

Mutter Plays Penderecki, and the Boy Korngold

Saturday, April 17, 2027 · 15:30 · Musikverein

Lorenzo Viotti, conductor · Anne-Sophie Mutter, violin

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	PENDERECKI 1933–2020 <i>Violin Concerto No. 2 'Metamorphosen'</i>	38'
2	KORNGOLD 1897–1957 <i>Sinfonietta in B major, Op. 5</i>	43'
	TOTAL MUSIC	81'

Krzysztof Penderecki

1933–2020

Violin Concerto No. 2 'Metamorphosen'

38 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–2020) was a Polish composer and conductor. Born in Dębica in south-eastern Poland, he learned the violin as a boy and studied composition at the Academy of Music in Kraków with Artur Malawski and Stanisław Wiechowicz, joining its teaching staff in 1958. In 1959 he entered three pieces anonymously in a national competition for young composers and won the first three prizes. The Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima for 52 strings (1960) and the St Luke Passion (1966) made him one of the best-known figures of the European avant-garde. From the mid-1970s, beginning with his First Violin Concerto, he wrote in a more traditional, late-Romantic idiom; the Polish Requiem, begun in 1980, belongs to these years. He taught at Yale University in the 1970s and conducted widely. Film directors borrowed his early music: it is heard in *The Exorcist* and in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*.

ABOUT THE WORK

Krzysztof Penderecki wrote his Second Violin Concerto for the violinist who plays it in these concerts. He and Anne-Sophie Mutter had performed Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto together in 1988, and the idea of a concerto for her came out of that meeting. The commission came from Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, the public broadcaster in Leipzig. Penderecki worked on the score, with interruptions, from 1992 to 1995, and Mutter gave the first performance in Leipzig on 24 June 1995 with the MDR Symphony Orchestra under Mariss Jansons.

The concerto is dedicated to her. She went on to record it with the London Symphony Orchestra, the composer conducting, and the recording won a Grammy Award in 1999.

By then Penderecki had been through several changes of style. He made his name around 1960 as a leader of the Polish avant-garde, with pieces such as the Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima, where string instruments are made to produce clusters, slides and noises. In the mid-1970s he turned towards the language of late Romanticism, and the work that announced the change was his First Violin Concerto, written for Isaac Stern. The Second came two decades after it. The violin was the instrument he had learned as a boy, and he wrote for it with inside knowledge.

Commentators usually set the two concertos side by side. Both are single movements of nearly forty minutes. The First is the darker of the two; the Second is described as lighter in colour and more lyrical, although nobody would call it a cheerful piece. Its tone is serious from the first bar to the last.

The title is the German plural: metamorphoses. It describes how the music is made. A short chromatic motif of a few notes, heard near the start, is transformed again and again, and most of what follows can be traced back to it. The result has been described as a set of symphonic variations on a single theme, in which the orchestra carries as much of the argument as the soloist. The concerto plays without a break for about 38 minutes, and is usually divided into six linked sections that differ in tempo and character.

The solo part is long and exhausting. The violin is seldom silent, and it has to move between fierce passagework, sustained singing lines and a big cadenza. Mutter has remained the concerto's chief advocate, and played it with several orchestras in 2018, the year of the composer's 85th birthday.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening belongs to the strings: a steady, pulsing tread that one critic likened to a heartbeat, with the violas prominent in setting out the theme. Fix the small chromatic figure in your ear here, because it is the seed of the whole piece. When the soloist enters, the line climbs quickly into the high register and the tension rises with it.

After that, follow the changes of mood more than the changes of theme. The same motif comes back as angry protest, as slow lament and, in a fast scherzo-like episode, as something close to

satire. The orchestra is not there to accompany. Soloist and players argue, interrupt and console each other, and some of the most telling passages are duets between the violin and a single section, the violas above all.

Two stretches stand out. One is a slower, inward passage where the violin sings quietly over very little. The other is the cadenza, which is long, ferocious and written in the tradition of the nineteenth-century virtuoso concerto, though the harmony is of its own time.

The ending is the passage that writers on the piece return to most. The energy drains away over a long-held note deep in the double basses, with cellos plucking above it; the violin makes a few last restless excursions, and the concerto closes quietly, far from where it began.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

43 minutes

1897–1957

Sinfonietta in B major, Op. 5

THE COMPOSER

Erich Wolfgang Korngold, born in Brünn (today Brno) in 1897, was the most spectacular child prodigy of his generation: a boy whose ballet *Der Schneemann*, written at eleven, became a sensation in Vienna, whom Mahler called a genius, and who by his early twenties had written the international operatic hit *Die tote Stadt* (1920). His was a late-Romantic idiom of opulent harmony and soaring melody, unfashionable in an age turning toward modernism. In 1934 Max Reinhardt invited him to Hollywood, and Korngold went on to become a founder of the symphonic film score, winning Oscars for *Anthony Adverse* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and bringing full Viennese Romanticism to the cinema. As a Jew, he found that the rise of the Nazis turned that move into exile, and it very likely saved his life. After the war he tried to return to concert composition with a violin concerto and a symphony, but felt out of step with musical fashion. He died in Los Angeles in 1957; the rehabilitation of his concert music came decades later.

