

Kavakos Plays Korngold; Wagner and Respighi

Wednesday, January 21, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Jaap van Zweden, conductor · Leonidas Kavakos, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ZARIŅA b. 2000 <i>Bloom</i>	8'
2	KORNGOLD 1897–1957 <i>Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35</i>	25'
3	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>Prelude and Liebestod from 'Tristan und Isolde'</i>	18'
4	RESPIGHI 1879–1936 <i>Pini di Roma</i>	22'
TOTAL MUSIC		73'

Annija Anna Zariņa

b. 2000

Bloom

THE COMPOSER

Annija Anna Zariņa (born 2000) is a young Latvian composer. She took her bachelor's degree in composition at both the Royal Conservatory in The Hague and the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, and has gone on to master's studies at the Yale School of Music. Working chiefly in contemporary classical and chamber music, she is drawn to conceptual and text-based composition and to a refined minimalism, an aesthetic that prizes clarity and intention and achieves its effects with carefully limited means. Despite her youth, her music has been taken up by notable ensembles including the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Bang on a Can All-Stars and the Latvian Radio Choir, and she has won a series of awards for young composers.

ABOUT THE WORK

The programme opens with a world premiere: *Bloom*, a new work by the young Latvian composer Annija Anna Zariņa. Placing a brand-new piece by a composer born in 2000 at the head of an evening that runs through Korngold, Wagner and Respighi is a deliberate gesture: a reminder that the orchestra is not only a museum of the past but a living instrument for the music of now.

8 minutes

Zariņa belongs to a generation of European composers for whom texture, atmosphere and concept often matter as much as theme and development. Her work has tended toward a refined minimalism (clarity achieved with limited means) and toward the exploration of sound itself. A title like Bloom suggests an organic process: something opening, unfolding, coming gradually into being, which is exactly the kind of gradual transformation that minimalist-influenced music does so well. As a premiere, the piece comes to its first listeners without the weight of a performance history, asking simply to be heard freshly and on its own terms.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Come to this one with open ears and no preconceptions: there are no famous tunes to wait for, because no one has heard it before. With music in this vein, the rewards usually lie in process and texture: listen for how sound emerges and grows, how the orchestra's colours shift and combine, how a small amount of material is patiently transformed. The title invites you to hear the music as a kind of blossoming, a gradual unfolding from something simple toward something fuller. Let it set the ear, and the mind, before the great Romantic statements that follow.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

25 minutes

1897–1957

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35

THE COMPOSER

Erich Wolfgang Korngold, born in Brünn (today Brno) in 1897, was the most spectacular child prodigy of his generation: a boy whose ballet *Der Schneemann*, written at eleven, became a sensation in Vienna, whom Mahler called a genius, and who by his early twenties had written the international operatic hit *Die tote Stadt* (1920). His was a late-Romantic idiom of opulent harmony and soaring melody, unfashionable in an age turning toward modernism. In 1934 Max Reinhardt invited him to Hollywood, and Korngold went on to become a founder of the symphonic film score, winning Oscars for *Anthony Adverse* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and bringing full Viennese Romanticism to the cinema. As a Jew, he found that the rise of the Nazis turned that move into exile, and it very likely saved his life. After the war he tried to return to concert composition with a violin concerto and a symphony, but felt out of step with musical fashion. He died in Los Angeles in 1957; the rehabilitation of his concert music came decades later.

ABOUT THE WORK

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was a child prodigy of almost Mozartean precocity (Mahler called him a genius when he was nine) who became a celebrated opera composer in 1920s Vienna. Then history intervened: a Jewish artist, he found refuge in Hollywood in the 1930s and became one of the founders of the symphonic film score, winning Oscars for swashbucklers like *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. After the war, with the Nazis defeated, he turned back to the concert hall, and the Violin Concerto of 1945 was his glorious re-entry. Famously, he built it from melodies drawn from his own film scores, themes from *Another Dawn*, *Juarez* and *Anthony Adverse* among them, repurposing music written for the screen as the material of a full Romantic concerto. Far from cheapening it, this gives the work its lush, soaring, unashamedly emotional character.

Korngold dedicated the concerto to Alma Mahler, widow of his early champion Gustav Mahler, and it found the ideal advocate in Jascha Heifetz, who gave the premiere in St Louis on 15 February 1947 to one of the most rapturous ovations the city had ever heard. Heifetz's advocacy did much to establish it in the repertoire. Gorgeously orchestrated, fiendishly difficult, and drenched in late-Romantic glamour, it is the sound of Old Vienna reborn in Technicolor Hollywood.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

From the soloist's very first phrase, this is music of soaring, golden lyricism. Listen for the gorgeous opening theme (lifted from the film *Another Dawn*) that the violin sings high above shimmering orchestral colour. The whole first movement luxuriates in big, cinematic melodies and lush harmony, with a brilliant cadenza for the soloist.

