

Gabetta's Martinů, and Ravel's Daphnis

Wednesday, May 13, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Santtu-Matias Rouvali, conductor · Sol Gabetta, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DVORAK 1841–1904 <i>In Nature's Realm, Op. 91</i>	14'
2	MARTINŮ 1890–1959 <i>Cello Concerto No. 1, H. 196</i>	30'
3	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>Jeu de cartes</i>	23'
4	RAVEL 1875–1937 <i>Suite No. 2 from 'Daphnis et Chloé'</i>	17'
TOTAL MUSIC		84'

Antonin Dvorak

1841–1904

In Nature's Realm, Op. 91

THE COMPOSER

Antonin Dvorak was born on September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, a small village north of Prague in Bohemia. The eldest of fourteen children, he was expected to follow his father into the butcher's trade, but his unmistakable musical talent led him on a different path. After studying at the Prague Organ School, Dvorak spent years playing viola in theatre orchestras while composing in his spare time, often in conditions of considerable hardship.

His breakthrough came when Johannes Brahms, serving on a jury for a composition prize, recognized Dvorak's exceptional gifts and recommended him to his own publisher, Simrock. The resulting Slavonic Dances (1878) were an immediate international success. Following in the footsteps of Bedrich Smetana, Dvorak went on to achieve worldwide fame as a Czech composer. His time as director of the National Conservatory in New York (1892-1895) produced some of his most beloved works, including the "New World" Symphony and the Cello Concerto.

14 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

In 1891 Dvořák conceived a cycle of three concert overtures on the grand theme of 'Nature, Life and Love', meant to be played together as a single arc. He later separated them and gave each its own title and opus number: In Nature's Realm (Op. 91), the boisterous Carnival (Op. 92), and the dark, jealous Othello (Op. 93). The first of the three, heard tonight, is a serene and radiant hymn to the natural world, written at the height of Dvořák's powers, just before he left for his celebrated years in America.

The overture is built around a single, gently rocking 'nature motif' that pervades the whole piece, a melodic idea Dvořák associated with the peace and majesty of the countryside he loved. From a hushed, dawn-like opening it grows into a broad, warm and songful celebration of the outdoors, full of the Bohemian folk flavour and the glowing orchestration that are Dvořák's signatures. It makes a fittingly pastoral, open-air opening to a programme that will travel from Czech nature through neoclassical wit to the sensuous Mediterranean dawn of Ravel.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, at the very start, for the quiet, expectant opening over a sustained low note, out of which the 'nature motif' gently emerges, along with little flecks of flute and oboe that suggest birdsong waking in the woods. This rocking motif is the seed of the whole overture; follow it as it returns again and again, passed around the orchestra in different registers and colours.

The theme has a folk-like, call-across-the-valley quality, and the overture grows from its tranquil opening into warm, full-orchestra climaxes before settling back into peace. Enjoy the glowing Dvořákian orchestration (the warm horns, the singing strings, the woodwind birdcalls) and the overall mood of contented communion with nature. It is a short, gracious tone-poem of the outdoors.

Bohuslav Martinů

1890–1959

Cello Concerto No. 1, H. 196

THE COMPOSER

Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959) was one of the most prolific and individual Czech composers of the twentieth century. Born in the small Bohemian town of Polička, where his family lived for years in a room atop a church tower (his father was the church sexton and town fire-watchman), he went on to a cos-

30 minutes

mopolitan career far from home, spending the 1920s and 30s in Paris (where he absorbed neoclassicism, jazz and the influence of Stravinsky and Roussel) before fleeing the war to the United States. Astonishingly productive, he left six symphonies, fifteen operas, numerous ballets and a vast body of concertos and chamber music. His mature style fuses a Czech lyrical warmth and folk feeling with a busy, motoric neoclassical energy and a distinctive shimmering, syncopated orchestral sound, instantly recognisable once you know it.

ABOUT THE WORK

Martinů's First Cello Concerto belongs to his vibrant Paris years and, as the orchestra's own note puts it, 'an irresistible example of 1930s neoclassical music.' He composed it in 1930, in his home town of Polička, at a time when he was deeply fascinated by Baroque music: by the drive and motor-rhythm of the concerto grosso, and that energy courses through the piece. It had a long evolution: Martinů re-worked it in Paris in 1939 and revised it again in Nice in 1955, the version usually heard today.

