

Iván Fischer: Stravinsky and Weill's Silbersee

Wednesday, December 2, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Iván Fischer, conductor · Thomas Oliemans, baritone · Netherlands Chamber Choir, choir

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>Tango</i>	4'
2	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>Four Norwegian Moods</i>	9'
3	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>Suite from 'The Firebird' (1919)</i>	22'
4	WEILL 1900–1950 <i>Der Silbersee (concert version)</i>	35'
TOTAL MUSIC		70'

Igor Stravinsky

4 minutes

1882–1971

Tango

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

Stravinsky's Tango is a miniature with an outsized place in his biography: it was the first piece he composed after settling in the United States, written in Hollywood in 1940 as he began a new American life that would last the rest of his days. He wrote it first for piano, and later made the spare, slightly acid orchestration usually heard today. By this point Stravinsky was deep into his 'neoclassical' phase, and the Tango shows his sardonic, cosmopolitan side: a familiar popular dance refracted through his unmistakable harmonic lens, elegant and a little austere, more wry homage than sultry seduction.

Coming at the start of an evening that runs from Stravinsky's Russian beginnings to wartime America and on to Weimar Germany, the Tango sets a tone of twentieth-century displacement and reinvention: a Russian émigré in California, writing a dance of Argentine origin, in the cool, ironic voice of European modernism.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is over almost before it begins, so listen closely. Notice the deliberate stiffness. Stravinsky drains the tango of its usual heat and replaces it with clipped rhythms, tart harmonies and a slightly mechanical tread. There is sensuality here, but it is held at arm's length, observed with a cool, knowing eye. It makes a piquant, brief curtain-raiser, and a first glimpse of Stravinsky the émigré craftsman.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

Four Norwegian Moods

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ABOUT THE WORK

The Four Norwegian Moods date from 1942, another product of Stravinsky's Hollywood years. Stravinsky built them on Norwegian folk tunes and cast them as a short concert suite of four movements, which the Boston Symphony Orchestra first performed under his direction in January 1944. These are not romantic tone-paintings of fjords but crisp, objective little studies in the neoclassical manner.

The result is wholly typical of the mature Stravinsky: folk melodies treated with affectionate detachment, dressed in lean, brilliant orchestration and bracing rhythms. It is light music in the best sense (economical, witty, beautifully made) and a rarity in the concert hall, making this a welcome chance to hear a lesser-known corner of Stravinsky's output.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The suite falls into four short movements: an opening 'Intrada,' a 'Song,' a 'Wedding Dance' and a closing 'Cortège.' Listen for the simple Norwegian folk tunes at the heart of each, and for what Stravinsky does to and around them: the clean, slightly tart harmonies, the springy rhythms, the transparent scoring in which every line is audible. There is a deadpan humour to the way he sets these homely melodies in his own sophisticated frame, never mocking them, but never sentimentalising them either.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

Suite from 'The Firebird' (1919)

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22 minutes

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ABOUT THE WORK

The Firebird made Stravinsky famous overnight. In 1910, still in his twenties and almost unknown, he was given the chance of a lifetime when Sergei Diaghilev commissioned him to write a ballet for the Ballets Russes in Paris. Drawing on Russian fairy tales, The Firebird tells of Prince Ivan, who captures the magical, glowing Firebird, wins her aid, and uses it to defeat the immortal ogre Kashchei and free the captive princesses. The Paris premiere was a sensation, and at a stroke Stravinsky became the most exciting young composer in Europe. It was the first step on a road that would lead, within three years, to the epoch-making Rite of Spring.

The full ballet is long, and Stravinsky later distilled it into concert suites; the most popular is this 1919 version, which gathers the score’s greatest moments into about twenty minutes for a somewhat reduced orchestra. It captures the whole arc of the drama, from the shimmering enchantment of Kashchei’s garden to the blazing triumph of the finale, and it remains one of the most dazzling orchestral showpieces ever written, the sound of a young genius discovering the full splendour of the modern orchestra.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The suite opens in darkness and mystery: low, slithering strings conjure the enchanted garden of the ogre Kashchei. Then the Firebird herself appears: listen for the flickering, darting woodwind and string writing that depicts her magical flight and dance, music of glittering, restless brilliance.

