

Two Knights and a Passion

Friday, January 16, 2026 · 19:30 · Musikverein
Daniel Harding, conductor · Peter Somodari, cello · Tobias Lea, viola

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Don Juan, Tone Poem, Op. 20</i>	18'
2	HAYDN 1732–1809 <i>Symphony No. 49 in F minor, Hob. I:49 ('La Passione')</i>	22'
3	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Don Quixote, Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character, Op. 35</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		82'

Richard Strauss

18 minutes

1864–1949
Don Juan, Tone Poem, Op. 20

THE COMPOSER

Richard Strauss was the heir to Wagner and Liszt, the composer who carried the late Romantic tradition into the twentieth century. Born in Munich in 1864, the son of the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, he received a conservative musical education before an encounter with Alexander Ritter, a violinist married to one of Wagner’s nieces, converted him to the “music of the future.”

Between 1889 and 1898, Strauss composed a series of tone poems that made him the most famous composer in Germany: *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. Each pushed the orchestra to new extremes of virtuosity and expression. Then he turned to opera, creating the scandalous *Salome* (1905), the shattering *Elektra* (1909), and the nostalgic masterpiece *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Strauss lived long: through two world wars, the Nazi era, and the destruction of the German musical culture he had embodied. His late works, including the *Metamorphosen* for strings and the *Four Last Songs*, are elegies for a lost world. He died in 1949, shortly after completing those final songs.

ABOUT THE WORK

When Richard Strauss conducted the premiere of *Don Juan* in Weimar on 11 November 1889, he was twenty-five years old and almost unknown outside German conducting circles. The piece changed that overnight. Its torrential opening, a great upward sweep of the strings as if a curtain had been ripped away, announced a new voice in orchestral music, and within a few years Strauss was the most talked-about composer in Europe. The young man who wrote it was already an experienced practical musician: the son of the formidable Munich horn player Franz Strauss, he had grown up steeped in the Classical and early Romantic repertoire his conservative father loved, before falling under the spell of Wagner and Liszt and the idea of ‘programme music’: instrumental music that tells a story or paints a scene.

Don Juan is the work in which Strauss claimed that inheritance and made it his own. It is a tone poem, the genre Liszt had pioneered: a single continuous movement whose form is shaped by a poetic subject rather than by abstract Classical schemes. Strauss’s subject was not Mozart’s seducer dragged down to hell, nor quite Byron’s, but the *Don Juan* of a verse drama by the Austrian-Hungarian poet Nikolaus Lenau, left unfinished at the poet’s death. Lenau’s *Don Juan* is a Romantic idealist rather than a mere libertine, a man who pursues woman after woman in search of an unattainable ideal of perfect womanhood, and who, when the chase finally exhausts him, lets himself be killed in a duel out of sheer disenchantment. Strauss prefixed three excerpts from Lenau’s text to the score, and the music follows their emotional arc rather than any literal sequence of events.

The orchestral writing is famously demanding. The violins’ opening flourish and the high horn calls have terrified players and excited audiences for well over a century, and excerpts remain standard audition material precisely because they expose everything. Strauss would go on to write grander and longer tone poems (*Death and Transfiguration* the following year, then *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and, on this same programme, *Don Quixote*), but *Don Juan* retains a special freshness: the sound of a brilliant young composer discovering exactly what a modern orchestra could do.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Don Juan is short and headlong, but it falls into clearly felt sections. The opening is one of the great curtain-raisers in all music, a surging gesture that establishes the hero's restless energy in a single breath. From it Strauss spins Don Juan's principal theme, ardent and impatient.

Then come the loves. Listen for two great lyrical episodes where the music slows and softens: the first tender and questioning, the second, introduced by a long, rapturous solo oboe melody over hushed strings, the emotional heart of the piece: music of genuine yearning that hints Strauss's Don Juan is searching for something more than conquest. Each time, the searching idealism gives way again to the driving main theme, and the chase resumes.

The turning point is unmistakable: a heroic new theme rings out on the four horns in unison, the very emblem of the cavalier at the height of his powers. But Strauss has prepared a devastating reversal. At the climax of the final duel, the whole orchestra suddenly stops; into the silence falls a single, ice-cold dissonant trumpet note: the sword-thrust. What follows is not a triumphant close but a slow ebbing into darkness, the hero's fire dwindling to nothing. The ending is quiet, abrupt, and final.

