

Oberon's Horn to the Dance

Wednesday, March 18, 2026 · 19:30 · Wiener Konzerthaus
Zubin Mehta, conductor · Pinchas Zukerman, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	WEBER 1786–1826 <i>Overture to Oberon, J. 306</i>	9'
2	BRUCH 1838–1920 <i>Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26</i>	25'
3	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92</i>	37'
TOTAL MUSIC		71'

Carl Maria von Weber

9 minutes

1786–1826

Overture to Oberon, J. 306

THE COMPOSER

Carl Maria von Weber, born near Lübeck in 1786, is the composer who, more than any other, founded German Romantic opera and gave it a national voice. A cousin of Mozart's wife Constanze, he grew up in a travelling theatrical family, and the stage was in his blood from the start; he was a brilliant pianist, a sharp-witted music critic, and a conductor who reformed orchestral practice wherever he worked. As opera director first in Prague and then, from 1817, in Dresden, he built a German-language opera company in deliberate opposition to the reigning Italian fashion. His breakthrough came in 1821 with *Der Freischütz*, whose forest setting, folk colour, and supernatural 'Wolf's Glen' scene electrified audiences and became the cornerstone of German Romantic opera, opening the path that led to Wagner, who revered Weber and in 1844 helped bring his remains home to Dresden. Weber's health, never robust, was destroyed by tuberculosis. He travelled to London in 1826 to conduct the premiere of his last opera, *Oberon*, written to an English libretto, and died there a few weeks later, only thirty-nine years old, his orchestral imagination and gift for atmospheric scene-painting having permanently enlarged the expressive range of the Romantic orchestra.

ABOUT THE WORK

The overture to Oberon is among the last music Weber wrote, and he composed it under the shadow of his own death. Oberon, or The Elf King's Oath was commissioned by the actor-manager Charles Kemble for Covent Garden in London, set to an English libretto by James Robinson Planché after Christoph Martin Wieland's verse romance, itself drawing on the medieval tale of Huon of Bordeaux and threaded through with characters from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The plot turns on a quarrel between Oberon, king of the fairies, and his queen Titania: the two will not be reconciled until they find a pair of human lovers faithful through every trial. The opera is a sprawling 'English Romantic opera' of spoken dialogue, songs and grand spectacle, a form that sat awkwardly with Weber's symphonic gifts. It is the only opera he ever set in English.

Already gravely ill with tuberculosis, and against medical advice, Weber learned English to understand the libretto and dragged himself to London to oversee the production, conducting the premiere on 12 April 1826. The overture was one of the last numbers he completed, in London, while rehearsals were under way. The premiere was a triumph, but the effort finished him: Weber died in London on the night of 4–5 June 1826, less than two months later, at the age of thirty-nine. The opera that cost him his life is rarely staged today, as its hybrid form has never travelled well, but the overture has never left the repertoire, surviving as a perfect, self-contained distillation of the whole fairy-world it introduces.

Like many of his overtures, this one is built almost entirely from melodies that return later in the opera, so that it works as a kind of advance summary of the drama's emotional terrain: the magic, the storm, the ardour, and the final blaze of triumph.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The seed of the whole work is sown in the very first bar: a soft, unaccompanied horn-call, Oberon's magic horn, three rising notes that conjure the fairy realm out of silence. Listen to how quietly the piece begins, the hushed strings and answering woodwinds (a little march for muted brass, a stirring in the violins) painting an enchanted twilight before the music has properly started. This slow introduction is all atmosphere and expectancy.

Then the Allegro bursts in, and the overture becomes a swift, brilliant sonata movement. Two ideas dominate: a darting, scurrying string theme full of fairy quicksilver, and a broad, soaring

clarinet melody, followed by a theme from the heroine Reiza's great aria 'Ocean! thou mighty monster', that swells into the overture's emotional high point. Listen for the contrast between the gossamer fairy music and this full-throated Romantic ardour. Weber's orchestration is the real marvel: the writing for horns and woodwinds, the way the orchestra glints and shimmers, points directly toward Mendelssohn's fairy music (Mendelssohn even quoted Oberon in his *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture) and Wagner's instrumental colour. The coda gathers everything into a headlong, glittering rush to a triumphant close: nine minutes that open the evening with pure enchantment.