The result is a concerto that marries Baroque vigour with twentieth-century harmony and a warm, songful Czech lyricism. The fast movements bustle with the busy, syncopated, perpetually-moving textures that are Martinů's fingerprint, while the slow movement offers music of real tenderness and depth. It is a substantial, rewarding addition to the cello repertoire, not as often heard as the Dvořák concerto but a true hidden gem, and a perfect vehicle for a charismatic soloist like Sol Gabetta.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the Baroque-inspired drive of the outer movements: the busy, motoric rhythms, the sense of constant forward motion, and the bracing dialogue between cello and orchestra. Martinů treats the orchestra almost like a Baroque concerto grosso, with the soloist weaving in and out of the texture. Notice his very personal orchestral sound, glittering and syncopated.

The heart of the concerto is its slow movement, a broad, deeply felt song for the cello, lyrical and warm, where Martinů's Czech soul shows through the neoclassical surface. And listen for the soloist's virtuosity throughout, including the cadenza. The cello sings almost continuously; let Gabetta's warm, communicative tone guide you through a concerto that is by turns athletic, tender and exhilarating.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

Jeu de cartes

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his “neoclassical” period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

Jeu de cartes (‘The Card Game’) is one of the wittiest products of Stravinsky’s neoclassical period, a ballet ‘in three deals’ from 1936, in which the dancers are playing cards in a game of poker. Across three ‘deals,’ hands are played out on the green baize table, and the action is repeatedly thrown into chaos by the perfidious Joker, who fancies himself invincible because he can become any card he likes, until he is finally defeated by a royal flush. It was choreographed by George Balanchine for the American Ballet and premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1937, with Stravinsky conducting.

The music is sparkling, brilliant and full of mischief. In the neoclassical manner, Stravinsky writes crisp, dancing music of great rhythmic vitality and clarity, and he laces it with sly musical jokes, quoting and parodying other composers (snatches of Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*, Johann Strauss waltzes, even Ravel and Delibes) as the Joker shuffles the musical deck. It is Stravinsky at his most playful and urbane: a glittering, fast-moving entertainment that nonetheless shows his peerless craftsmanship in every bar.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the recurring 'shuffling' fanfare, a strutting little march that opens the ballet and announces the start of each new 'deal,' like the cards being dealt afresh. Around it, Stravinsky spins crisp, brilliant, constantly changing music full of rhythmic snap and bright orchestral colour.

Half the fun is catching the musical jokes: listen for sudden quotations and parodies of other composers' music (a flash of Rossini, a whiff of a Strauss waltz), which Stravinsky tosses in with a wink as the Joker plays his tricks. The music is fast, witty and unsentimental, full of unexpected turns and deadpan humour. You don't need to follow the card-game plot in detail; simply enjoy the dazzling craftsmanship, the rhythmic energy, and the sly, knowing wit of Stravinsky the great musical gamesman.

Maurice Ravel

17 minutes

1875–1937

Suite No. 2 from 'Daphnis et Chloé'

THE COMPOSER

Maurice Ravel was born on March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, a small town in the French Basque Country near the Spanish border. His mother was Basque and his father a Swiss-born engineer and inventor, a heritage that would profoundly shape his musical identity. From an early age, Ravel showed exceptional musical talent and entered the Paris Conservatoire at fourteen, where he studied with Gabriel Fauré and absorbed the harmonic innovations of his time.

Often paired with Claude Debussy under the "Impressionist" label, Ravel himself rejected this categorization. Where Debussy was spontaneous and atmospheric, Ravel was a meticulous craftsman, obsessed with formal perfection and clarity. This perfectionism produced some of the most beloved works in the orchestral repertoire: the hypnotic *Boléro*, the shimmering *Daphnis et Chloé*, and the virtuosic *Gaspard de la nuit*.

By the late 1920s, Ravel was France's most celebrated living composer, yet he remained restless, constantly seeking new sounds and influences. A triumphant four-month tour of North America in 1928 brought him face to face with jazz, which impressed him deeply. These experiences would flow directly into his final orchestral works.

ABOUT THE WORK

Daphnis et Chloé is Ravel's longest score, and many consider it his masterpiece. It is a vast 'choreographic symphony,' composed between 1909 and 1912 for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, retelling an ancient Greek pastoral romance about the shepherd Daphnis and his beloved Chloé. From the full hour-long ballet Ravel drew two concert suites; the Second Suite, published in 1913, gathers the ballet's glorious final scene and has become one of the most beloved showpieces in the orchestral repertoire, a demonstration of Ravel's genius as perhaps the greatest of all orchestrators.

