

Szeps-Znaider's Beethoven and Elgar's First

Wednesday, January 28, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Antonio Pappano, conductor · Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61</i>	42'
2	ELGAR 1857–1934 <i>Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55</i>	50'
TOTAL MUSIC		92'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven's only violin concerto is now universally regarded as one of the supreme masterpieces for the instrument: serene, spacious and song-like, music of Olympian calm from the most turbulent of composers. Yet its beginnings were chaotic. Beethoven wrote it in 1806 for the violinist Franz Clement, a brilliant player and friend, and, as so often, he finished it desperately late; it is believed that Clement had to sight-read parts of the solo line at the premiere in Vienna on

42 minutes

23 December 1806. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that first performance was not a success, and the concerto languished for decades, dismissed as too long and insufficiently brilliant.

Its rescue came almost forty years later, and from a child. In 1844 the twelve-year-old prodigy Joseph Joachim played it in London under Mendelssohn's baton, and his advocacy, sustained over a long career, finally established the concerto as the cornerstone of the repertoire it is today. What earlier audiences heard as a lack of fireworks we now recognise as its glory: this is a concerto not of display but of breadth, lyricism and inwardness, the soloist less a virtuoso showman than a singer floating long, radiant lines above the orchestra.

It is also one of the most original concertos ever written, beginning not with a flourish but with five quiet, mysterious taps on the timpani, a rhythmic motif that, astonishingly, goes on to permeate the entire first movement. From that hushed opening grows some of the most sublime and expansive music Beethoven ever wrote.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, right at the start, to those five soft drum-beats, an utterly novel way to open a concerto, and a rhythmic idea that recurs throughout the long first movement, sometimes gently, sometimes (on unexpected notes) with a faint sense of unease. The movement is vast and unhurried; rather than waiting for bravura, savour the breadth of its themes and the way the solo violin, when it finally enters, soars and decorates rather than competes, spinning endless lyrical lines.

The slow movement (*Larghetto*) is pure serenity: a hushed set of variations on a tender theme, the violin embroidering above muted strings, music of rapt, almost religious calm. It leads without a break, via a questioning pause, straight into the finale: a buoyant, dancing Rondo with a catchy hunting-horn lilt. Listen for how the soloist tosses the cheerful main tune around with the orchestra, with moments of charm and wit, bringing this most spacious and noble of concertos to a genial, high-spirited close. (Listen, too, for the cadenzas, the soloist's unaccompanied flourishes, which different violinists choose from a range of versions.)

Edward Elgar

1857–1934

Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55

THE COMPOSER

Edward Elgar (1857–1934) was the composer who, more than any other, restored England to the front rank of European music after two centuries in which it had produced no figure of international stature. Largely self-taught, the son of a Worcester music-shop owner and organist, he made his way slowly from the provinces to national and then world fame, achieving his breakthrough in 1899 with the Enigma Variations. A late Romantic to his core, steeped in Wagner, Brahms and Richard Strauss yet unmistakably English in his blend of nobility, warmth and wistful melancholy, he gave his country a body of great orchestral music: two symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, the Enigma Variations, the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* and the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. Knighted and laden with honours, he became the very emblem of Edwardian Britain, though his finest music reaches far beyond pomp into a deep, often autumnal expressivity. His wife Alice's death in 1920 effectively silenced him as a composer for his last years.

ABOUT THE WORK

Elgar's First Symphony was one of the most eagerly awaited works in British musical history. By 1908 he was at the height of his fame, and it was widely known that he had been contemplating a symphony for over a decade; when it finally appeared, the anticipation was enormous. The premiere, given by the Hallé Orchestra under the great Hans Richter (the conductor who had led the first Ring cycle for Wagner) in Manchester on 3 December 1908, was a sensation. Rehearsing the London Symphony Orchestra for the London premiere a few days later, Richter reportedly called it 'the greatest symphony of modern times, written by the greatest modern composer,' and the public agreed: within little more than a year the symphony had received around a hundred performances across Britain, Europe and America, an almost unheard-of success for a new symphonic work.

