

From Bach to Handel: Jan Willem de Vriend and Alena Baeva

Friday, April 30, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Jan Willem de Vriend, conductor · Alena Baeva, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	REBEL 1666–1747 <i>Les Éléments</i>	25'
2	BACH 1685–1750 <i>Violin Concerto in D minor, BWV 1052R</i>	22'
3	BACH 1685–1750 <i>Sinfonia from the cantata 'Ich liebe den Höchsten von ganzem Gemüte', BWV 174</i>	6'
4	BACH 1714–1788 <i>Symphony in D major</i>	11'
5	HANDEL 1685–1759 <i>Concerto a due cori in F major, HWV 333</i>	16'
TOTAL MUSIC		80'

Jean-Féry Rebel

1666–1747

Les Éléments

THE COMPOSER

Jean-Féry Rebel (1666–1747) was a French Baroque composer and violinist, a child prodigy spotted and taught by Jean-Baptiste Lully himself. He spent his career at the centre of French royal music, joining the king's famous string band, the Vingt-quatre Violons du Roi, and eventually becoming Chamber Composer to the King. Though much of his output consists of elegant violin sonatas and dance music, he is remembered above all for one astonishing piece: the prologue 'Le Chaos' to his late ballet *Les Éléments*, in which he anticipated the harmonic experiments of the twentieth century by nearly two hundred years.

25 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Jean-Féry Rebel was past seventy, with a long career as a violinist at the French court behind him, when he wrote the most startling piece of his life. ‘Les Éléments’ belongs to a kind of work he is credited with inventing, the ‘*simphonie de danse*’: a suite of orchestral dances for the stars of the Paris Opéra to perform on its own, outside any opera. The dances came first and were performed in September 1737. Rebel then added an introduction, ‘Le Cahos’ (his spelling), which was played by the orchestra of the Académie Royale de Musique, without dancers, in March 1738. The orchestra’s announcement gives the date 1721 for the ballet; the sources consulted here agree on 1737 and 1738.

The subject is the creation of the world out of the four elements, and Rebel explained in a preface exactly what he had done. Chaos, he wrote, is ‘that confusion which reigned among the Elements’ before they took their places in the order of nature, and to depict a confusion of harmony he ‘risked beginning with all the notes sounding together’. The piece accordingly opens with every note of the D minor scale played at once, a dense, grinding discord that may be the first such cluster of notes ever written down for an orchestra. The Paris audience of 1738 seems not to have been repelled: a report in the *Mercure de France* called the movement one of the finest pieces of its sort.

Each element has its own music, which Rebel also spelled out. Earth is in the bass, in tied notes played with a shudder. Water is in the flutes, in lines that rise and fall. Air is given to the piccolos, in long held notes ending in trills, and fire to the violins, in quick, brilliant runs. The chaos comes round seven times, and each time the elements struggle a little less, until the music settles at last on a plain chord of D major.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening needs no pointing out. The chord is hammered, then repeated faster and faster, and breaks off into silence. After it, listen for the four elements emerging one at a time: the heavy, trembling bass, the liquid flutes, the high piccolo trills, and the violins flickering like flames. They collide, the discord returns, and bit by bit the harmony clears.

Once order is established the rest is a suite of French dances, elegant and far more conventional, though the elements are still its subject. A stately Loure presents earth and water, with the bass and the flutes continuing as before. The Chaconne, a dance

over a repeating pattern, belongs to fire and gives the violins their head. In the Ramage (the word means birdsong) and the Rossignols that follows, flutes and violins twitter in imitation of nightingales: this is air. A second Loure brings in hunting calls, two lively Tambourins imitate the pipe and drum of Provence, and after a gentle Sicilienne and an air for Love the suite ends with a brilliant Caprice.

