

Tamestit's Harold in Italy and Schumann's Rhenish

Friday, January 9, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Klaus Mäkelä, conductor · Antoine Tamestit, viola

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BERLIOZ 1803–1869 <i>Harold en Italie, Op. 16</i>	40'
2	SCHUMANN 1810–1856 <i>Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 97 ('Rheinische')</i>	33'
TOTAL MUSIC		73'

Hector Berlioz

1803–1869

Harold en Italie, Op. 16

THE COMPOSER

Hector Berlioz was music's great revolutionary. Born in 1803 near Grenoble, he was expected to follow his father, a physician, into medicine and dutifully enrolled at the School of Medicine in Paris. But the lure of music proved irresistible.

Berlioz's path was never easy. His independent mind and refusal to follow traditional rules put him at odds with the conservative Parisian musical establishment. He won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1830. Throughout his life his music was more appreciated abroad, in Germany, Britain and Russia, than at home. Yet his innovations in orchestration, program music, and musical narrative transformed the art form.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Berlioz never studied the piano and played it haltingly at best. The orchestra was his instrument, and he expanded its expressive possibilities in ways no one had imagined.

ABOUT THE WORK

Harold in Italy is one of the most original works of the Romantic era: a symphony with a solo viola woven through it, somewhere between a symphony and a concerto, and like nothing written before it. It owes its existence to a famous near-miss. In 1834 the legendary violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini, having acquired a fine Stradivarius viola, asked Berlioz to write him a concert piece to show it off. Berlioz obliged with a first movement, but Paganini, finding the solo part too

40 minutes

restrained, with too many bars of rest, declared it would not do; he wanted to play continuously, and he never performed the work. Berlioz, undeterred, completed it on his own grander plan: not a virtuoso vehicle but, as he put it, ‘a series of scenes for orchestra in which the solo viola would be involved as a more or less active character, always retaining its own individuality.’

That character is Harold, Berlioz’s musical portrait of the melancholy, world-weary wanderer of Byron’s poem *Childe Harold*, here drawn from the composer’s own youthful travels in the mountains of the Abruzzi in Italy. The viola represents Harold himself: a solitary, observing presence who moves through four vivid scenes, sometimes participating, sometimes merely watching from the sidelines. A recurring ‘Harold’ theme, a Berliozian *idée fixe* cousin to the one in his *Symphonie fantastique*, identifies him throughout.

The work was premiered in Paris on 23 November 1834. Paganini did not hear it until 1838, and was so overwhelmed that he knelt and kissed Berlioz’s hand before the audience, and sent him a gift of 20,000 francs that freed the composer to write his next masterpiece. Today *Harold in Italy* is treasured both as a Romantic landmark and as one of the great showcases for the viola.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first for Harold’s theme: after a brooding orchestral introduction, the solo viola enters with a long, songful melody, noble and a little melancholy, that will return, transformed, in every movement, marking Harold’s presence in each scene.

The four movements are vivid pictures. The first, ‘Harold in the Mountains,’ moves from gloom to exhilaration. The second, the ‘March of the Pilgrims,’ is the most famous: a procession that seems to approach from afar and recede into the distance, with tolling bells, over which the viola muses; listen for the magical, fading close. The third, ‘Serenade,’ evokes an Abruzzi mountain-eer serenading his sweetheart: a piping tune on the *cor anglais* and oboe, with Harold’s viola observing the lovers’ scene. The finale, the ‘Orgy of the Brigands,’ is wild and headlong; listen for how Berlioz, in a Beethovenian gesture, briefly recalls themes from the earlier movements before the riotous bandits sweep them away. Notice, too, how the once-central viola falls almost silent here, the dreamer overwhelmed by the violent world around him.

Robert Schumann

1810–1856

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 97 ('Rheinische')

THE COMPOSER

Robert Schumann was born on June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Saxony, into a literary household. His father was a publisher and bookseller, and throughout his life, Schumann remained as devoted to literature as to music, editing an influential music journal and writing eloquent criticism that championed Chopin, Berlioz, and the young Brahms.

After abandoning law studies in Leipzig, Schumann pursued a career as a concert pianist, but a growing weakness in the fingers of his right hand forced him to focus on composition. His piano works of the 1830s, including *Carnaval*, *Kreisleriana*, and *Kinderszenen*, established him as a leading voice of musical Romanticism. In 1840, after a long legal battle with her father, he married the celebrated pianist Clara Wieck, and their union sparked an extraordinary creative outburst: more than half of all Schumann's songs date from that single year.

Schumann's later years were shadowed by mental illness, which had plagued him intermittently since youth. In 1854, after attempting suicide, he was confined to an asylum near Bonn, where he died on July 29, 1856, at the age of forty-six.

ABOUT THE WORK

Schumann's 'Rhenish' Symphony is music of homecoming and celebration. In 1850 he took up a new post as municipal music director in Düsseldorf, on the Rhine, and the move into the warm, vital cultural life of the Rhineland clearly delighted him. The symphony (the last he composed, though published as his Third) poured out in a few weeks at the end of that year, and it overflows with the broad, generous, open-air spirit of the great river and its people. Where so much of Schumann's music is inward and confiding, the 'Rhenish' is public and expansive, a portrait of a region and a mood.

