

Sunrise and Northern Light

Thursday, February 19, 2026 · 19:30 · Wiener Konzerthaus

Andris Nelsons, conductor

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	KURTÁG b. 1926 <i>Petite musique solennelle en hommage à Pierre Boulez 90</i>	9'
2	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Also sprach Zarathustra, Tone Poem, Op. 30</i>	33'
3	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43</i>	43'
	TOTAL MUSIC	85'

György Kurtág

b. 1926

9 minutes

Petite musique solennelle en hommage à Pierre Boulez 90

THE COMPOSER

György Kurtág, born in 1926 in Lugoj, in the Romanian Banat, is one of the most concentrated and singular voices in contemporary music, a composer for whom brevity is not a limitation but a discipline. He moved to Budapest in 1946 to study at the Liszt Academy, where he formed a lifelong friendship with his near-contemporary György Ligeti; the two would remain the twin poles of post-war Hungarian modernism. A crisis of confidence in the 1950s preceded a year in Paris in 1957 and 1958, where work with the psychologist Marianne Stein, and exposure to the music of Webern and the plays of Beckett, helped him rebuild his language from the smallest possible units. The result was a music of aphoristic miniatures (gestures, sighs, fragments) assembled into larger cycles such as the open-ended piano collection *Játékok* ('Games'), the song cycle *Messages of the Late Miss R. V. Trousova*, and *Kafka-Fragmente* for soprano and violin. Trained also as a pianist, he and his wife Márta performed *Játékok* together for decades, often alongside his Bach transcriptions. Kurtág writes slowly, revises endlessly, and distrusts grandiloquence; even his rare orchestral works retain the intimacy of chamber music. His first opera, *Fin de partie*, after Beckett, reached the stage at La Scala in 2018, when he was 92. He is widely regarded as one of the essential composers of his time.

ABOUT THE WORK

The *Petite musique solennelle en hommage à Pierre Boulez 90* ('Little Solemn Music in Homage to Pierre Boulez 90') is exactly what its title says: a short, ceremonial orchestral piece written to mark the ninetieth birthday of Pierre Boulez, the composer, conductor, and uncompromising standard-bearer of post-war modernism, born in March 1925. Kurtág and Boulez belonged to overlapping worlds, both shaped by the legacy of Webern and both central to the European avant-garde of the second half of the twentieth century, and the homage, written in 2015, is the tribute of one master to another across the boundary that separated their very different temperaments: Boulez the analytical architect of large, glittering structures, Kurtág the miniaturist who builds from the single gesture outward.

The word 'solennelle' (solemn) in the title is the key to the piece's character. This is not a fanfare or a celebration so much as a measured, ceremonial offering, closer in spirit to a chorale or a procession than to a birthday flourish. As with so much of Kurtág's music, it is brief: a span of only a few minutes, in which not a note is wasted. The composer's habit of writing in the most concentrated possible terms means that an orchestral homage from him carries the weight of something much longer, precisely because it refuses to fill its time with display.

Kurtág's relationship to the orchestra is unusual. The bulk of his life's work lies in chamber music, song, and the piano miniatures of *Játékok*, and when he does write for large forces he tends to treat the orchestra as an immense, finely graded chamber ensemble rather than as a Romantic mass of sound. Solo lines emerge and recede; instruments are used for the exact colour of a single chord or interval; silence is shaped as carefully as sound. A piece like this, placed at the opening of a concert, functions almost as a threshold: a moment of stillness and attention before the great Romantic statements that follow.

Heard at the head of this Vienna programme, the homage sets a tone of listening rather than spectacle. It asks the audience to lean in, to notice the weight of individual sonorities, before Strauss flings open the orchestra at full blaze. In a season of anniversaries and tributes, it is also a reminder of how a living tradition honours its own: not with imitation, but with the offering of one composer's most personal manner laid at the feet of another.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first for scale and restraint. After the silence of the hall, the piece does not announce itself with a grand gesture; it grows out of quiet, deliberately placed sonorities. Kurtág's orchestra is vast but used sparingly. Pay attention to how few instruments are usually sounding at once, and how much each chord seems to mean. Solemnity here is created not by volume but by space and pacing: notes are given room to settle, and the silences between them are part of the music, not gaps in it.

Track the harmony as a slow ceremony rather than a melody you can hum. Kurtág thinks in intervals and resonances; a single sustained chord, slightly coloured by a soft attack or a touch of a low instrument, can be the whole event of a passage. Notice the way sonorities are weighted at the bottom and allowed to ring, giving the brief span a sense of gravity and depth out of proportion to its length.

Finally, hear the piece as a frame. Its concentration and stillness are the opposite of the cosmic sunrise that opens *Also sprach Zarathustra* a few minutes later, and that contrast is surely intended. This is music that rewards close, almost held-breath attention: the sound of a composer who believes that the smallest, most carefully chosen gesture can carry as much as the grandest.