Johann Sebastian Bach

22 minutes

1685–1750

Violin Concerto in D minor, BWV 1052R

THE COMPOSER

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is, for many, the greatest composer who ever lived: the supreme master of the Baroque and the towering summit of the entire Western musical tradition. Born in Eisenach into a vast dynasty of German musicians, he spent his life as a working church and court musician, never travelling far from his native Thuringia and Saxony, and capped his career as Thomaskantor in Leipzig, responsible for the music of the city's principal churches. There he produced, week after week, an output of staggering quantity and quality: hundreds of cantatas, the Passions, the Mass in B minor, the great organ works, the keyboard collections, the orchestral and chamber music. Bach's genius lay in fusing profound emotional and spiritual depth with unparalleled contrapuntal mastery, music of dazzling intellectual rigour that is at the same time intensely human. Relatively neglected as a composer in the decades after his death (though revered by musicians), he was triumphantly restored to the wider public by the nineteenth-century Bach revival, and has stood at the centre of musical life ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

There is no manuscript of a violin concerto in D minor by Johann Sebastian Bach. What survives is a concerto for harpsichord and strings, BWV 1052, the first in a collection of keyboard concertos that Bach wrote out in his own hand in Leipzig around 1738, probably for the concerts of the Collegium Musicum, the society of students and professionals he directed there. Most of those harpsichord concertos are known or believed to be arrangements of earlier concertos for other instruments, and this one has long been thought to go back to a lost concerto for violin. The solo part gives the game away: again and again it has figures that lie awkwardly under a keyboard player's hands but fall naturally on a violin, such as passages that rock back and forth across an open string.

The letter R in the catalogue number stands for reconstruction. Since the nineteenth century, when the violinist Ferdinand David made the first attempt, scholars and players have tried to work backwards from

the harpsichord version to the violin concerto behind it, and several versions exist. They can draw on another witness as well. In the 1720s Bach used all three movements in church cantatas, with the organ playing the solo: the first two in 'Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal', BWV 146, and the finale in BWV 188.

When the supposed original was written, and for whom, nobody knows, and a few scholars have doubted whether there ever was a violin version, or even whether the piece began as Bach's own. It is easy to hear why most people believe in it. Bach had studied Vivaldi's concertos closely as a young man, and this is his most fiery response to them: a concerto that takes the Italian model of orchestral refrains and solo episodes and fills it with a severity and drive that are all his own. It is also among the most difficult of the violin concertos associated with his name.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement begins with the whole orchestra and the soloist in bare unison, a stern, angular theme with no harmony at all. That refrain returns throughout in different keys, and between its appearances the violin takes off in long chains of rapid figuration. Listen for the passages where the soloist saws across the strings, one note fixed while the others move against it; in the harpsichord version these sound busy, on the violin they sound wild. Towards the end the orchestra stops and the soloist winds up the tension alone before the unison theme crashes back.

The Adagio is laid out in the same way, on a smaller scale. The strings play a grave unison theme in G minor, and it then goes on repeating in the bass, like a slow tread, while the violin sings a long, richly ornamented lament above it. The movement ends as it began, with the theme alone.

The finale is a fast dance in triple time, tense and springy, with a main theme that leaps and syncopates. The solo episodes grow more and more brilliant, and near the close there is again room for a short cadenza before the orchestra has the last word. The concerto stays in the minor to the end.

Johann Sebastian Bach

1685–1750

Sinfonia from the cantata 'Ich liebe den Höchsten von ganzem Gemüte', BWV 174

THE COMPOSER

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is, for many, the greatest composer who ever lived: the supreme master of the Baroque and the towering summit of the entire Western musical tradition. Born in Eisenach into a vast dynasty of German musicians, he spent his life as a working church and court musician, never travelling far from his native Thuringia and Saxony, and capped his career as Thomaskantor in Leipzig, responsible for the music of the city's principal churches. There he produced, week after week, an output of staggering quantity and quality: hundreds of cantatas, the Passions, the Mass in B minor, the great organ works, the keyboard collections, the orchestral and chamber music. Bach's genius lay in fusing profound emotional and spiritual depth with unparalleled contrapuntal mastery, music of dazzling intellectual rigour that is at the same time intensely human. Relatively neglected as a composer in the decades after his death (though revered by musicians), he was triumphantly restored to the wider public by the nineteenth-century Bach revival, and has stood at the centre of musical life ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

This is a piece many listeners will half recognise. On Whit Monday, 6 June 1729, Bach performed a new cantata in Leipzig, 'Ich liebe den Höchsten von ganzem Gemüte' (I love the Most High with all my heart), on a text by Picander, the poet of the St Matthew Passion. For its instrumental introduction he went back to something written years earlier: the first movement of the third of the concertos he had dedicated to the Margrave of Brandenburg in 1721.