The slow movement (*Romance*) is the concerto's heart: a tender, dreamy nocturne built on a melody from *Anthony Adverse*, the violin spinning long, rapt lines over a glowing accompaniment touched with celesta and vibraphone: pure Hollywood enchantment. Then the finale bursts in, a fast, jaunty, jig-like romp full of bravura fireworks and high spirits. Listen for the dazzling virtuosity Korngold demands (rapid runs, leaps and double-stops) and for the way the movement drives to a brilliant, exhilarating close. Throughout, savour the sheer unembarrassed beauty of the writing: this is Romanticism that survived into the twentieth century and went to the movies.

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

Prelude and Liebestod from 'Tristan und Isolde'

THE COMPOSER

Richard Wagner transformed opera more radically than any composer before or since. Born in Leipzig in 1813, he grew up in a family steeped in theater and from an early age was drawn to the dramatic rather than the purely musical. Apart from a spell of lessons with the Leipzig cantor Theodor Weinlig, he was largely self-directed as a composer, absorbing Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller alongside Beethoven, developing a vision of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a “total work of art” synthesizing poetry, drama, music, and visual spectacle.

Wagner’s path was turbulent. An active participant in the 1849 Dresden uprising, he spent years in political exile, fleeing creditors and nursing turbulent love affairs. Yet his genius attracted patrons, most notably the eccentric King Ludwig II of Bavaria, whose financial support made possible Wagner’s ultimate achievement: the construction of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth, a theater designed specifically for his works. There, in 1876, his monumental four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* received its first complete performance.

Wagner’s musical innovations (the seamless orchestral flow, the system of *leitmotifs* or recurring themes associated with characters, objects, or ideas, and the extreme chromaticism that strained the boundaries of tonality) influenced virtually every composer who followed, from Strauss and Mahler to Schoenberg and beyond.

ABOUT THE WORK

Few works changed music as profoundly as *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner’s opera of 1865, the story of two lovers bound by a magic potion to a passion that can only be consummated in death, pushed harmony to the very edge of tonality and, in doing so, helped open the door to the music of the next hundred years. Its very first bars announce the revolution: the famous ‘Tristan chord,’ a dissonance that aches to resolve but does not, setting up a state of yearning that the music sustains, almost unbearably, across the whole four-hour opera, and only fully releases at the very end.

The Prelude and Liebestod is Wagner’s own concert distillation of that vast arc, brilliantly pairing the opera’s beginning and ending into a single span of about eighteen minutes. The Prelude (which opens the opera) is all rising desire: surging, swelling phrases that climb and fall back, never quite arriving. The ‘Liebestod’ (‘Love-Death’) is Isolde’s final scene, sung over the body of the dead Tristan as she is transfigured by love and, in ecstasy, joins him in death. Wagner arranged the two together so that the longing of the Prelude finds, at

last, its overwhelming consummation and release in the Liebestod's final, radiant resolution. It is one of the supreme expressions of Romantic yearning ever composed.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, right at the start, for the Tristan chord, the very first sustained harmony, which seems to lean forward, asking to resolve, and then slips instead into another unresolved chord. This refusal to settle is the engine of the whole piece. The Prelude builds in great waves of rising, surging melody, each climbing higher and pulling back, generating an almost physical sense of longing and frustration that mounts to a shattering climax before subsiding.

Then, without the opera's intervening hours, Wagner gives us the Liebestod. Listen for how Isolde's transfiguration theme rises, gradually and inexorably, through the orchestra: the same kind of surging phrases as the Prelude, but now flooding toward fulfilment rather than frustration. The music swells to an overwhelming peak and then, finally, melts into a long, glowing resolution, the harmonic release withheld since the opera's first bar. After so much yearning, the effect of that final, peaceful chord is profound: desire consummated, at last, in death and transcendence.