The suite is in three linked sections. 'Lever du jour' (Daybreak) depicts sunrise over the sacred grove, as Daphnis is reunited with Chloé; 'Pantomime' enacts the lovers miming the story of Pan and Syrinx, with a famous extended flute solo; and the 'Danse générale' is a wild, ecstatic celebration in a driving, irregular metre. Originally the score includes a wordless chorus; in concert it is often given (as likely here) in the orchestra-only version. Either way, it is ravishing: sensuous, shimmering, building to one of the most exhilarating climaxes in music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening 'Daybreak' is one of the supreme sunrises in music. Listen for the rippling, rising figures in the woodwinds and harps (flowing water and dripping dew), over which the strings slowly unfurl a great, broad melody as the sun climbs; the music swells in a vast crescendo of pure orchestral light, dotted with flute birdsong. It is gradual, sensuous and overwhelming.

In the central 'Pantomime,' listen for the long, languorous solo flute, representing the panpipes of Pan, one of the most beautiful and demanding flute solos in the repertoire. Then comes the 'Danse générale': listen for the driving, lopsided rhythm (you can almost feel the music tripping over itself), the whirling strings and woodwinds, and the crashing percussion, as the celebration builds to a frenzied, intoxicating close. Throughout, marvel at Ravel's orchestration, the sheer range and subtlety of colour that makes this music shimmer and blaze like nothing else.

Tonight's artists

Sol Gabetta *cello*

Martinů's First Cello Concerto needs a soloist with both athletic brilliance for its driving, Baroque-inspired outer movements and a warm, singing tone for its tender slow movement. Sol Gabetta, celebrated for the communicative joy and richness of her playing, is an ideal advocate for this under-played gem, bringing star charisma to a concerto that deserves to be heard far more often.

Sol Gabetta, born in Argentina in 1981 to a family of French, Argentine and Russian heritage, is one of the most charismatic cellists before the public today. A prodigy who began on the violin before settling on the cello, she won her first competition at ten and rose to international prominence after taking the Crédit Suisse Young Artist Award in 2004. Since then she has appeared with the world's leading orchestras and conductors, recorded extensively for Sony and Deutsche Grammophon, and founded her own acclaimed chamber-music festival, Solsberg, in Switzerland, where she lives and teaches. Admired for the warmth, intensity and communicative joy of her playing, she is also a noted champion of contemporary music, with concertos written for her by composers including Pēteris Vasks. She performs on a 1730 Venetian cello by Matteo Goffriller.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE Bohuslav Martinů: The Compulsion to Compose

F. James Rybka, Scarecrow Press 2011

An English-language life of Martinů that follows him from the church tower in Polička to Paris, where he wrote his First Cello Concerto in 1930.

ACCESSIBLE Ravel

Roger Nichols, Yale University Press 2013

A readable life of Ravel by a leading English scholar of French music, with the story of how *Daphnis et Chloé* came to be written for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

DEEPER The Cambridge Companion to Ravel

Deborah Mawer (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2000

Essays on Ravel's style, his ballets and his orchestration, for listeners who want to look more closely at the score of *Daphnis et Chloé*.

SOURCES

1. Sol Gabetta plays Martinů's Cello Concerto No. 1, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/sol-gabetta-plays-martinus-cello-concerto-no-1-2026-05-13/>
2. Concertgebouw Orchestra and cellist Sol Gabetta play Martinů, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/11154814-concertgebouw-orchestra-and-cello-sol-gabetta-play-martinu>
3. In Nature's Realm, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_Nature%27s_Realm
4. Bohuslav Martinů, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohuslav_Martin%C5%AF
5. List of compositions by Bohuslav Martinů, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Bohuslav_Martin%C5%AF
6. Jeu de cartes, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeu_de_cartes
7. Daphnis et Chloé, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphnis_et_Chlo%C3%A9
8. This is the most unbelievably beautiful musical 'sunrise' ever written, Classic FM. <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/ravel/guides/daphnis-and-chloe-sunrise/>
9. Bohuslav Martinů: The Compulsion to Compose, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780810877610>
10. Ravel, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300187762>
11. The Cambridge Companion to Ravel, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521648561>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-05-13-rouvali>

Version 3, 30 September 2026