

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

Petite musique solennelle en hommage à Pierre Boulez 90

9 minutes

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.

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

1864–1949

Also sprach Zarathustra, Tone Poem, Op. 30

33 minutes

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.

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 or-

chestra 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

43 minutes

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'.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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