A gentler episode follows, the ‘Round Dance of the Princesses,’ with a tender, folk-like melody on the oboe and strings. Then comes the suite’s showstopper: the ‘Infernal Dance of King Kashchei,’ which erupts with a shattering chord and hurls the whole orchestra into a savage, syncopated frenzy of pounding, off-balance rhythms that point straight toward The Rite of Spring. After this violence, the ‘Berceuse’ (Lullaby) brings deep calm, a hushed bassoon melody over rocking strings. And then

the Finale: a solo horn intones a noble, hymn-like Russian tune that grows, gradually and gloriously, into a radiant full-orchestra apotheosis, building through a broad, irregular seven-beat rhythm to one of the most thrilling final pages in the repertoire.

Kurt Weill

35 minutes

1900–1950

Der Silbersee (concert version)

THE COMPOSER

Kurt Weill (1900–1950) was one of the most distinctive musical voices of the twentieth century, a composer who moved between worlds, bringing the bite of popular song and cabaret into the concert hall and the opera house. Born in Dessau, the son of a Jewish cantor, he trained in Berlin with Engelbert Humperdinck and Ferruccio Busoni, and in the 1920s became a central figure of the Weimar Republic's explosive cultural life. His collaborations with the playwright Bertolt Brecht, above all *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) with its worldwide hit 'Mack the Knife', fused theatre, jazz and social critique into something entirely new. When the Nazis came to power, Weill, as a Jew and a creator of 'degenerate' music, was forced to flee; he settled eventually in the United States, where he reinvented himself as a composer for Broadway, writing shows such as *Lady in the Dark* and *Street Scene*. Often caricatured as two separate composers, the acid Berliner and the Broadway tunesmith, Weill is better understood as a single artist with an unwavering belief that serious music could speak directly to ordinary audiences.

ABOUT THE WORK

Der Silbersee (The Silver Lake), subtitled 'A Winter's Fairy Tale,' was Kurt Weill's last work written in Germany, and its fate is inseparable from the catastrophe unfolding around it. A 'play with music' in three acts to a text by the great Expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser, it is a bitter, fantastical parable of the Depression: a story of poverty, hunger, guilt and the faint hope of human solidarity, in which a poor man is shot for stealing food and an unlikely redemption is sought across a frozen lake. Kaiser's barbed social fable gave Weill the chance to write some of his most pointed and varied music, ranging from biting satirical songs to passages of real lyrical warmth.

The timing could hardly have been more dramatic. *Der Silbersee* was premiered simultaneously in three German cities (Leipzig, Erfurt and Magdeburg) on 18 February 1933, just under three weeks after Hitler became Chancellor. It managed only a few charged performances before the Nazis shut it down: on 4 March 1933 the work was banned as 'degenerate,' and Weill and Kaiser were both driven from German cultural life. Both soon went into exile. Tonight's concert version lifts

the score's musical numbers out of the spoken play, letting Weill's extraordinary music, caustic, tender and unmistakably his, speak on its own.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is Weill in his great Weimar voice, the world of The Three-penny Opera: tunes you can whistle, sharpened by tart harmonies, dance rhythms and a knowing, cabaret edge. Listen for the way he shifts register, from acid, march-like satire to sudden moments of disarming sweetness, often within a single number, so that the music keeps undercutting easy sentiment.

One celebrated number is the savage 'Ballad of Caesar's Death,' a mock-historical cabaret song about a tyrant brought low, whose point could hardly be missed in February 1933. Listen, too, for the contributions of the baritone soloist and the chorus, who carry the work's storytelling, and for the salty, jazz-inflected orchestration. Above all, listen to this as a document of a vanished world: the sound of Weimar Germany's daring popular-art experiment, captured at the very moment it was being extinguished.