ABOUT THE WORK

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was fourteen when he began the *Sinfonietta*, in the spring of 1912, and had just turned fifteen when the sketch was finished that August. Orchestrating it took another year, during which he also wrote a violin sonata and started his first opera. By then he was already a known quantity in Vienna: the son of a prominent music critic, and the composer of a ballet, *Der Schneemann*, written when he was eleven.

The first performance was given by the Vienna Philharmonic under Felix Weingartner on 30 November 1913. The score is dedicated to Weingartner, who had backed the boy from early on, and the orchestra that plays it in these concerts is the one that introduced it. Other conductors took it up quickly, and Richard Strauss, who had followed Korngold's progress for some years, was among its admirers.

"Sinfonietta" undersells it. The piece has four movements, lasts around 43 minutes and calls for a large orchestra that includes two harps, celesta and piano. In everything but name it is a symphony. The diminutive is usually read as a pointer to the music's sunny temper, and has nothing to do with its size.

The whole score grows from a motto of five rising notes built from stacked fourths. Korngold called it the "Motiv des fröhlichen Herzens", the motif of the cheerful heart. It is there at the start of the first movement, it shapes themes in the other three, and it has the last word. The idea stayed with him: commentators trace the same rising figure through the music he wrote over the following decades, into the years in Hollywood.

The key is B major, a bright one, and the richly chromatic harmony keeps slipping away from it, so that the home key has to be won back again and again. The orchestral sound owes a good deal to Strauss. The long, buoyant melodies, and the ease with which they arrive, were his own.

The piece was played widely in the years that followed its premiere and then fell out of the repertoire. Korngold, who was Jewish, spent the Nazi years in exile in the United States, and performances of the Sinfonietta are still uncommon.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Fließend, mit heiterem Schwunge (flowing, with cheerful swing). The motto rises at once and the first theme springs out of it, so the opening bars hold the material of the whole work. The second theme is slower and lilting, with a Viennese sway, and is built on the same fourths. A short development works up to a climax with brass fanfares; when the opening returns, the second theme is quieter than before, and the coda dwells on the five notes in a new harmonisation.

Scherzo: Molto agitato, rasch und feurig (fast and fiery). Brass and timpani launch it, with heavy accents and a restless main idea, and this is where the debt to Strauss is plainest. The middle section could hardly be more different: a slow, warm

melody that drifts through one key after another. Listeners who know Korngold's film scores will recognise the manner. An abbreviated return of the scherzo ends the movement with hammered chords.

Molto andante (dreamy). The shortest movement. A cor anglais sings a wistful melody over hushed chords coloured by celesta and harps. The strings then take up the motto, slowed down and richly harmonised, the music rises to a single climax, and it sinks back to where it began.

Finale: Patetico, Allegro giocoso. The start is the darkest music in the piece: a stern gesture, then a slow, uneasy climb from the lower strings. The mood does not last. The same idea turns up in the Allegro giocoso as a cheerful main theme, and a broad, songlike second melody follows it. The movement grows from one climax to the next with the motto threaded through it, and the five rising notes close the work in triumph.

Tonight's artists

Anne-Sophie Mutter *violin*

The concerto was written for Mutter and is dedicated to her. She gave its first performance in Leipzig in 1995 and made the first recording, with the composer conducting. She plays it at all four concerts: the subscription pair on 17 and 18 April, the soirée on 23 April and the concert of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde on 24 April. Viotti and the orchestra take the Korngold Sinfonietta on tour between the two weekends with a different first half.

Anne-Sophie Mutter is a German violinist, born in Rheinfelden in Baden in 1963. She studied with Erna Honigberger and then with Aida Stucki, both pupils of Carl Flesch. Herbert von Karajan heard her at the Lucerne Festival in 1976, when she was thirteen, and invited her to play with the Berlin Philharmonic at the Salzburg Whitsun Festival the following year; her first recording, of two Mozart concertos with Karajan, followed in 1978. Alongside the central concerto repertoire she has made new music a large part of her work. Witold Lutosławski, Krzysztof Penderecki, Henri Dutilleux, Sofia Gubaidulina, Wolfgang Rihm, André Previn and John Williams are among the composers who have written for her. She has won four Grammy Awards and received the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize in 2008, the year in which she set up the Anne-Sophie Mutter Foundation to support young string players.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold**

Brendan G. Carroll, Amadeus Press 1997

The standard life of Korngold in English, detailed on the Vienna years in which the teenage composer wrote the Sinfonietta and heard this orchestra play it first.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century** *Alex Ross, Picador 2008*

A history of the century's music with room for both halves of this programme: Vienna before 1914, and the post-war avant-garde from which Penderecki emerged and later turned away.

DEEPER **Zemlinsky**

Antony Beaumont, Cornell University Press 2000

The scholarly biography of Korngold's teacher, and through him a close study of the Viennese musical world that produced the Sinfonietta.

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13. Hommage à Penderecki (review), MusicWeb International. https://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2019/Jan/Penderecki_hommage_4835163.htm
14. Penderecki: Violin Concerto No. 2, 'Metamorphoses'; Bartók: Violin Sonata No. 2, Walter Simmons. <https://walter-simmons.com/?p=669>
15. Sinfonietta (Korngold), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinfonietta_\(Korngold\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinfonietta_(Korngold))
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2027-04-17-viotti>

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