Max Bruch

1838–1920

25 minutes

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26

THE COMPOSER

Max Bruch, born in Cologne in 1838, was a thoroughly Romantic German composer whose long life ran from the age of Mendelssohn well into the twentieth century, yet whose musical convictions never budged from the mid-Romantic ideals of his youth. A precocious talent who was composing by the age of nine, he made his living chiefly as a conductor, holding posts in Mannheim, Koblenz, Sondershausen, Liverpool (with the Liverpool Philharmonic) and Breslau, before settling into a long and influential professorship of composition at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik from 1890 to 1910. Bruch prized melody above all, and his sympathies lay with the conservative tradition rather than the 'music of the future' of Wagner and Liszt. He was a prolific composer of choral works and operas that he regarded as his most important achievements, but posterity has been ruthlessly selective: today he is remembered almost entirely for three instrumental pieces: the First Violin Concerto, the Scottish Fantasy for violin and orchestra, and *Kol Nidrei* for cello, the last built on a Jewish liturgical melody that led to a persistent and false assumption that Bruch was himself Jewish (he was, in fact, raised a Protestant). He lived just long enough to see the Romantic world he embodied swept away by the First World War, dying in Berlin-Friedenau in 1920.

ABOUT THE WORK

Max Bruch's First Violin Concerto is one of the most beloved works in the entire violin repertoire, and a piece that, to its composer's lasting irritation, came to overshadow everything else he wrote. Bruch began it as a young man in his early twenties and laboured over it for years; the first version was performed in Koblenz in April 1866, with Otto von Königslöw as soloist, but he was dissatisfied and undertook a thorough revision with the help of the greatest violinist of the age,

Joseph Joachim. Joachim advised Bruch on the solo writing and on the work's unusual form, and the definitive version he premiered in Bremen on 7 January 1868 became an instant and permanent success. Bruch dedicated the concerto to Joachim in gratitude.

That very success became a source of bitterness. Bruch saw little of the money the concerto went on to earn, and, worse in his own estimation, its fame eclipsed the choral and operatic works on which he had staked his reputation. 'Every fortnight another one comes to me wanting to play the first concerto,' he complained to his publisher.

The concerto's most striking formal feature is announced in the title of its first movement: 'Vorspiel,' meaning prelude. Bruch worried that calling the piece a concerto at all was misleading, since the opening movement does not follow the expected concerto-sonata pattern. Instead the three movements (Vorspiel: Allegro moderato; Adagio; Finale: Allegro energico) are played without a break, each flowing directly into the next, giving the whole an unbroken, song-like continuity that owes more to Mendelssohn's concerto than to the grand Beethovenian model.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens not with a flourish but with a question: soft, brooding timpani and woodwind phrases, answered each time by the solo violin in free, almost improvisatory recitative: a true 'prelude' that feels like a singer warming up before the aria. From these murmured exchanges the violin launches the movement's two great themes, passionate and full-throated, before the music dies away and slides, without pause, straight into the slow movement.

The Adagio is the heart of the concerto and the reason so many violinists love it: an outpouring of long-breathed, deeply Romantic melody, three song-like themes layered over one another, that lets the soloist simply sing. Listen for the warmth of the violin's middle and lower register here; Bruch keeps the orchestra subdued so the line can soar. It is one of the most lyrical slow movements in the literature.

The Finale wakes the music from that reverie. A quiet, expectant build-up in the orchestra sets up the soloist's entry with a bold, gypsy-flavoured main theme in double-stops: fiery, dance-like and brilliantly virtuosic. Listen for the broad second theme that the orchestra takes up grandly, and for the steadily accelerating

drive to the close, the solo line blazing ever higher until the whole concerto ends in a jubilant rush. After the Vorspiel's questions and the Adagio's song, the Finale is pure release.

Ludwig van Beethoven

37 minutes

1770–1827

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony was written in 1811–12, during a summer the composer spent taking the waters at the Bohemian spa town of Teplitz, hoping to repair his ruined health and his failing hearing. It belongs to one of the most fertile stretches of his life, the same period that produced the Eighth Symphony and the famous, unsent 'Immortal Beloved' letter, and it overflows with an energy that betrays no trace of the personal crisis surrounding it. If the Fifth Symphony is fate and the Sixth is nature, the Seventh is pure, propulsive rhythm: it is the symphony in which Beethoven made rhythm itself the principal subject.