Elgar dedicated it to Richter, and built the vast, four-movement structure around a single 'motto' theme, a broad, noble melody (he marked it *nobilmente*, a favourite Elgarian direction) heard at the very opening, which returns, transformed, across the whole symphony to bind it together and crown it at the end. The work is huge in scale and emotional range, moving from serene grandeur through a driving, restless scherzo to one of the most beautiful slow movements ever written by an Englishman, before a finale that battles its way to a blazing return of the opening nobility. It is Edwardian confidence and private vulnerability held in a single, magnificent span.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Everything begins with the motto theme: listen, at the very opening, for a slow, grand, hymn-like melody over a quiet tread, noble and serene. Fix it in your memory, because Elgar will bring it back, transformed, throughout the symphony, and its triumphant return is the work's ultimate goal. After this majestic introduction, the first movement proper grows restless and stormy, the calm of the motto repeatedly disturbed.

The second movement is a fierce, driving scherzo, full of nervous energy and brilliant orchestration; listen for how its hurtling march-like material gives way to a gentler, almost pastoral episode. Then, magically, that same fast music slows and transforms directly into the great Adagio third movement, one of the supreme slow movements in the repertoire, music of profound, songful tenderness that Richter compared to Beethoven. (Listen for how the scherzo's notes literally become the Adagio's melody, slowed almost beyond recognition.) The finale begins in shadow and uncertainty, gathering its forces, until at last the noble motto theme returns in full glory, sweeping the symphony to a radiant, affirmative close in A-flat.

Tonight's artists

Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider *violin*

Beethoven's Violin Concerto rewards not flash but breadth, nobility and a singing line sustained over its vast span, qualities that suit Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider perfectly. With his large, warm, aristocratic tone and his deep musical seriousness (sharpened, no doubt, by his parallel life as a conductor), he is a natural Beethovenian, able to give the long lyrical paragraphs of the first movement and the rapt serenity of the Larghetto their full measure. On a Guarneri once played by Kreisler, his is exactly the kind of grand, unhurried account this most spacious of concertos asks for.

Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, born in Copenhagen in 1975 to Polish-Jewish parents, is a Danish violinist and conductor of the front rank. He announced himself by winning the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels in 1997, following earlier successes at the Carl Nielsen and Sibelius competitions, and went on to a major international career as a soloist, admired for the richness, power and aristocratic breadth of his tone. In recent years he has built an equally significant career on the podium, serving as music director of the Orchestre National de Lyon and as principal guest conductor of the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, a double life as soloist and conductor that gives his music-making an unusually complete musical perspective. He plays a great Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin once owned by Fritz Kreisler.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: A Life**

Jan Caeyers, University of California Press 2020

A readable modern life of Beethoven that follows him through the productive years around 1806, when he wrote the Violin Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Elgar**

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2004

A compact life of Elgar by one of his leading biographers, covering the long-awaited First Symphony of 1908.

DEEPER **Beethoven: Violin Concerto**

Robin Stowell, Cambridge University Press 1998

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to the Violin Concerto alone: its genesis, its first performance and how violinists have played it.

SOURCES

1. Antonio Pappano conducts the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Beethoven and Elgar, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwkeest.nl/en/calendar/beethovens-violin-concerto-2026-01-28/>
 2. Antonio Pappano, conductor, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwkeest.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/antonio-pappano/>
 3. Antonio Pappano, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Pappano
 4. Violin Concerto (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Beethoven))
 5. Symphony No. 1 (Elgar), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_\(Elgar\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_(Elgar))
 6. Edward Elgar, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Elgar
 7. Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolaj_Szeps-Znaider
 8. Beethoven: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520343542>
 9. The Life of Elgar, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521009072>
 10. Beethoven: Violin Concerto, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521457750>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-01-28-pappano>

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