Ottorino Respighi

22 minutes

1879–1936

Pini di Roma

THE COMPOSER

Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936) was the leading Italian orchestral composer of his generation, and one of history's supreme masters of orchestral colour. Trained in Italy and, crucially, in Russia, where he studied briefly with Rimsky-Korsakov, the great wizard of orchestration, he absorbed a dazzling command of instrumental sound that he applied to a distinctly Italian sensibility. At a time when Italian music meant, above all, opera, Respighi was unusual in devoting himself to the orchestra. He is best known for his brilliant 'Roman trilogy' of tone poems (Fountains of Rome, Pines of Rome and Roman Festivals) celebrating the sights, history and atmosphere of the Eternal City. A scholar as well as a colourist, he was also fascinated by early music, lovingly arranging Renaissance and Baroque pieces. His finest works combine spectacular orchestral virtuosity with vivid pictorialism and a warm lyrical gift.

ABOUT THE WORK

Pines of Rome (Pini di Roma), completed in 1924, is the most famous of Respighi's 'Roman trilogy' and one of the great orchestral showpieces of the twentieth century. Where his earlier *Fountains of Rome* had painted the city's waters at different hours, *Pines* uses the umbrella pines that line Rome's avenues and ruins as a frame for four vivid scenes spanning different places and, remarkably, different eras of the city's long history. It is music of spectacular orchestral imagination, building to one of the most overwhelming climaxes in the repertoire.

Respighi's pictorialism is exact and inventive. The four movements move from a children's game in a sunlit park, to the shadowy depths of an ancient catacomb, to a moonlit nocturne on the Janiculum hill, and finally to a vision of the ancient Roman legions marching in triumph along the Appian Way. Famously, the third movement calls for something unheard-of in 1924: the recorded song of a real nightingale, to be played on a gramophone over the orchestra, one of the first uses of a recording within a live orchestral work. The premiere took place in Rome on 14 December 1924, and the piece has thrilled audiences ever since with its sheer sonic splendour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The four movements run without a break, each a vivid picture. **'The Pines of the Villa Borghese'** bursts in with brilliant, chattering energy: children playing and shouting in a Roman park, the orchestra glittering and boisterous. Then, abruptly, **'Pines Near a Catacomb'**: the mood turns dark and solemn, with hushed, chant-like brass evoking ancient subterranean worship; listen for the music swelling from the depths and receding.

'The Pines of the Janiculum' is a moonlit nocturne, opening with a rippling piano cadenza and a long, dreamy clarinet melody; at its close, listen for the famous recorded nightingale, singing over the quiet orchestra. Then comes the finale, **'The Pines of the Appian Way.'** It begins almost inaudibly, with a low, throbbing tread in the basses and a steady drumbeat, depicting a Roman legion approaching from far off along the ancient road at misty dawn. Listen for how Respighi builds, with extraordinary patience and cumulative power, from that distant rumble to a blazing, brass-drenched march (with extra brass often placed around the hall), the legion advancing in overwhelming triumph as the sun rises over Rome. It is one of the most spine-tingling crescendos in all music.

Tonight's artists

Leonidas Kavakos *violin*

Korngold's Violin Concerto pairs Hollywood glamour with formidable technical demands, and it asks for a soloist who can pour out its soaring, golden melodies without ever tipping into mere sentimentality. Leonidas Kavakos, celebrated for the aristocratic refinement and depth of his tone, brings exactly that combination of warmth and seriousness, able to honour the concerto's unashamed Romantic beauty while giving it the dignity and finish of a master. In his hands the film-score themes become genuine concert poetry.

Leonidas Kavakos, born in Athens in 1967, is one of the most revered violinists in the world. He swept the major competitions early, winning the Sibelius, Paganini and Naumburg prizes, and made his name with a sensational recording of the original version of the Sibelius Concerto, long withheld from performance, which won Gramophone's Concerto of the Year. Trained in Greece and with Josef Gingold in the United States, he is admired for the depth, integrity and aristocratic poise of his playing, a sound of great refinement and inner intensity rather than mere flash. He performs and records widely with the world's leading orchestras, is increasingly active as a conductor, and plays the 1734 'Willemotte' Stradivarius.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold**

Brendan G. Carroll, Amadeus Press 1997

The full biography of Korngold, from Viennese child prodigy to Hollywood, and the story of the Violin Concerto built from his film themes.

ACCESSIBLE **Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music**

Alex Ross, Picador 2021

A wide-ranging account of Wagner's influence on art and culture, in which Tristan und Isolde plays a central part.

DEEPER **Richard Wagner: Tristan und Isolde**

Arthur Groos, Cambridge University Press 2011

A Cambridge Opera Handbook of scholarly essays on Tristan und Isolde, for readers who want to go deeper into the Prelude and Liebestod.

SOURCES

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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-01-21-van-zweden>

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