The original is for strings alone, three violins, three violas and three cellos over a bass line, nine players each with a part of their own. For the church Bach kept that music almost exactly as it was and added to it. Two hunting horns have new parts, and two oboes and a tenor oboe, each doubled by extra strings, form a second group that reinforces the texture. A piece of chamber music becomes a piece for full orchestra.

Why he did it is not recorded. It was a feast day, which called for something grand, and it has been suggested that the choice had to do with his having taken over the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig a few months earlier, which gave him a pool of able instrumentalists. The sinfonia takes up most of the cantata; the arias and the closing chorale that follow in church are modest by comparison. In this concert it

stands alone, after the interval, as a companion to the violin concerto in the first half: another case of Bach reusing and transforming his own music.

The whole Brandenburg movement is built from the short, three-note figure heard in the first bar, tossed between the three groups of strings.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

If you know the Brandenburg Concerto, the fun lies in hearing what has changed. The busy string writing is all still there, the three violins, three violas and three cellos handing the opening figure from group to group, but it now has a halo around it. The horns sometimes ride above the strings with long held notes and sometimes punch out the rhythm, giving the music an outdoor ring. The oboes thicken the big moments when everyone plays together, so that the contrast between full orchestra and the lighter passages for the solo strings is stronger than in the original.

Listen also for the long stretch in the middle where the music moves into the minor and the violins have running passages over a pulsing bass, and for the return of the opening, which arrives with the horns in full cry. The movement lasts about six minutes and never stops for breath.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach

11 minutes

1714–1788

Symphony in D major

THE COMPOSER

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788) was the second surviving son of Johann Sebastian Bach, born in Weimar and taught by his father. After studying law he entered the service of the Prussian crown prince, the future Frederick the Great, and spent nearly three decades in Berlin as court harpsichordist. In 1768 he succeeded his godfather Georg Philipp Telemann as director of music in Hamburg, where he remained until his death. He was one of the leading keyboard players of his day, and his treatise on keyboard playing was widely used. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven all admired his music, with its abrupt contrasts and its intensely personal expression.

ABOUT THE WORK

A note of caution first. The orchestra's listing says only 'Symphony in D major' and gives no catalogue number, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote more than one symphony in that key. The description

published with the concert, a rollercoaster of quirky rhythms and strange harmonic turns written some fifty years after his father's cantata, fits the best known of them: the first of the four 'Orchestral Symphonies with twelve obbligato parts', Wq 183, composed in Hamburg in the mid-1770s. This note assumes that this is the work to be played.

Emanuel Bach had by then left Berlin, where he had spent nearly thirty years as harpsichordist to Frederick the Great, and succeeded his godfather Telemann as director of music for the principal churches of Hamburg. The four symphonies of Wq 183 were written to a commission in 1775 and 1776; the name of the patron has not come down to us. They were published in 1780. They are the most richly scored of all his symphonies: pairs of flutes, oboes and horns and a bassoon join the strings, and the 'twelve obbligato parts' of the title means that every one of these instruments has a line that matters.

The music is like nothing else of its time. Emanuel Bach was the great exponent of what his contemporaries called the 'sensitive style', in which a piece changes mood as abruptly as a person might, and in his symphonies he pushed this to the edge of eccentricity: sudden silences, lurches into distant keys, phrases that break off halfway. Haydn and Mozart admired him, and it is hard not to hear in this music something of what Beethoven would later do with surprise. The symphony is short, little more than ten minutes, and its three movements run into each other without a pause.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The beginning is one of the oddest in eighteenth-century music. The violins play a single note, D, alone, and repeat it in a quickening, off-beat rhythm, so that for several seconds the ear has neither a beat nor a key to hold on to. When the full orchestra bursts in, the harmony swerves somewhere unexpected. That stuttering opening idea keeps coming back, in the oboes, in the strings, at the start of the central section, and the home key of D major is not properly settled until late in the movement.

There is no full close. The first movement dissolves into a short, stately Largo, a moment of calm. It too is left hanging, and the Presto finale breaks in: a quick, boisterous movement full of jokes, with violins that seem to get stuck in swirling arpeggios and sudden drops from loud to soft.

