ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

Klaus Mäkelä in Las Palmas: Schumann's 'Spring' Symphony and the Symphonie fantastique

Tuesday, February 2, 2027 · 19:30 · Auditorio Alfredo Kraus

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor

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

Robert Schumann

1810–1856

33 minutes

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.

ABOUT THE WORK

Until he was thirty Robert Schumann was known almost entirely as a composer for the piano. Then, in 1840, the year he married Clara Wieck after a long legal fight with her father, he wrote songs: well over a hundred of them in a few months. Clara wanted more. She thought his imagination needed a larger canvas than the keyboard, and wrote in her diary that her highest wish was to see him compose for orchestra.

He did so at great speed. The whole symphony was sketched in four days, from 23 to 26 January 1841, and the orchestration was finished within a month. Felix Mendelssohn conducted the first performance at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 31 March. It was warmly received, and it changed Schumann's standing: he was now a symphonist, and three more symphonies followed over the next ten years.

The nickname is Schumann's own. The spark is usually said to have been a poem by the Leipzig writer Adolf Böttger, which ends with the lines 'O turn, O turn and change your course, in the valley spring is blooming'. At first each movement had a title: the beginning of spring, evening, merry playmates, spring in full bloom. Schumann removed them before the score was printed, but he went on describing the work in the same terms. To a conductor preparing a performance he wrote that he would like the opening trumpet call to sound 'as if it came from on high, like a summons to awakening', and that the rest of the introduction might suggest the world turning green, even a butterfly in the air. He added that these were ideas that had come to him only after the piece was finished.

That is a fair warning against listening for a story. The symphony was written in the middle of a Saxon winter, and what it conveys is not a landscape but what Schumann called the longing for spring: restlessness, expectation and a great deal of physical energy.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Andante un poco maestoso, Allegro molto vivace. Trumpets and horns open with the summons, a short fanfare that has traditionally been linked with the last lines of Böttger's poem. The slow introduction that follows grows steadily brighter and faster until the fanfare, speeded up, turns into the main theme of the Allegro. Almost the whole movement is driven by that one rhythm. Near the end Schumann holds back a surprise: a new, songful melody that has not been heard before.

II. Larghetto. A long song for the violins, which the composer of so many recent songs lets unfold without hurry. It returns on the cellos and later on oboe and horn, each time with richer decoration around it. In the closing bars the trombones enter quietly with a solemn phrase. It turns out to be a preview of the next movement, which follows without a break.

III. Scherzo: Molto vivace. The trombones' phrase becomes a stamping dance in D minor. Schumann gives the movement two contrasting middle sections instead of one: the first a quick exchange between strings and wind in two beats to the bar, the second built on running scales. The ending slows and fades away instead of closing with a bang.

IV. Allegro animato e grazioso. A bold rising scale from the full orchestra introduces a light, tripping theme for the violins. The movement has the grace of a dance and something of Mendelssohn's quickness. Just before the opening music returns, everything stops for horn calls and a short flute cadenza, like birdsong heard out of doors. The coda gathers speed and ends the symphony in high spirits.

Hector Berlioz

50 minutes

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

On 11 September 1827 a company of English actors played Hamlet in Paris. In the audience was Hector Berlioz, twenty-three years old. He was overwhelmed twice over: by Shakespeare, and by the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, who played Ophelia. He wrote her letters, which went unanswered. She left Paris in 1829 without having met him.

The symphony he wrote early in 1830 turned this obsession into music. He called it 'Episode in the Life of an Artist' and had a printed programme handed to the audience. A young musician of morbid sensibility, despairing in love, takes opium. The dose is too weak to kill him and instead brings on a series of visions, in which the woman he loves has become a melody that follows him everywhere. Berlioz called this melody the idée fixe. He had written the tune two years earlier, for a competition cantata, and it appears in each of the five movements, changed every time by its surroundings.