Richard Strauss

33 minutes

1864–1949

Also sprach Zarathustra, Tone Poem, Op. 30

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

Also sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spoke Zarathustra) is Strauss's boldest attempt to put philosophy into sound. Composed in 1896, when he was thirty-one and at the height of his powers as a writer of tone poems, it takes its title and inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's prose-poem of the same name, in which the prophet Zarathustra descends from his mountain solitude to teach humanity about the Übermensch and the overcoming of received values. Strauss did not attempt to set the book to music line by line; rather, as he explained it, he wished to convey in music an idea of the development of the human race, through its religious and scientific phases, up to Nietzsche's idea of the Superman. He gave the score subtitles drawn from Nietzsche's chapters, and these became a loose programme.

The work falls into a continuous sequence of sections, played without a break: after the celebrated opening 'Sonnenaufgang' (Sunrise), the music passes through 'Of the Backworldsmen' (Von den Hinterweltlern), with its hymn-like evocation of religious faith; 'Of the Great Longing' (Von der großen Sehnsucht); 'Of Joys and Passions'; a 'Grave Song'; 'Of Science' (Von der Wissenschaft), built on an austere fugue that gathers all twelve notes of the chromatic scale; 'The Convalescent'; the swirling waltz of 'The Dance-Song' (Das Tanzlied); and the mysterious bell-tolls of the 'Nachtwandlerlied' (Song of the Night-Wanderer). The premiere took place in Frankfurt on 27 November 1896, with Strauss himself conducting, and the piece was an immediate success.

The opening minutes are, of course, world-famous, even to listeners who have never heard the rest: Stanley Kubrick's use of the Sunrise in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) made those rising trumpet calls a universal shorthand for awe and the dawn of consciousness. But the music after the fanfare is where Strauss's real argument unfolds: a struggle between two tonal worlds, the key of C (representing nature, the cosmos, the physical world) and the key of B (the human, the spiritual, the questing). That opposition is never resolved. At the very end, the orchestra settles into B major in the high strings while the lower strings pluck a C: two keys sounding at once, the cosmos and humanity unreconciled. This 'world riddle' close, refusing the satisfy-

ing final cadence the ear expects, is one of the most quietly radical gestures in late-Romantic music: a vast philosophical poem that ends not with an answer but with a question.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Sunrise is the obvious place to begin, and it deserves fresh ears. Out of an almost subsonic rumble of organ, contrabassoon and double basses, the void before creation, a solitary trumpet sounds the rising figure C–G–C, answered by the full orchestra and crowned by tremendous strokes on the timpani and a blazing C major chord. Strauss gives it to us three times, each more overwhelming, before the music plunges into the human drama. Listen for that bare interval, the rising fifth and octave: it is the work's primal cell, and it returns throughout.

From there, follow the music as a journey of moods rather than a story. In 'Of the Backworldsmen' the divided lower strings intone a hushed, churchly theme, and horns and organ quote the plainchant 'Credo in unum Deum': religion as one of humanity's early answers. 'Of Science' is the cerebral heart: a slow fugue whose subject deliberately uses all twelve chromatic notes, knotting the orchestra into dense counterpoint that represents the labour of the intellect. When the music finally breaks free into 'The Convalescent' and then 'The Dance-Song,' notice the solo violin spinning a Viennese waltz. This is Strauss the man of the theatre and the ballroom reasserting himself, life and sensuality answering abstraction.

Save your closest attention for the ending. After the midnight bell tolls twelve in the 'Nachtwandlerlied,' the orchestra drifts upward into a serene B major in the high woodwinds and violins, but underneath, the lower strings keep pricking out Cs, pizzicato, refusing to join that key. The two tonalities hang unreconciled in the air, and the work simply fades on this unanswered question. Do not wait for a resolution; the absence of one is the point.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43

THE COMPOSER

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) is Finland's greatest composer and one of the supreme symphonists of the twentieth century. His music, above all the seven symphonies and tone poems such as *Finlandia* and *Tapiola*, became inseparable from Finland's emerging national identity during its struggle against Russian domination, and he was revered as a national hero in his own lifetime. His style evolved from late-Romantic richness toward an increasingly concentrated, organic and original conception of symphonic form, in which themes seem to grow and fuse like living things, shot through with the cold light and vast spaces of the Nordic landscape. Famously, after completing the Seventh Symphony, the incidental music to *The Tempest* and the tone poem *Tapiola* in the mid-1920s, he fell almost completely silent for the last thirty years of his life: the 'silence of Järvenpää'.