George Frideric Handel

1685–1759

Concerto a due cori in F major, HWV 333

THE COMPOSER

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle in 1685. He learned his craft from the organist Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow and at eighteen joined the orchestra of the Hamburg opera as a violinist. A court appointment in Hanover followed, but the success of his opera *Rinaldo* in London in 1711 showed him where his future lay, and he soon settled in England for good. For the next three decades he was above all a composer of Italian opera for the London stage, and he wrote ceremonial music for the Hanoverian kings, the *Water Music* among it. When the taste for Italian opera faded in the 1730s he turned to oratorio in English, a form he largely made his own, with big choruses at its centre. He suffered a stroke in 1737 and recovered. He went blind in old age but continued to work, and died in London in 1759.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the 1740s George Frideric Handel's seasons of English oratorio at the Covent Garden theatre were among the main musical events of the London year, and he liked to give his audiences something extra. Between the parts of an oratorio he would play one of his organ concertos, or put on a new concerto for the orchestra. The three pieces now called 'Concerti a due cori' were written for this purpose in the seasons of 1747 and 1748. The one in F major, HWV 333, is thought to have been played at the first performances of the oratorio 'Alexander Balus' in March 1748.

The title, which is not Handel's own, means concertos for two choirs, and the choirs are of wind instruments. Handel wrote for two matching groups, which he labelled first and second chorus, each made up in this concerto of oboes, bassoon and a pair of horns, and set them against each other and against the strings. Why so many wind players were to hand is not certain; one suggestion is that London was full of bandsmen after the regiments raised against the Jacobite rising of 1745 were stood down.

He did not compose much of it afresh. Handel was a great recycler, and these concertos are largely built from choruses of his own oratorios, with the voice parts handed to the instruments. In HWV 333 the best known borrowing comes in the third movement, which is the chorus 'Lift up your heads' from 'Messiah'; other movements, according to one commentator, go back to 'Esther', the Birthday Ode for Queen Anne and the 'Occasional Oratorio'. His audience, who knew

far less of his music than we can today, would probably not have recognised much of it. What they heard was a splendid noise, and the piece still makes one.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There are six movements. The first, marked 'Pomposo', is a grand opening in the dotted rhythms of a French overture, and the point of the piece is clear at once: the two groups of horns and oboes answer each other from opposite sides of the orchestra, phrase for phrase, with the strings in the middle. A quick Allegro follows, bright with horns.

The third movement is the one to listen out for if you know 'Messiah'. In the oratorio the chorus divides to ask and answer the question 'Who is this King of glory?'; here the two wind choirs take over that exchange, and the effect of music thrown from side to side is, if anything, even plainer without the words.

The Largo that follows turns to the minor: a gently rocking siciliano in which the oboes come forward. The fifth movement is built over a repeating bass, and the concerto ends with a lively movement for everyone, based on yet another chorus. Watch the two groups of players as well as listening to them, since the piece is as much about space as about notes.

Tonight's artists

Alena Baeva *violin*

Alena Baeva is the soloist in Bach's Violin Concerto in D minor, a work that survives only as a harpsichord concerto and is played here in a reconstruction for the violin. It is the most demanding of the Bach violin concertos, and it suits a player known for taking on repertoire off the usual track. She plays it on 30 April and again at the Sunday matinee on 2 May, in a programme of eighteenth-century music led by Jan Willem de Vriend, a specialist in this repertoire.

Alena Baeva is a violinist who was born in Kyrgyzstan in 1985 and is now a citizen of Luxembourg, where she has lived since 2010. She began the violin at five with Olga Danilova and later studied with Eduard Grach. Her repertoire is unusually wide, and alongside the standard concertos she champions less familiar ones, among them the concerto by Mieczysław Karłowicz, which she has recorded. She often performs with the pianist Vadym Kholodenko and records for the Alpha Classics label.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven**

John Eliot Gardiner, Vintage 2015

A conductor's portrait of Bach, strong on how he reworked his own music for the church cantatas, which is the story behind the sinfonia of BWV 174.

ACCESSIBLE **Hearing Bach's Passions**

Daniel R. Melamed, Oxford University Press 2005

Not about these pieces, but a short and clear guide to how Bach's church music in Leipzig was put together and performed, the world the cantata sinfonia comes from.

DEEPER **Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician**

Christoph Wolff, W. W. Norton & Company 2001

The standard scholarly life of Bach, with full accounts of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum, the harpsichord concertos and the lost originals behind them, and of his sons' training.

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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-04-30-de-vriend>

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