

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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"

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.

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

50 minutes

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.

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 or-

chestra 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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-09-16-makela>

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