ABOUT THE WORK

Sibelius's Second Symphony, composed in 1901–02, is the most popular of his seven and, for many listeners, the gateway to his whole world. He began sketching it in Italy, where he and his family spent the early months of 1901 in Rapallo, on the Ligurian coast, and something of the Mediterranean warmth seems to have seeped into a score that is nonetheless unmistakably Nordic. He completed it back in Finland, and conducted the premiere in Helsinki on 8 March 1902. The reception was rapturous. Audiences of the day, living under Russian rule and the intensifying pressure of imperial censorship, heard in the symphony's struggle-to-triumph trajectory a parable of national liberation, and the work came to be known as a 'symphony of independence'.

Whether Sibelius intended any such message is still debated, and his methods point to something more abstract and more interesting. Where a composer like Tchaikovsky or Brahms tends to present whole, singing themes and then develop them, Sibelius works the other way around: he scatters small motivic fragments early on, seemingly disconnected, and lets them gradually coalesce, over the span of a movement, into the broad melodies the ear has been waiting for. The result is music that feels organic, even geological, with themes growing the way a landscape forms, by slow accretion and pressure. This 'building from fragments' technique reaches its grandest demonstration in this symphony, and it became a hallmark of his mature style.

The four movements trace an arc from pastoral openness through darkness and unrest to a blazing affirmation. The first movement (*Allegretto*) sets out in sunlit D major, its rocking string figures and woodwind calls suggesting open countryside, the thematic fragments circling and combining. The second (*Andante*) is the symphony's troubled heart: it opens with a long, ominous pizzicato tread in the basses over which the bassoons intone a bleak, almost funereal melody, and the movement swings between gloom, defiance, and a hard-won lyricism. The third (*Vivacissimo*) is a whirlwind scherzo, fast and driving, and at its centre comes one of Sibelius's most beautiful inspirations: a slow trio launched by an oboe melody that repeats the same note over and over before it dares to move. Most remarkably of all, the scherzo does not end and then yield to the finale; instead, after the trio returns, the music gathers itself and surges, without a break, directly into the last movement.

That finale (*Allegro moderato*) is the goal of the whole symphony: a broad, hymn-like theme in D major, striding and triumphant, that returns at the close lifted to an overwhelming peroration. The transition from the dark scherzo into this radiant apotheosis is one of the great coups in the symphonic repertoire, light breaking, irresistibly, out of shadow.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

In the first movement, listen for how little Sibelius gives you at the start, and how much he makes of it. The opening string figure is almost a non-theme, a gentle rising-and-falling pulse, and the woodwind ideas that follow seem like loose fragments. Keep your ear on those scraps: over the movement they are turned, combined, and grown until they suddenly cohere into something whole. This is the Sibelian fingerprint, and once you hear it here you will hear it everywhere.

The slow movement rewards patience. Note the very opening: a long, walking pizzicato in the cellos and basses, footsteps in the dark, over which the bassoons sing their grave melody. The whole movement is a tug-of-war between this bleakness and moments of fierce, brass-led protest and aching string lyricism: Sibelius at his most emotionally direct.

In the scherzo, let the sheer speed take you, then wait for the trio: the oboe enters with a melody that repeats a single note again and again before it finally lifts and broadens, a moment of stillness at the centre of the storm. The crucial thing is what happens next. Rather than stopping for applause, the music

swells out of the scherzo and pours directly into the finale. Listen for that seam (or rather, for the lack of one) as the scherzo's energy is transformed, mid-flight, into the finale's striding hymn.

The finale itself is built for a single goal. Its broad main theme is stated, developed, and then, over a long, patiently rising bass line and surging strings, brought back at the end, blazing, in full D major. Hear how Sibelius delays the final arrival, stretching the tension almost to the breaking point before the brass crown the theme and the symphony closes in triumph. It is one of the most physically thrilling endings in the repertoire, and the perfect counterweight to the unresolved question on which Strauss left us earlier in the evening.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE Sibelius: A Composer's Life and the Awakening of Finland

Glenda Dawn Goss, University of Chicago Press 2009

Sets Sibelius against the Finland of his youth, the national awakening that shaped the years around the Second Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE The Life of Richard Strauss

Bryan Gilliam, Cambridge University Press 1999

A short, readable life of Strauss that covers the tone poems of the 1890s, Also sprach Zarathustra among them.

DEEPER The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss

Charles Youmans (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2010

Essays by specialists on Strauss's music, with a close look at the tone poems and the ideas, Nietzsche's included, behind Also sprach Zarathustra.

SOURCES

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3. List of compositions by György Kurtág, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Gy%C3%B6rgy_Kurt%C3%A1g
4. Also sprach Zarathustra (Strauss), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Also_sprach_Zarathustra_\(Strauss\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Also_sprach_Zarathustra_(Strauss))
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6. Jean Sibelius, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Sibelius
7. Symphony No. 2 (Sibelius), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Sibelius\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Sibelius))

8. Sibelius: A Composer's Life and the Awakening of Finland, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780226005478>
9. The Life of Richard Strauss, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521570190>
10. The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521728157>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-02-19-nelsons>

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