

Janine Jansen plays Beethoven's Violin Concerto

Friday, April 2, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Kazuki Yamada, conductor · Janine Jansen, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61</i>	42'
2	TAKEMITSU 1930–1996 <i>Dreamtime (Yume no toki)</i>	14'
3	ROUSSEL 1869–1937 <i>Bacchus et Ariane, Suite No. 2, Op. 43</i>	18'
TOTAL MUSIC		74'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven completed only one violin concerto. He wrote it in 1806 for Franz Clement, one of the leading violinists in Vienna, and it was first heard on 23 December that year at a benefit concert for Clement in the Theater an der Wien. By most accounts the solo part was finished so late that Clement had to play some of it more or less at sight. The evening is also remembered for a stunt: Clement put in a

42 minutes

showpiece of his own, played with the violin held upside down. The accounts disagree about whether he did this between the movements of the concerto or later in the concert.

The new work did not catch on. It was a good deal longer than the violin concertos audiences knew, Mozart's for instance, it asked for a larger orchestra, and its solo part was very hard without being showy in the usual way. For several decades it was rarely played. The turning point came in London in 1844, when the boy violinist Joseph Joachim, not yet in his teens, played it with the Philharmonic Society under Felix Mendelssohn. Joachim went on championing the piece for the rest of his long career, and it has been at the centre of the violin repertoire ever since.

What puzzled its first listeners is what makes the concerto so loved now. A concerto was expected to be a contest, the soloist pitted against the orchestra and dazzling the house. Beethoven wrote something closer to a long conversation. The orchestra states nearly all the themes, and the violin, entering late and high, spends much of its time decorating them, climbing above them and spinning them out. The difficulty is real, but it lies in holding a singing line very quietly at the top of the instrument, in full view, far more than in fireworks.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first sound is the timpani alone: a few soft, even strokes on one note. That drum rhythm runs through the whole first movement, passed to the violins, the horns and the trumpets, sometimes as a whisper and sometimes hammered out by the full orchestra. The woodwinds answer it with a calm hymn-like theme. The orchestra then sets out all the material of the movement at length before the soloist plays a note, so the first entry of the violin, rising in octaves out of the orchestra, has been a long time coming. The movement is by far the biggest of the three.

The *Larghetto* is a set of gentle variations. Muted strings present the theme, and the violin does not so much play it as embroider it, while clarinet, bassoon and horns take turns with the tune. Much of the movement stays very soft, and the best performances make the hall go still.

There is no break before the finale. A short flourish from the soloist leads straight into the rondo, whose bouncing tune has the lilt of a hunting call; the violin plays it low, then two octaves higher, and the orchestra roars it back. A plaintive episode in G

minor, shared with the bassoon, offers a moment of shade before the tune returns, and after the cadenza the concerto ends with two brisk chords.

Toru Takemitsu

14 minutes

1930–1996

Dreamtime (Yume no toki)

THE COMPOSER

Toru Takemitsu (1930–1996) was the best-known Japanese composer of the twentieth century. Born in Tokyo, he was largely self-taught, and came to Western classical music by listening to the radio of the American occupation forces after the war. His Requiem for strings of 1957 first drew international attention, and ‘November Steps’ (1967), written for the New York Philharmonic, set the Japanese biwa and shakuhachi beside a Western orchestra. Debussy was a lasting influence, and Takemitsu’s later music is slow, finely coloured and often named after water, gardens and dreams. He also wrote around a hundred film scores, among them the music for Akira Kurosawa’s ‘Ran’.

ABOUT THE WORK

‘Dreamtime’ was written to be danced. The Czech choreographer Jiří Kylián asked Toru Takemitsu for a score for his company, the Netherlands Dans Theater in The Hague, which commissioned the piece, and Takemitsu composed it in 1981. It was first heard in the concert hall, though: Hiroyuki Iwaki conducted the Sapporo Symphony Orchestra in the premiere in Sapporo on 27 June 1982. The Japanese title is ‘Yume no toki’.

The name comes from Australia. In a short note on the score Takemitsu wrote that while composing he was ‘intensely influenced’ by the Dreamtime, the body of myth handed down from generation to generation among Aboriginal Australians; one account links the piece to a visit he made to Groote Eylandt, off the coast of the Northern Territory, to see a large gathering of Aboriginal dancers, singers and storytellers. He did not try to imitate what he heard there. What he took was an idea about dreaming. A dream, he wrote, is vivid in every detail and yet adds up to a whole that nobody could have predicted, and so in this piece ‘short episodes hang suspended in seeming incoherency to form a musical whole’.

Dreams and water run through the titles of his music from these years: ‘Toward the Sea’ dates from the same year as ‘Dreamtime’, and ‘Rain Tree’, ‘Dream/Window’ and ‘I Hear the Water Dreaming’ followed. By then Takemitsu had left behind the sharper edges of his early avant-garde scores for a slow, luminous manner that owes a

good deal to Debussy, a composer he had loved since he first heard Western music on the radio in post-war Tokyo. In Amsterdam the piece is also a homecoming of a kind, since it was a Dutch company that asked for it.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The orchestra is large, but it almost never plays all at once and rarely plays loudly. Takemitsu asks for triple woodwind, including alto flute, cor anglais and bass clarinet, a full brass section, two harps, celesta, and three percussionists whose instruments nearly all ring rather than strike: glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, tubular bells, suspended cymbals, gongs and tam-tams.

