

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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

40 minutes

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 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.’

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 mountaineer 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')

33 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

Version 3, 30 September 2026