

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

Saturday, June 13, 2026 · 15:30 · Musikverein

Lorenzo Viotti, conductor

| TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME |                                                                                                                                     | MIN |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1                   | <b>POULENC</b> 1899–1963<br><i>Les Animaux modèles, Suite for Orchestra, FP 111</i>                                                 | 22' |
| 2                   | <b>DEBUSSY</b> 1862–1918<br><i>Printemps, Suite symphonique, L. 61 (orchestrated by Henri Büsser)</i>                               | 16' |
| 3                   | <b>ZEMLINSKY</b> 1871–1942<br><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*

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.

### 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 explains 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

1862–1918

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

16 minutes

## 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.

## 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*

45 minutes

### 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 heart-break: 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.

#### 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.

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## CONCERT PROGRAMS

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*Version 3, 30 September 2026*

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