It has an unusual five-movement design, recalling Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony, and the extra movement is the key to its character. After a soaring first movement and a genial scherzo (originally headed 'Morning on the Rhine'), Schumann inserts, before the finale, a solemn, awe-struck slow movement inspired by a real event: the Schumanns had visited the great Gothic cathedral at Cologne, where the archbishop was about to be elevated to cardinal. The fourth movement, marked 'Feierlich' (solemnly), is Schumann's musical evocation of that grandeur: a hushed, archaic processional built on chorale-like brass, conjuring the soaring stone vaults of the cathedral.

The symphony was premiered in Düsseldorf on 6 February 1851 under the composer's own direction. It remains the sunniest and most extrovert of his symphonies and, in its 'cathedral' movement, the site of some of his most profound and original music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement bursts in without preamble on a great, surging theme in swinging triple time, one of Schumann's most exhilarating openings. Listen for how the rhythm seems to push against the bar-lines, giving the music its irresistible forward sweep, and for the broad, horn-led climaxes that evoke the wide Rhineland landscape.

The second movement is a relaxed, rustic scherzo with a folk-like, almost beer-hall lilt (Schumann first marked it 'Morning on the Rhine'); the third is a tender, songful intermezzo. Then comes the heart of the work: the solemn fourth movement. Listen for the hushed entry of the trombones intoning a grave, chorale-like theme, and for the dense, archaic, almost ecclesiastical counterpoint that follows: music of extraordinary weight and mystery, evoking the vast space of Cologne Cathedral. Out of this solemnity the finale springs, bright and festive, sweeping away the shadows; listen near the end for the return of the cathedral music, now transfigured and triumphant, crowning the symphony in radiant E-flat.

Tonight's artists

Antoine Tamestit *viola*

Harold in Italy is not a conventional concerto but a character study, and it asks of its soloist something subtle: the viola must be a presence rather than a showman, by turns singing, musing and simply observing the scenes around it. Antoine Tamestit, whose glowing, deeply coloured tone on the legendary 1672 'Mahler' Stradivarius is among the most beautiful viola sounds before the public, is an ideal Harold, able to make the instrument the melancholy, watching soul at the centre of Berlioz's Italian wanderings.

Antoine Tamestit, born in Paris in 1979, is one of the world's foremost violists, a soloist who has done much to raise the profile of his instrument. Trained at the Paris Conservatoire and at Yale, and a pupil of the great violist Tabea Zimmermann, he won major prizes including first place at the ARD and William Primrose competitions and was a BBC New Generation Artist. He is celebrated for his flawless technique and, above all, for the exceptional warmth and richness of his tone. A committed champion of new music, he has premiered concertos written for him, including Jörg Widmann's. He plays the 'Mahler' Stradivarius of 1672, the very first viola made by Antonio Stradivari, and one of the most storied instruments in the world.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz

Hector Berlioz, translated by David Cairns, Alfred A. Knopf 2002

Berlioz's own witty account of his life, in David Cairns's translation, including how Paganini's request for a viola piece led to Harold in Italy.

ACCESSIBLE Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician

John Worthen, Yale University Press 2010

A humane, readable life of Schumann that covers his move to Düsseldorf on the Rhine, where he wrote the Rhenish Symphony.

DEEPER The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz

Peter Bloom, Cambridge University Press 2000

Scholarly essays on Berlioz's music and ideas, including his symphonies, for a closer look at Harold in Italy.

SOURCES

1. Klaus Mäkelä conducts the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Berlioz and Schumann, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwworkest.nl/en/calendar/klaus-makela-conducts-berlioz-and-schumann-2026-01-09/>
2. Klaus Mäkelä conducts Berlioz and Schumann, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/10159645-klaus-makela-conducts-berlioz-and-schumann>
3. Concertgebouwworkest speelt Schumann en Berlioz met Klaus Mäkelä, I amsterdam. <https://www.i amsterdam.com/en/whats-on/calendar/concerts-and-music/concerts/concertgebouwworkest-speelt-schumann-en-berlioz-met-klaus-makela>
4. Harold en Italie, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_en_Italie
5. Harold in Italy, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/1920/harold-in-italy>
6. Symphony No. 3 (Schumann), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_\(Schumann\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(Schumann))
7. Symphony No. 3, in E-flat major, Op. 97, "Rhenish", Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/3966/symphony-no-3-in-e-flat-major-op-97-rhenish>
8. Schumann Symphony No. 3, Rhenish, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/schumann-symphony-no-3-rhenish>
9. Antoine Tamestit, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_Tamestit
10. Antoine Tamestit, harmonia mundi. <https://harmoniamundi.com/en/artistes/antoine-tamestit>
11. The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780375413919>
12. Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300163988>
13. The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521596381>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-01-09-makela>

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