The premiere, on 8 December 1813 in the great hall of the University of Vienna, was a charity concert for soldiers wounded at the Battle of Hanau, and it was a sensation. The orchestra was studded with celebrities (the violinist Louis Spohr, Hummel, Meyerbeer and Salieri all took part), and the audience demanded the second movement be encored on the spot. Beethoven himself, by now very hard of hearing, conducted, and called the symphony 'one of my best works'.

The phrase forever attached to this symphony is Richard Wagner's: he called it 'the apotheosis of the dance'. It is an apt description for a work in which every movement is driven by an insistent, repeating rhythmic cell, the music seeming to move by the sheer momentum of its own pulse.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony opens with a long slow introduction, grand, spacious and full of rising scales, before it quietly gathers itself onto a single repeated note that turns into a skipping dotted rhythm. That dotted figure is the engine of the whole first movement (Vivace): once it starts, it never stops, driving forward with an almost obsessive joy. Listen for how the entire movement is generated from this one bounding rhythmic idea.

The second movement (Allegretto) is the symphony's most famous music, and it was the hit of the premiere. It is not a true slow movement but a steady, processional tread: a solemn theme built on a simple long-short-short rhythm that repeats hypnotically, growing from a bare whisper in the low strings into a great chorale and back again. Mournful yet strangely consoling, it has been borrowed by countless films; listen for the way the haunting melody is passed up through the orchestra and for the gentler major-key episode that offers a glimpse of light.

The third movement is a lightning-fast scherzo, twice interrupted by a broad, hymn-like Trio said to derive from an Austrian pilgrims' hymn. Beethoven brings the Trio back an extra time, then cuts it off with comic abruptness. The Finale (Allegro con brio) is a whirlwind: a stamping, almost Bacchanalian dance of unstoppable force, propelled by hammered accents and a churning bass line that drives the symphony to one of the most exhilarating conclusions Beethoven ever composed. By the end, Wagner's 'apotheosis of the dance' feels exactly right.

Tonight's artists

Pinchas Zukerman *violin*

In the Bruch G minor Concerto, Pinchas Zukerman brings exactly the gifts the work most rewards: a singing, golden tone built to fill the Adagio's long Romantic lines, and the temperament to relish the Finale's fiery gypsy dance. Few living players have lived longer or more deeply inside this repertoire.

Pinchas Zukerman, born in Tel Aviv in 1948, is one of the defining string players of his generation: a violinist, violist and conductor of rare versatility. The son of Holocaust survivors, he began on recorder and clarinet before switching to the violin at eight, and his gifts were spotted by Isaac Stern and Pablo Casals, who arranged for him to study in New York at the Juilliard School under the legendary teacher Ivan Galamian. He shared the Leventritt Competition prize with Kyung-wha Chung in 1967 and launched an international career that has now spanned more than half a century. Equally celebrated on the viola, Zukerman has long been admired above all for the warmth, breadth, and effortless beauty of his tone, qualities that make him an ideal interpreter of the great Romantic concertos of Bruch, Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Tchaikovsky. He has also built a substantial parallel career as a conductor, as Music Director of the National Arts Centre Orchestra of Canada from 1998 to 2015, and is a devoted teacher.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

A long, lively modern life of Beethoven that covers the years of the Seventh Symphony and its first performances in Vienna.

ACCESSIBLE Max Bruch: His Life and Works

Christopher Fifield, Boydell Press 2005

The standard English life of Bruch, and the place to read how the First Violin Concerto came about and how it overshadowed the rest of his music.

DEEPER Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision

Lewis Lockwood, W. W. Norton 2017

A leading Beethoven scholar goes through the nine symphonies one by one, with a chapter on the Seventh.

SOURCES

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2. Zubin Mehta, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zubin_Mehta
3. Vienna New Year's Concert, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vienna_New_Year%27s_Concert
4. Pinchas Zukerman, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinchas_Zukerman
5. Carl Maria von Weber, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Maria_von_Weber
6. Oberon (Weber), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oberon_\(Weber\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oberon_(Weber))
7. Max Bruch, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Bruch
8. Violin Concerto No. 1 (Bruch), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._1_\(Bruch\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._1_(Bruch))
9. Symphony No. 7 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_(Beethoven))
10. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
11. Max Bruch: His Life and Works, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781843831365>
12. Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393353853>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-03-18-mehta>

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