The first performance took place at the Paris Conservatoire on 5 December 1830, conducted by François-Antoine Habeneck. Beethoven had been dead for less than four years, and his symphonies were still new to Paris. Berlioz revered them. The five-movement plan and the scene in the country both look back to the Pastoral Symphony, but nothing in Beethoven sounds like this. The score asks for two harps, a cor anglais, an oboe placed offstage, a shrill small clarinet, bells, four players on the timpani and two ophicleides, deep brass instruments whose parts are now taken by tubas.

Smithson was not at the premiere. She heard the symphony two years later, on 9 December 1832, when Berlioz, back from his prizewinner's stay in Italy, presented a revised version together with a sequel, Lélio. They met the next day and married the following year. The marriage was not happy, and by 1844 they had separated. Berlioz himself came to feel that the music could do without its story, and in later years he played the programme down.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Rêveries, Passions. A slow introduction of muted, sighing strings stands for the vague longings of the artist before he has seen his beloved. When the Allegro begins, violins and flute play the idée fixe almost unaccompanied: a long melody that climbs by stages and keeps falling back. Fix it in the ear here, since everything later depends on recognising it.

II. Un bal. Harps and shimmering strings set the scene for a waltz. In the middle of the dance the idée fixe drifts in on flute and oboe, as if the artist had caught sight of her across the room, and it returns once more, on a clarinet, before the brilliant close.

III. Scène aux champs. A cor anglais calls, and an oboe answers from offstage: two shepherds piping to each other. The long, calm movement that follows is troubled at its centre, when the beloved's theme returns over agitated low strings. At the end the cor anglais calls again. There is no answer, only distant thunder from four timpani.

IV. Marche au supplice. The artist dreams that he has killed his beloved and is being led to the scaffold. Muffled drums and growling low brass alternate with a blazing march for the full band. At the last moment a solo clarinet begins the idée fixe, his final thought of her, and a single crashing chord cuts it off.

V. Songe d'une nuit du sabbat. He sees his own funeral, attended by witches and monsters. The beloved's theme arrives squealing on the small clarinet, turned into a vulgar jig. Bells toll, and bassoons and tubas intone the Dies irae, the chant from the Mass for the Dead. A witches' round dance starts up as a fugue in the strings, and near the end Berlioz plays both at once. Listen too for the dry clatter when the violins strike the strings with the wood of their bows.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Schumann: The Faces and the Masks**

Judith Chernaik, Vintage 2019

A recent life of Schumann that draws heavily on the letters and the marriage diary, and is at its best on 1840 and 1841, the years of the songs and the 'Spring' Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz**

Hector Berlioz, translated by David Cairns, Alfred A. Knopf 2002

Berlioz tells the story of Harriet Smithson and the Symphonie fantastique himself, in one of the most entertaining books any composer has written.

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

David Cairns, University of California Press 2000

The first volume of the standard biography ends in 1832, so it covers in close detail the years in which the Symphonie fantastique was conceived, performed and revised.

SOURCES

1. On tour in Spain with Klaus Mäkelä, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/on-tour-in-spain-with-klaus-makela-2027-02-02/
2. La Royal Concertgebouw de Ámsterdam regresa tras 20 años al Festival de Música de Canarias, Radio Televisión Canaria. https://rtvc.es/royal-concertgebouw-amsterdam-20-anos-festival-musica-canarias-7-septiembre-2026/
3. Symphony No. 1 (Schumann), Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_(Schumann)
4. Symphony No. 1 in Bb, op. 38 ('Spring') (programme note by William E. Runyan), Runyan Program Notes. https://www.runyanprogramnotes.com/program_note/symphony-no-1-in-bb-op-38-spring
5. Spring in the Air: Schumann's Symphony No. 1, Interlude. https://interlude.hk/spring-in-the-air-schumanns-symphony-no-1/
6. Symphonie fantastique, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphonie_fantastique
7. Berlioz: Symphonie fantastique (programme note), Boston Symphony Orchestra. https://www.bso.org/works/symphonie-fantastique
8. Schumann: The Faces and the Masks, Open Library. https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781101974254
9. The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz, Open Library. https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780375413919
10. Berlioz, Volume One: The Making of an Artist, Open Library. https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520221994

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https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-02-02-makela

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