

Fables, a Lost Spring, and a Mermaid's Tale

Saturday, June 13, 2026 · 15:30 · Musikverein
Lorenzo Viotti, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	POULENC 1899–1963 <i>Les Animaux modèles, Suite for Orchestra, FP 111</i>	22'
2	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>Printemps, Suite symphonique, L. 61 (orchestrated by Henri Büsser)</i>	16'
3	ZEMLINSKY 1871–1942 <i>Die Seejungfrau, Fantasy in Three Movements for Large Orchestra after a Fairy Tale by Andersen</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		83'

Francis Poulenc

1899–1963

Les Animaux modèles, Suite for Orchestra, FP 111

THE COMPOSER

Francis Poulenc was born in Paris in 1899 into a wealthy family of pharmaceutical manufacturers (the firm later became Rhône-Poulenc). Largely self-taught as a composer (his formal training was as a pianist, with the great Catalan virtuoso Ricardo Viñes), he shot to fame in his early twenties as a member of Les Six, the loose group of young French composers around Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau who rejected both German Romanticism and Debussyan vagueness in favour of wit, clarity, and the music of the streets. The critic Claude Rostand famously described him as ‘half monk, half rascal’, and the phrase has stuck because it is true: Poulenc’s music swings between cabaret-bright irreverence and a depth of religious feeling almost unmatched in twentieth-century music. The turning point came in 1936, when the death of a fellow composer in a car accident prompted a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Black Virgin at Rocamadour and a return to the Catholic faith of his childhood. From then on the two Poulencs coexisted: the boulevardier of the ballets and songs, and the believer of the Stabat Mater, the Gloria, and the opera Dialogues des Carmélites.

22 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Les Animaux modèles (The Model Animals) was Poulenc's third and final ballet, composed between 1940 and 1942, that is, in defeated, occupied France. Its scenario, devised by the composer himself, brings to the stage six fables of Jean de La Fontaine, transposed to a country estate in rural Burgundy: the action runs from daybreak, as the estate wakes, to the midday meal that gathers everyone together. Poulenc completed the piano score in September 1941 and the orchestration between October 1941 and June 1942.

The premiere took place at the Paris Opéra on 8 August 1942, with choreography by Serge Lifar (who also danced) and Roger Désormière conducting. The circumstances gave the work a hidden edge: with German officers sitting in the audience of the occupied capital, Poulenc smuggled into his score the melody of the old revanchist song 'Vous n'aurez pas l'Alsace et la Lorraine' ('You shall not have Alsace and Lorraine'), a gesture of quiet defiance that the occupiers failed to notice. Arthur Honegger, reviewing the score, remarked that the many influences audible in it had been so completely assimilated that the result was simply 'Poulenc'.

The composer later extracted the six-movement orchestral suite heard tonight: *Le petit jour* (Daybreak), *Le lion amoureux* (The Lion in Love), *L'homme entre deux âges et ses deux maîtresses* (The Middle-Aged Man and His Two Mistresses), *La mort et le bûcheron* (Death and the Woodcutter), *Les deux coqs* (The Two Roosters), and *Le repas de midi* (The Midday Meal).

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The suite is a portrait gallery, and each panel has its own colour. *Le petit jour* is dawn music: soft, luminous scoring for a large orchestra used with chamber-music delicacy as the estate stirs to life. *Le lion amoureux* gives us La Fontaine's lion who falls in love and lets his claws be clipped and his teeth be filed for the sake of a shepherdess: the music is grandly passionate, and all the funnier (and sadder) for taking the lion's ardour seriously. *L'homme entre deux âges* is a comedy of vanity: a man between two ages courts two mistresses, one young, one older, and each plucks out the hairs that displease her (the young one the grey, the older one the dark) until he is bald; Poulenc gives the scene a suave, mock-elegant gallantry.

La mort et le bûcheron is the emotional centre of the suite, and the place to hear Poulenc's other face. An exhausted woodcutter calls for Death; when Death actually appears, he hastily ex-

plains that he only wanted help lifting his load. The music here is grave and processional, with a darkness that has more to do with the France of 1940 than with La Fontaine's world. *Les deux coqs* is the showpiece: two roosters battle over a hen in brilliant, strutting combat music. Listen for the orchestral crowing and the swagger of the victor (whose pride, in the fable, promptly costs him everything). *Le repas de midi* rounds the day off with the warmth of a shared table, recalling music from the dawn scene as the frame closes. Throughout, listen for the Poulenc trademarks: razor-sharp wind writing, sudden swerves between music-hall cheek and genuine tenderness, and melodies that sound as if they had always existed.

Claude Debussy

16 minutes

1862–1918

Printemps, Suite symphonique, L. 61 (orchestrated by Henri Büsser)

THE COMPOSER

Claude Debussy, born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1862 to a family of modest means, entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten and spent the next decade exasperating his professors with chords that broke every rule. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884, endured (resentfully) the obligatory residence at the Villa Medici in Rome, and then set about quietly dismantling the foundations of nineteenth-century music. With the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), and *La Mer* (1905), he created a new musical language, built on colour, atmosphere, and suggestion rather than Germanic development, that made him the single most influential composer of the early twentieth century. Critics called the style 'impressionism,' borrowing the term from painting; Debussy himself detested the label, insisting he was striving for precision, not haze. He died in Paris in March 1918, while the city was under German bombardment in the final year of the First World War.