Tonight's artists

Thomas Oliemans *baritone*

Weill's Silbersee lives or dies on the singer's command of words and character: these are songs that tell a story, by turns savage, comic and tender, in the cabaret-tinged idiom of Weimar Berlin. Thomas Oliemans, a baritone celebrated for his dramatic immediacy and his way with text, is perfectly cast: a singer who can land bitter irony one moment and find genuine pathos the next, drawing the audience into Kaiser and Weill's strange, pointed fairy tale.

Thomas Oliemans, born in 1977, is one of the most versatile and compelling baritones of his generation. He trained at the Amsterdam Conservatory with Margreet Honig. Equally at home on the opera stage, the concert platform and in the intimate world of the song recital, he commands a wide repertoire, from Mozart's Papageno to Weill's Mahagonny, and is admired for the intelligence, immediacy and theatrical flair of his performances. He appears regularly with the leading Dutch ensembles and at international houses and festivals, and his feeling for text and character makes him an ideal interpreter of Weill's word-driven, dramatically charged songs.

Netherlands Chamber Choir *choir*

The chorus is woven into the storytelling of Der Silbersee, carrying much of its commentary and colour. The Netherlands Chamber Choir, one of the world's finest professional vocal ensembles, brings its trademark clarity and flexibility to Weill's idiom, music that demands both choral polish and a feel for the sharp, popular edge of Weimar theatre.

The Netherlands Chamber Choir (Nederlands Kamerkoor), founded in 1937, is among the most renowned professional chamber choirs in the world. It is celebrated for the precision, blend and expressive range of its singing across an enormous repertoire, from Renaissance polyphony to a long list of newly commissioned works, and it collaborates regularly with leading orchestras and conductors. Its artistry brings both refinement and dramatic presence to the choral writing in Weill's Der Silbersee.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Ross's history of twentieth-century music has vivid chapters on Stravinsky's Paris and on Weimar Berlin, the world of Der Silbersee.

ACCESSIBLE **Kurt Weill on Stage: From Berlin to Broadway**

Foster Hirsch, Limelight Editions 2004

Hirsch follows Weill's theatre career from Berlin to Broadway, including Der Silbersee, which the Nazis shut down within weeks of its 1933 premiere.

DEEPER **Stravinsky: A Creative Spring**

Stephen Walsh, University of California Press 2002

The first volume of Walsh's Stravinsky biography covers the Russian and Paris years, including The Firebird of 1910 that made his name.

SOURCES

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3. Iván Fischer, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iv%C3%A1n_Fischer
4. Tango (Stravinsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tango_\(Stravinsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tango_(Stravinsky))
5. Igor Stravinsky: Tango, IRCAM (brahms.ircam.fr). <https://brahms.ircam.fr/works/work/24786/>
6. Igor Stravinsky: Four Norwegian Moods, IRCAM (brahms.ircam.fr). <https://brahms.ircam.fr/en/work/four-norwegian-moods>
7. List of compositions by Igor Stravinsky, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Igor_Stravinsky
8. The Firebird, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Firebird

Kurt Weill · Der Silbersee (concert version)

9. Stravinsky: Suite from The Firebird (1919 version), Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/suite-from-the-firebird-1919-version>
10. Kurt Weill, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Weill
11. Der Silbersee, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Silbersee
12. Der Silbersee, Kurt Weill Foundation for Music. <https://www.kwf.org/works/der-silbersee/>
13. Thomas Oliemans, Wikipedia (Dutch). https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Oliemans
14. Nederlands Kamerkoor, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nederlands_Kamerkoor
15. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
16. Kurt Weill on Stage: From Berlin to Broadway, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780879109905>
17. Stravinsky: A Creative Spring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520227491>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-12-02-fischer>

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