

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 Élémens

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 Élémens’ 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.

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

1685–1750

Violin Concerto in D minor, BWV 1052R

22 minutes

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.

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

6 minutes

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.

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

1714–1788

Symphony in D major

11 minutes

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.

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

16 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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