ABOUT THE WORK

Printemps (Spring) is young Debussy, and a work with one of the odder histories in his catalogue. He composed it in 1887, at the age of twenty-four, as one of the obligatory 'envois' (proof-of-work submissions) required of Prix de Rome laureates during their residence at the Villa Medici. His stated aim was to depict not a postcard spring but 'the slow and laborious birth of beings and things in nature' (gestation first, blossoming after) without leaning on any literary programme.

The Académie des Beaux-Arts was not pleased. Its official report rebuked the young composer for indulging in ‘vague impressionism’, ‘one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in works of art.’ It is the earliest known association of the word ‘impressionism’ with Debussy’s music, and the label, intended as a reprimand, would follow Debussy for the rest of his life, much to his annoyance.

The original version was scored for orchestra with wordless chorus, but that manuscript was lost, and only a reduction for chorus and piano four hands survived. The work therefore had to wait a quarter of a century: between 1909 and 1912 the composer and conductor Henri Büsser reorchestrated *Printemps* from that reduction, working under Debussy’s supervision, folding the former choral lines into the instrumental fabric and retaining a prominent part for piano four hands inside the orchestra. This version, the one performed tonight, was premiered at the Salle Gaveau in Paris on 18 April 1913, conducted by Rhené-Baton.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Printemps is in two linked movements, and the seed of the whole work is sown in the first minute: a gently winding theme, first heard against shimmering figuration, that will be transformed throughout both movements, an early instance of the cyclic thinking Debussy absorbed from his teachers and soon made entirely his own.

The first movement (*Très modéré*) is the ‘slow and laborious birth’: the music gathers itself out of soft, hovering textures, the main theme surfacing and submerging, growing in warmth without ever quite arriving. Listen for the piano duet glinting inside the orchestra (a colour effect, not a concerto) and for harmonies that already point toward the *Faune*, still seven years away. The second movement is the blossoming: a dance of quickening rhythms that Debussy described as the joy of being born into new life. The cyclic theme returns transfigured, what was tentative now radiant, and the work ends in an uncomplicated burst of light that the mature, more elusive Debussy would never quite permit himself again. Heard between Poulenc’s fables and Zemlinsky’s mermaid, it is the afternoon’s hinge: French clarity warming into the sumptuous late-Romantic sea to come.

Alexander Zemlinsky

1871–1942

Die Seejungfrau, Fantasy in Three Movements for Large Orchestra after a Fairy Tale by Andersen

THE COMPOSER

Alexander Zemlinsky, born in Vienna in 1871, stood at the very centre of Viennese music around 1900, and was then almost completely forgotten for half a century. As a young composer he was encouraged by Brahms himself, who recommended his music to his own publisher, Simrock. He became the only formal composition teacher Arnold Schoenberg ever had, and the bond became family when Schoenberg married Zemlinsky's sister Mathilde in 1901. He was also a conductor of the first rank: at the Vienna Volksoper, then for more than fifteen years at the German Theatre in Prague (where he conducted acclaimed Mozart and gave important premieres), and later at Berlin's Kroll Opera under Klemperer. As a composer he refused to follow his friend Schoenberg into atonality, instead pushing late-Romantic harmony and orchestration to their expressive limits in works like the Lyric Symphony and the operas *Eine florentinische Tragödie* and *Der Zwerg*. Forced to flee Austria after the Anschluss in 1938, he reached New York in poor health and died in Larchmont, New York, in 1942, his music unplayed and his name eclipsed. The revival began only in the 1970s and 1980s; today he is recognized as one of the essential voices of fin-de-siècle Vienna.

ABOUT THE WORK

Die Seejungfrau (The Mermaid) is a forty-five-minute orchestral fantasy on Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', and one of the most personal scores of fin-de-siècle Vienna. In April 1901 Zemlinsky began a love affair with his composition pupil Alma Schindler, the most magnetic young woman in musical Vienna. That November she met Gustav Mahler; she broke with Zemlinsky and married Mahler four months later. Zemlinsky began *Die Seejungfrau* in February 1902 and completed the orchestration in March 1903, and the work is widely heard as, in part, an expression of that heartbreak: Andersen's tale of a creature who sacrifices everything (her voice, her world, her nature) for a love that is never returned could hardly have cut closer to home.