Do not expect themes that are stated and developed. The piece, about fourteen minutes long, moves as a chain of short episodes. A phrase rises in the flutes or the strings, swells, and dissolves into the shimmer of harps and tuned percussion before the next begins, and some of these gestures come back, slightly altered, the way a place recurs in a dream. Takemitsu said that the small variations of rhythm and the changes of tempo are there to heighten ‘the sensation of floating’, and the easiest way in is to stop counting beats and follow the colours as they pass from one group of instruments to another.

Albert Roussel

1869–1937

18 minutes

Bacchus et Ariane, Suite No. 2, Op. 43

THE COMPOSER

Albert Roussel (1869–1937) was a French composer who came to music late. Born in Tourcoing, he first made a career as a naval officer and resigned his commission in 1894 to study music, eventually at the Schola Cantorum in Paris under Vincent d’Indy, where he remained a student until 1908. He also taught there, and his pupils included Erik Satie, Edgard Varèse and, later, Bohuslav Martinů. His early works are close to the impressionism of Debussy and Ravel; after the First World War he moved towards a leaner, rhythmically driven neoclassical style, heard in his last two symphonies and in the ballet ‘Bacchus et Ariane’.

ABOUT THE WORK

Albert Roussel was sixty-one and at the height of his reputation when he composed ‘Bacchus et Ariane’ in 1930, at about the same time as his Third Symphony. It is a ballet in two acts on a scenario by Abel

Hermant, and the Paris Opéra staged it on 22 May 1931 with choreography by Serge Lifar, sets by the painter Giorgio de Chirico and Philippe Gaubert conducting.

The story comes from Greek myth. Ariadne has helped Theseus out of the labyrinth and sailed away with him, and on the island of Naxos he abandons her. In the ballet Bacchus, the god of wine, finds her asleep. She wakes, sees that she has been left, and in despair runs to a cliff and throws herself off, only to be caught by the god. He wins her, and at the end she is crowned and raised among the immortals.

Accounts differ on how warmly the ballet was received in the theatre, but it is in the concert hall that the music has lived. Roussel made the score into two orchestral suites that follow the two acts closely. Charles Munch conducted the first in Paris on 2 April 1933, and Pierre Monteux gave the second there, with the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris, on 2 February 1934. The Second Suite, which is the whole second act from Ariadne's awakening to her coronation, quickly became the more popular of the two and is now among the pieces by which Roussel is most often heard. It shows his late style at full strength: clear outlines and driving, stamping rhythms that put him close to the neoclassical music of the time, in an orchestral sound richer and more sensuous than that label suggests.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The suite plays without a break for about eighteen minutes and follows the stage action closely. It opens with Ariadne asleep: slow, drifting music with no clear beat. Her waking is drawn in small nervous details, darting figures on the clarinet and plucked strings. The tempo quickens as she looks for Theseus and runs to the rock, and the fall into the arms of Bacchus brings the first big climax.

From there the suite is a sequence of dances that grow steadily more intoxicated. Bacchus dances alone, and the two are brought together in a long, slow stretch of love music, the lyrical heart of the piece. Then his followers arrive, Ariadne dances, and the two dance together.

Everything leads to the final Bacchanale. Roussel builds it on a pounding rhythm that he tightens notch by notch, with the brass and percussion gradually let off the leash. He was a composer who liked to keep excitement on a tight rein, which makes the release at the end all the stronger: the dance sweeps into a broad, blazing coda for the coronation of Ariadne.

Tonight's artists

Janine Jansen *violin*

Janine Jansen has been a guest of the Concertgebouw Orchestra for more than twenty years, and yet, the orchestra points out, the two have never played Beethoven's Violin Concerto together until now. She plays it on 2 April and again at the Sunday matinee on 4 April, unusually as the first item on the programme, before the interval. On the podium is Kazuki Yamada, who makes his debut with the orchestra and has brought a piece by his compatriot Takemitsu with him.

Janine Jansen, born in Soest in 1978, is one of the most charismatic and admired violinists in the world. From a musical Dutch family, she studied with Coosje Wijzenbeek, Philippe Hirschhorn and Boris Belkin, and has built a career of the highest distinction as soloist and chamber musician, recording widely and founding the International Chamber Music Festival in Utrecht. She is the LSO's Portrait Artist this season. Renowned for the intensity, communicative warmth and fearless commitment of her playing, she also has a long creative partnership with the composer Richard Dubugnon, who has written several works for her, which makes her the natural soloist for tonight's premiere.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

A big, readable life of Beethoven that sets the Violin Concerto in the remarkable year of 1806 and explains what Clement and Vienna made of it.

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

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

A history of twentieth-century music told through its composers and their times, and a good guide to the world in which Roussel and, later, Takemitsu worked.

DEEPER **Beethoven: Violin Concerto**

Robin Stowell, Cambridge University Press 1998

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to the concerto: its genesis, the first performance, the text and a movement-by-movement analysis.

SOURCES

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13. Suite No. 2 from the ballet 'Bacchus et Ariane', Op. 43, Wiener Symphoniker. <https://www.wienersymphoniker.at/en/opus/suite-no-2-ballet-bacchus-et-ariane-op-43>
14. Albert Roussel, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Roussel
15. Kazuki Yamada, conductor, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/kazuki-yamada/>
16. Kazuki Yamada, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazuki_Yamada
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-04-02-yamada>

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