Joseph Haydn

1732–1809

22 minutes

Symphony No. 49 in F minor, Hob. I:49 ('La Passione')

THE COMPOSER

Joseph Haydn was born in 1732 in the Lower Austrian village of Rohrau, the son of a wheelwright, and rose from rural poverty to become the most famous composer in Europe. After years as a chorister at St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna and a precarious freelance youth, he entered in 1761 the service of the immensely wealthy Esterházy princes, for whom he would work for nearly three decades, much of it at the remote palace of Eszterháza in rural Hungary. There, as he later put it, he was 'cut off from the world' and 'forced to become original'. Out of that isolation came the body of work that effectively defined the Classical style: he is rightly called the father of both the symphony and the string quartet, having brought each to maturity over a long, experimental career of more than a hundred symphonies and almost seventy quartets. Genial, witty, and deeply professional, Haydn was admired across Europe, befriended and influenced the young Mozart, and taught the young Beethoven. After his prince's death in 1790 he travelled twice to Lon-

don, where his late 'London' symphonies and the oratorio *The Creation* made him a celebrity. He died in Vienna in 1809, having lived through, and shaped, an entire era of music.

ABOUT THE WORK

Haydn's Symphony No. 49 belongs to a remarkable cluster of works he wrote around 1768, in his mid-thirties, while in the full vigour of his service at the Esterházy court. These years saw a striking change in his music: a turn toward minor keys, abrupt dynamic contrasts, agitated string writing, and a heightened emotional intensity that listeners have long associated with the literary and artistic movement known as *Sturm und Drang* ('storm and stress'). Whether Haydn was consciously responding to that movement or simply exploring the expressive frontier of his own art is debated, but the F minor Symphony is one of its most concentrated examples. It is among the darkest and most inward of all his symphonies.

The nickname 'La Passione' was not Haydn's own. It attached to the work around 1790, in copies circulating in northern Germany, and is often linked to a performance in Holy Week, when the symphony's grave, lamenting character suited the Passiontide season; another old source calls it, quite differently, 'the good-humoured Quaker'. Like a number of Haydn's symphonies from this period, it is scored for a modest Classical orchestra (pairs of oboes and horns, bassoon and strings, with no trumpets or timpani) and draws its power not from forces but from concentration of feeling.

Its most distinctive structural feature is that it follows the old pattern of the *sonata da chiesa*, or 'church sonata': it opens not with a fast movement but with a slow one, and proceeds slow, fast, minuet, fast. By the late 1760s this was already an archaic layout. Beginning a symphony with a long, sorrowing *Adagio* sets the tone for everything that follows; the whole work is bound together by its brooding F minor and by a shared seriousness of utterance rare even in this experimental phase of Haydn's career. It is a reminder that, long before the so-called 'London' symphonies made him an international celebrity, Haydn was already capable of music of profound, almost confessional depth.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony's four movements stay almost obsessively within the orbit of F minor, and the first movement sets the mood. It is an *Adagio* in a slow triple metre: grave, weighted and song-like,

with sighing appoggiaturas and a tread that suggests lament or procession. Notice how rarely the music allows itself to relax into the major; the shadow hardly lifts.

The second movement (Allegro di molto) breaks the spell with sudden violence: driving string figures, leaping lines, and sharp dynamic jolts. This is the Sturm und Drang Haydn at his most turbulent, the agitation all the more striking after the stillness that preceded it.

The Minuet returns to the prevailing minor, and it is no courtly diversion: stiff and serious in its outer sections, it darkens the dance that usually offers relief. Listen for the contrasting central trio, which opens a brief window into the major and a gentler, more pastoral light (one of the few consolations in the whole work) before the grim minuet returns.

The finale (Presto) is breathless and headlong, a hurtling movement that drives the symphony's tension to its close rather than dispelling it. Where many Classical finales send the audience home cheered, this one stays gripped by F minor to the end, sealing one of Haydn's most uncompromising and emotionally unified symphonies.

Richard Strauss

42 minutes

1864–1949

Don Quixote, Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character, Op. 35

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Don Quixote, completed in 1897 and premiered in Cologne on 8 March 1898 under Franz Wüllner, is the most original and the most affectionate of Richard Strauss's great tone poems. It comes from the astonishing burst of orchestral works he produced in the 1890s, the decade that made him famous. Strauss subtitled the work 'Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character,' and the form is exactly that: an introduction, a theme, ten variations, and a finale, each variation depicting an episode from Cervantes's novel about the elderly Spanish gentleman who reads too many tales of chivalry, loses his wits, and rides out with his earthbound squire Sancho Panza to revive the age of knight-errantry.

Strauss's masterstroke is to cast the work as a kind of concerto without quite being one. The figure of Don Quixote is represented by a solo cello, whose noble, slightly absurd, ever-hopeful theme threads through the entire piece; Sancho Panza is given to a solo viola (doubled at times by bass clarinet and tenor tuba), earthy, garrulous, and full of proverbs. Around these two soloists Strauss deploys one of his largest and most imaginative orchestras, with an extraordinary array of special effects that were the wonder, and sometimes the scandal, of his contemporaries.