The premiere, on 25 January 1905, took place in this very building: at the Musikverein, with Zemlinsky conducting, in a legendary concert that also included the first performance of Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*: teacher and pupil, side by side, each with a huge orchestral tone poem. Zemlinsky's score was warmly received and had further performances in Berlin and Prague, yet the composer then withdrew it, and the work vanished for three quarters of a century. The manuscript itself was split: Zemlinsky gave the first movement away

as a gift, and carried the other two with him when he fled Austria in 1938. Only in the early 1980s was it established that a manuscript in Vienna and another in Washington were parts of the same work. The modern revival came in 1984, and a 2013 critical edition by Antony Beaumont restored a passage Zemlinsky cut before the premiere: the mermaid's visit to the sea-witch. Since its rediscovery, *Die Seejungfrau* has become one of Zemlinsky's most frequently performed orchestral works.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The fantasy is in three movements, and it helps to keep Andersen's story in mind without expecting a bar-by-bar narration. At the premiere Zemlinsky offered no programme note, preferring the tale to be felt rather than read.

The first movement opens in the depths: low strings and winds conjure the dark, slow-breathing world of the sea floor. Against it, listen for a solo violin: the voice of the mermaid herself, lyrical, yearning, unmistakably human in a non-human world. The movement's centrepiece is a magnificent orchestral storm and shipwreck, from which the mermaid rescues her drowning prince; the aftermath, as the waters calm, contains some of the most tender music Zemlinsky ever wrote.

The second movement (marked 'very lively, rushing') is the fantasy's scherzo: glittering, dance-like, by turns seductive and sinister. This is the world of transformation: the sea-witch's bargain, the mermaid's voice traded for human legs, festivity at the prince's court that she can watch but never fully join. The orchestration here is Zemlinsky at his most virtuosic, a Viennese contemporary's answer to Strauss and early Schoenberg.

The finale (marked 'very broad, with painful expression') is the long farewell. The prince marries another; the mermaid, refusing to save herself by killing him, dissolves into foam at sunrise. Zemlinsky shapes this as a slow, grief-saturated transfiguration: themes from the earlier movements return purified, and the solo violin's song is absorbed into a radiant, resigned final ascent. If the work is indeed his answer to losing Alma, this ending is its message: not rage, but renunciation. Listen, at the very close, for how the music does not so much end as evaporate, the mermaid becoming spray, spirit, air.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Poulenc: A Biography**

Roger Nichols, Yale University Press 2020

A recent life of Poulenc that covers the war years in which he wrote *Les Animaux modèles*.

ACCESSIBLE **Debussy: A Painter in Sound**

Stephen Walsh, Vintage 2019

A readable life of Debussy through his music, including the student years at the Villa Medici when he wrote *Printemps*.

DEEPER **Zemlinsky**

Antony Beaumont, Cornell University Press 2000

The standard English biography of Zemlinsky, with the story of *Die Seejungfrau*, its 1905 premiere and its long disappearance.

SOURCES

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2. Event listing: Wiener Philharmoniker / Lorenzo Viotti, Musikverein, 13 June 2026, Bachtrack. <https://bachtrack.com/concert-event/wiener-philharmoniker-lorenzo-viotti-vienna-philharmonic-musikverein-grosser-saal-13-june-2026/424606>
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4. *Les Animaux modèles*, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Animaux_mod%C3%A8les
5. Poulenc: *Les Animaux modèles*, Sinfonietta (booklet notes by Nigel Simeone), Chandos. <https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/CHSA5260.pdf>
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7. Poulenc: *Half Monk, Half Rascal* (review), MusicWeb International. https://musicweb-international.com/classrev/2012/July12/Poulenc_choral_8226906.htm
8. *Printemps* (Claude Debussy), Bru Zane Mediabase. <https://www.bruzanemediabase.com/en/exploration/works/printemps-claude-debussy>
9. *Printemps*, Claude Debussy (programme note by John Henken), Hollywood Bowl / LA Phil. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/2981/printemps>
10. *Printemps*, Hungarian National Philharmonic. <https://www.filharmonikusok.hu/en/muvek/tavas/>
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12. Claude Debussy, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Debussy
13. *Die Seejungfrau*, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Seejungfrau
14. Putting Anger into Music: Zemlinsky's *The Mermaid*, Interlude. <https://interlude.hk/putting-anger-into-music-zemlinsky-the-mermaid/>
15. Zemlinsky: *Die Seejungfrau*, Universal Edition. <https://www.universaledition.com/en/The-Mermaid/P0063807>
16. Alexander Zemlinsky's *Die Seejungfrau* Premieres in New Critical Edition, European American Music Distributors. <https://www.eamdc.com/news/Alexander-Zemlinskys-Die-Seejungfrau-Premieres-in-New-Critical-Edition/>
17. Alexander von Zemlinsky, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_von_Zemlinsky
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20. Lorenzo Viotti, Music Director, Tokyo Symphony Orchestra. <https://tokyosymphony.jp/en/aboutTSO/conductor/viotti/>
21. New General Music Director Lorenzo Viotti, Opernhaus Zürich. <https://www.opernhaus.ch/en/orchester-der-oper-zuerich/lorenzo-viotti-neuer-gmd-saison-2028-29/>

Alexander Zemlinsky ·Die Seejungfrau, Fantasy in Three Movements for Large Orchestra
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22. Poulenc: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300226508>

23. Debussy: A Painter in Sound, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780525432630>

24. Zemlinsky, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780801438035>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-06-13-viotti>

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