

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

1864–1949

Don Juan, Tone Poem, Op. 20

18 minutes

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 devastat-

ing 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')

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

1864–1949

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

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.



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