What lifts the work above mere cleverness is its tenderness. Strauss clearly loved his hapless knight, and the music never simply mocks him: even at its most uproarious it keeps a thread of sympathy, and by the end that sympathy becomes the whole point. The piece is at once a brilliant orchestral comedy, a virtuoso showcase for two of the orchestra's own string players, and, in its final pages, a deeply moving portrait of disillusionment and death. Tonight it sends the audience home with the second of the evening's two knights, after the duel-haunted Don Juan, framing a programme in which idealism, in different costumes, again and again collides with the world.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Introduction paints Don Quixote's mind unhinging itself by reading: courtly, chivalric music gradually clouds and grows confused until, at last, his sanity dissolves in a famously knotted

dissonant chord. Then the two themes are presented, the solo cello's questing knight and the solo viola's plain-spoken squire, and the variations begin.

Each has its picture. Variation 1 is the attack on the windmills, which Quixote takes for giants: listen for the great whirling figure and the crash that knocks him flat. Variation 2 is the battle with a flock of sheep mistaken for an army. Strauss's bleating, flutter-tongued brass, one of the earliest uses of the technique, is among the most notorious effects in the repertoire. Later variations bring a procession of penitents that the knight charges, a tender nocturnal episode (the cello dreaming of his idealised Dulcinea), and the celebrated ride through the air on a wooden horse, where a wind machine howls beneath a sustained orchestral pedal even though, in fact, the pair never leave the ground.

Throughout, keep your ear on the dialogue between the two soloists, the cello's high-flown ardour repeatedly deflated by the viola's grumbling common sense. The Finale is the place where the comedy turns to poignancy. Don Quixote, defeated in a duel, recovers his reason at last and quietly accepts that his dreams were folly. The solo cello sings a long, serene final melody and then, in one unforgettable downward slide, the knight breathes his last. After all the noise and laughter, the work ends in stillness.

Tonight's artists

Peter Somodari *cello*

In Don Quixote the solo cello *is* the deluded knight: his nobility, his ardour, his eventual heartbreak all carried on a single instrument's line. Drawing the part from within the orchestra's own ranks, rather than importing an outside star, keeps Quixote sounding like one of the Philharmonic's own: a voice that belongs to this sound, dreaming and dying in the middle of it.

Peter Somodari, born in Veszprém, Hungary, is a cellist of the Vienna Philharmonic. He joined the Vienna State Opera Orchestra in 2012 and became a member of the Philharmonic in 2016, taking his place in a cello section long famous for the warmth and unanimity of its sound. In Strauss's Don Quixote the solo cello is not an accompanied soloist but the very protagonist, and the Vienna Philharmonic entrusts the role to one of its own players, who must combine the projection of a concerto soloist with an insider's blend into the orchestra's collective voice.

Tobias Lea *viola*

If the cello is Don Quixote's soaring idealism, the solo viola is Sancho Panza's feet-on-the-ground good sense: garrulous, affectionate, forever puncturing his master's flights with a proverb. Taking the part from one of the orchestra's own violists lets that earthy second voice rise naturally out of the texture, the perfect foil to the cello across one of Strauss's most loving double portraits.

Tobias Lea, from Adelaide in Australia, is a violist of the Vienna Philharmonic. He joined the Vienna State Opera Orchestra in 1994 and became a member of the Philharmonic in 1998, and has since spent three decades in a viola section that supplies the inner glow so characteristic of the Vienna sound. The solo viola part in Strauss's Don Quixote, the voice of the earthbound squire Sancho Panza, is one of the great character roles in the orchestral viola repertoire, demanding both comic timing and a singing tone, and here it is taken by a player who can step forward as a soloist while remaining fully part of the ensemble.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma**

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2006

A full life of Strauss that traces the young composer of Don Juan and the confident master of Don Quixote a decade later.

ACCESSIBLE **The Faber Pocket Guide to Haydn**

Richard Wigmore, Faber and Faber 2009

A handy guide to Haydn's life and works, useful for placing the stormy Symphony No. 49, 'La Passione', among his minor-key symphonies of the late 1760s.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss**

Charles Youmans (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2010

Essays on Strauss's life and music, with a close look at the tone poems, Don Juan and Don Quixote among them.

SOURCES

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3. Tobias Lea, Viola, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/orchester-mitglieder/viola-tobias-lea/1635/>
4. Don Juan (Strauss), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Juan_\(Strauss\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Juan_(Strauss))
5. Don Juan (Strauss), Wikipedia (de). [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Juan_\(Strauss\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Juan_(Strauss))
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