on 7 May 1986 by Gutman, its dedicatee, with the Munich Philharmonic under Eri Klas.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The concerto opens with the cello alone, heavily (the marking is *Pesante*), turning over a short questioning figure. The orchestra enters like an echo of the soloist's line and slowly grows independent of it. This is the pattern for the first movement: the cello leads, the orchestra follows, swells, and at the peaks of its great waves simply drowns the soloist. A cadenza builds to a climax in which the opening question returns as a shout, and the movement breaks off.

The second movement, a *Largo*, looks for a way out through stillness. The orchestra offers chorale-like themes and the cello, in its most vulnerable voice, joins one of them before climbing to the top of its range. The third is fast and sounds at first like a finale: a sharp-edged march and a whirl of dance figures with a grot-

esque tinge that recalls Shostakovich. It does not last. The chorale from the slow movement crashes in at the height of the noise and the soloist is swept away.

Then the cello begins again, quietly, feeling its way towards a melody. This last Largo is the true finale. The tune is simple and hymn-like, and it climbs by steps, repeated and reinforced as more and more of the orchestra joins. The score calls for the cello to be amplified, which lets the line carry over the full ensemble. Whether the ending is a triumph or something more hard-won and exhausted is left open, and good performances keep it open.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

"L'Oiseau de feu" (The Firebird), Ballet Music (complete)

45 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

The Firebird was the first score Stravinsky wrote for Sergei Diaghilev, and the one that made him famous. Diaghilev wanted a new ballet on Russian fairy-tale subjects for the 1910 Paris season of his Ballets Russes. His first choice of composer was Anatoly Lyadov; when that came to nothing he turned to a 27-year-old pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov whose short orchestral pieces he had heard in St Petersburg. Stravinsky wrote the mu-

sic over the winter of 1909 to 1910, working closely with the choreographer Michel Fokine. The first performance, at the Paris Opéra on 25 June 1910, was conducted by Gabriel Pierné, with Tamara Karsavina as the Firebird and Fokine himself as Prince Ivan. It was an immediate success.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Stravinsky took from Rimsky-Korsakov a simple way of telling two worlds apart. The human characters, Ivan and the princesses, have music built on plain scales and folk melody. The supernatural ones, Kashchei and the Firebird, have slithering chromatic harmony based on interlocking thirds. The opening, low in the basses and cellos, is Kashchei's garden at night. When the Firebird appears the orchestra breaks into glittering fragments: flutes, harps, celesta, string harmonics.

The princesses' round dance (Khorovod) is built on a Russian folk-song and brings the first sustained melody of the evening, on the oboe. The Infernal Dance is the showpiece: a syncopated, stamping theme hurled between sections of the orchestra, the clearest sign of the composer who would write *The Rite of Spring* three years later. The Berceuse that follows gives a drooping tune to the bassoon over muted strings and harp.

The ending is the famous part. Out of near silence a solo horn plays another folk melody, quietly. It is passed to the strings, then the full orchestra, and finally transformed into a pealing hymn in an uneven seven-beat metre with the brass in full cry. In the complete ballet that apotheosis arrives after three quarters of an hour of preparation, and it lands accordingly.

Tonight's artists

David Cohen *cello*

The soloist comes from inside the orchestra: David Cohen is the LSO's Principal Cello, and this concert is one of the season's showcases for its own principals. Schnittke's concerto is seldom programmed, and the orchestra's season announcement singles it out as a rarity. Gianandrea Nosedà, the LSO's Principal Guest Conductor, pairs it with the complete *Firebird* in the second of his two Barbican programmes this month, a single concert on Sunday 16 May 2027.

David Cohen is Principal Cello of the London Symphony Orchestra, a post he took up in 2022. He made his solo debut with the Belgian National Orchestra at the age of nine and studied at the Yehudi Menuhin School and then at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama with Oleg Kogan, winning the Guildhall's Gold Medal. In 2001 he became Principal Cello of the Philharmonia Orchestra, the youngest principal in its history, and held the post until 2009. He teaches at the Conservatoire Royal in Mons and at Trinity Laban in London, founded the chamber music festival *Les Sons Intensifs* in Lessines, and plays a cello by Domenico Montagnana of about 1735.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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