

Schumann's 'Spring' and the Symphonie fantastique

Wednesday, September 16, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Klaus Mäkelä, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	SCHUMANN 1810–1856 <i>Symphony No. 1 in B-flat major, Op. 38 "Spring"</i>	33'
2	BERLIOZ 1803–1869 <i>Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14</i>	50'
TOTAL MUSIC		83'

Robert Schumann

1810–1856

Symphony No. 1 in B-flat major, Op. 38 "Spring"

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.

33 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Robert Schumann came late to the symphony. Through the 1830s he had poured himself almost entirely into music for the piano, and in 1840, the year he finally married Clara Wieck after a long and bitter legal struggle with her father, into song, producing a flood of Lieder in what is now known as his 'year of song.' Marriage seemed to unlock everything at once: Clara, herself a great pianist and a serious musician, urged him toward the larger forms, and at the start of 1841 he turned to the orchestra for the first time. The result was the 'Spring' Symphony, music drenched in the happiness of his new life.

It was written at extraordinary speed. Schumann sketched the entire symphony in just four days, from 23 to 26 January 1841, and completed the orchestration by 20 February, a torrent of creativity that mirrors the season the work celebrates. He later wrote that he had composed it 'in that springtime urge which overtakes the human being probably right into old age, and every year again.' According to Clara's diary, the 'Spring' title came from a poem by Adolf Böttger, whose closing lines, about spring blossoming in the valley, have traditionally been heard behind the opening. Schumann originally gave the four movements poetic titles: 'Spring's Beginning,' 'Evening,' 'Merry Playmates' and 'Spring in Full Bloom.' He removed them before publication, not wanting to bind the listener too literally, but the seasonal imagery still shapes the music's character.

The premiere, on 31 March 1841 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, was conducted by Schumann's friend Felix Mendelssohn. It was warmly received, and it launched Schumann's career as a symphonist; three more symphonies would follow. For all the later debate about his orchestration, the 'Spring' Symphony remains irresistible: fresh, warm-hearted and brimming with the optimism of a man who had finally got everything he wanted.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony opens with a call to attention: a bright fanfare for horns and trumpets, like a summons to awaken. This fanfare seeds the whole first movement: after a slow, expectant introduction, the music breaks into a buoyant Allegro built from the same rising shape, full of rhythmic spring.

The second movement (Larghetto) is a tender, songful Romance for the strings, with Schumann the great songwriter audible in every phrase. Without a real break it slides into the Scherzo,

which is unusual in offering not one but two contrasting trios, the music restlessly changing colour before a quiet, almost mysterious close.

The finale (*Allegro animato e grazioso*) is graceful and high-spirited, with a famous moment where the music pauses for a brief, birdlike cadenza on the solo flute. Listen for how Schumann keeps the energy dancing to the very end, sending the symphony off with the same exuberance that opened it.

Hector Berlioz

1803–1869

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

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

Few works arrived as suddenly, or as scandalously, as Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. He wrote it in 1830, when he was twenty-six and consumed by a hopeless infatuation with the Irish Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson, whom he had seen onstage in Paris and pursued for years before she would so much as acknowledge him. Out of that obsession he built not a love song but a symphony with a story: a five-movement 'Episode in the Life of an Artist,' as he subtitled it, in which a young musician, in a fit of lovesick despair, poisons himself with opium and sinks into a series of feverish visions. Berlioz wrote a detailed programme to be read alongside the music, and few composers before him had turned a symphony so explicitly into narrative.

Its central device is the *idée fixe*, a single melody representing the beloved that recurs, transformed, in every movement, surfacing in a ballroom, in a country field, even amid the horrors of the finale. This

50 minutes

idea of a recurring ‘fixed’ theme threading through an entire symphony was revolutionary, and it pointed the way toward the leitmotifs of Wagner and the cyclic forms of later Romantics. So was Berlioz’s orchestra, large for its day and deployed with a riot of new colours: an offstage oboe answering the cor anglais, harps in the ballroom, timpani played by four players at once.

The premiere, at the Paris Conservatoire on 5 December 1830 under François-Antoine Habeneck. Berlioz did eventually marry Harriet Smithson, in 1833, but the marriage was unhappy and the couple later separated. But the symphony she inspired changed the course of music. It remains the founding monument of Romantic programme music and one of the most audacious symphonies ever written.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Follow the *idée fixe*, the beloved’s theme, and the symphony tells its own story. It first appears in the opening movement, ‘Reveries, Passions,’ after a long, yearning slow introduction: a long-breathed, surging melody on the violins and flute that embodies the artist’s idealised love, returning obsessively as his moods swing between tenderness and frenzy.

The second movement, ‘A Ball,’ is an elegant waltz; listen for the moment the beloved’s theme cuts through the swirl of the dance, glimpsed across a crowded room. The third, ‘Scene in the Fields,’ opens with two shepherds calling to each other on cor anglais and offstage oboe, a pastoral calm later shadowed by distant thunder on four timpani, the artist’s peace already curdling into foreboding.

Then the nightmare. In the ‘March to the Scaffold,’ the artist dreams he has killed his beloved and is led to the guillotine: a grim, stamping march builds to a single tender flash of the *idée fixe* (his last thought of her), brutally cut off by the crash of the falling blade. The finale, ‘Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath,’ is the most grotesque of all: the once-noble beloved’s theme returns cheapened and shrieking on a high clarinet, joined by the medieval chant of the *Dies irae* tolled on bells, until the whole orchestra whirls into a diabolical round-dance. Keep your ear on the strings playing *col legno*, tapping with the wood of their bows, to conjure the rattle of dancing skeletons.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Berlioz**

Peter Bloom, Cambridge University Press 1998

A short, readable life of Berlioz, with the story of his obsession with the actress Harriet Smithson that lies behind the *Symphonie fantastique*.

ACCESSIBLE **Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician**

John Worthen, Yale University Press 2010

Worthen follows Schumann into 1841, the year after his marriage to Clara, when he sketched the Spring Symphony in a matter of days.

DEEPER **Berlioz, Volume One: The Making of an Artist**

David Cairns, University of California Press 2000

The first volume of Cairns's two-volume life of Berlioz covers his youth up to the composition and premiere of the *Symphonie fantastique* in 1830.

SOURCES

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2. Symphony No. 1 (Schumann), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_\(Schumann\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_(Schumann))
3. *Symphonie fantastique*, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphonie_fantastique
4. Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique* (programme note), Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/symphonie-fantastique>
5. *The Life of Berlioz*, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521485487>
6. *Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician*, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300163988>
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Version 3, 30 September 2026