

Strauss's Oboe Concerto and Schoenberg's Pelleas

Friday, June 4, 2027 · 19:30 · Musikverein

Christian Thielemann, conductor · Sebastian Breit, oboe

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Oboe Concerto in D major, TrV 292</i>	25'
2	SCHOENBERG 1874–1951 <i>Pelleas und Melisande, Op. 5</i>	42'
	TOTAL MUSIC	67'

Richard Strauss

25 minutes

1864–1949

Oboe Concerto in D major, TrV 292

THE COMPOSER

Richard Strauss was the heir to Wagner and Liszt, the composer who carried the late Romantic tradition into the twentieth century. Born in Munich in 1864, the son of the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, he received a conservative musical education before an encounter with Alexander Ritter, a violinist married to one of Wagner's nieces, converted him to the "music of the future."

Between 1889 and 1898, Strauss composed a series of tone poems that made him the most famous composer in Germany: *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. Each pushed the orchestra to new extremes of virtuosity and expression. Then he turned to opera, creating the scandalous *Salome* (1905), the shattering *Elektra* (1909), and the nostalgic masterpiece *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Strauss lived long: through two world wars, the Nazi era, and the destruction of the German musical culture he had embodied. His late works, including the *Metamorphosen* for strings and the *Four Last Songs*, are elegies for a lost world. He died in 1949, shortly after completing those final songs.

ABOUT THE WORK

When American troops reached Garmisch in the spring of 1945, Richard Strauss was eighty years old and living in his villa there. Some of the soldiers who cared about music sought him out. One was John de Lancie, a professional oboist in his twenties who would later become principal oboe of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

De Lancie later described the exchange. Thinking of all the oboe solos in the tone poems and operas, he asked Strauss whether he had ever considered writing a concerto for the instrument. “He answered ‘No,’” de Lancie recalled, “and there was no more conversation on the subject.” The question stayed with the composer all the same. Before 1945 was out he had written a Concerto in D major for oboe and small orchestra, and it was first played in Zurich on 26 February 1946, with Marcel Saillet as soloist and Volkmar Andreae conducting the Tonhalle Orchestra. De Lancie, back in the United States, was offered the American premiere but was not able to give it himself; it went to Mitch Miller, who later became famous as the host of the television show *Sing Along with Mitch*.

The concerto is one of the last works Strauss completed. The war had brought musical life in Europe to a standstill, and the composer of *Salome* and *Der Rosenkavalier* turned back to the Classical models of his youth: three movements in the traditional layout, and a modest orchestra of two flutes, cor anglais, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns and strings. There are no orchestral oboes, so the soloist has the colour to himself.

Christian Thielemann sets the concerto beside Schoenberg’s *Pelleas und Melisande*, a score that owes its subject to Strauss. Vienna hears the pairing three times: at a concert of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde on 4 June and at the Philharmonic’s own subscription concerts on 5 and 6 June, all in the Musikverein.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The three movements are played without a break and last about twenty-five minutes.

Allegro moderato. The cellos begin with a murmured figure of four quick notes, rocking between two pitches. It sounds like a mere preparation, but Strauss builds a good deal of the concerto from it. The oboe enters almost at once with a long, winding melody, and this opening makes heavy technical demands on the player. Listen for the way the flute and clarinet answer the

soloist: much of this movement behaves like chamber music, and Strauss is more interested in the oboe's singing voice than in display.

Andante. The rocking figure from the opening returns in the strings and becomes the accompaniment to a slow melody in B-flat major. This is the vein of the late operas, tender and a little nostalgic, with the harmony coloured by passing chromatic notes. A cadenza, punctuated by chords from the strings, leads directly into the finale.

Vivace, then Allegro. The last movement is quick and playful, with something of the high spirits of the tone poems Strauss wrote as a young man. After a second cadenza Strauss adds a surprise: a lilting, dance-like Allegro in 6/8 that works almost as a short fourth movement, and the horns help to see the piece out with good humour.

Arnold Schoenberg

1874–1951

42 minutes

Pelleas und Melisande, Op. 5

THE COMPOSER

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) was born in Vienna and was largely self-made as a composer, with Alexander Zemlinsky, later his brother-in-law, as his mentor. His early works, such as *Verklärte Nacht* and the huge *Gurre-Lieder*, grow out of the late Romantic language of Brahms and Wagner. In the years before the First World War he gave up traditional tonality in works including *Pierrot lunaire*, and by 1923 he had arrived at the twelve-tone method, a way of organising all twelve notes of the chromatic scale that shaped a great deal of later twentieth-century music. He was also a teacher of great influence, and Alban Berg and Anton Webern were among his pupils. From the mid 1920s he directed a master class in composition at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. When the Nazis forced him out in 1933 he formally returned to the Jewish faith in Paris and emigrated to the United States. He settled in Los Angeles, became a professor at the University of California there in 1936 and an American citizen in 1941, and lived in the city until his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Schoenberg was in his late twenties and living in Berlin when he wrote *Pelleas und Melisande*, between 1902 and February 1903. It was his first completed work for orchestra. The subject came from Richard Strauss, who pointed the younger man towards Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande*, first staged in 1893. Schoenberg did not know that Debussy's opera on the same play was about to reach the stage in Paris.

His first thought was also an opera. He gave it up for a symphonic poem, the form Strauss had cultivated in *Don Juan* and *Ein Heldenleben*, and later claimed to regret the decision a little: “It would have differed from Debussy’s. I might have missed the wonderful aura of the poem; but I might have made my characters more singing.” He also saw what he had gained. The symphonic poem, he said, “taught me to express my characters in precisely formulated units.”

Maeterlinck’s story is simple and dark. Prince Golaud finds Melisande weeping in a forest and marries her. She and his younger half-brother Pelleas are drawn to each other; Golaud, consumed by jealousy, kills Pelleas, and Melisande dies soon afterwards. Schoenberg set out to follow the play closely, and wrote that apart from a few omissions and small changes of order he had tried to reflect every detail.

He conducted the first performance himself in the Vienna Musikverein on 25 January 1905 (a few sources give the 26th). According to the Arnold Schönberg Center it was also his debut as a conductor. It went badly. “The first performance, 1905 in Vienna, under my own direction, provoked great riots among the audience and even the critics,” he remembered. “Reviews were unusually violent and one of the critics suggested putting me in an asylum and keeping music paper out of my reach.” Opinion changed within a few years, and the piece is now one of the more often played of his early scores.

The orchestra is very large, with eight horns, four trumpets, five trombones and a big woodwind section. The key is D minor, and the harmony, though still tonal, is stretched about as far as tonality will go. For listeners who know Schoenberg only as the inventor of twelve-tone music, the opulence of this score, with its debts to Wagner and Strauss, tends to come as a surprise. In these concerts it returns to the hall where it was first heard.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The work plays without a break for a little over forty minutes. Schoenberg’s pupil Alban Berg showed that its four main sections correspond to the movements of a symphony, and that is the easiest way to keep your bearings.

First part: the forest. The quiet opening, in a swaying 12/8, belongs to Melisande; Schoenberg himself linked this motif to her. A short, ominous “fate” motif follows at once and will return at every turn of the story. Golaud’s theme is heard first in the horns. Pelleas arrives later with a youthful, knightly theme that is often given to the trumpet.

Scherzo. The music lightens for the scene at the fountain, where Melisande plays with her wedding ring and loses it. Schoenberg called this passage “the game with the ring”. Darker episodes follow before the music slows.

Slow movement. Schoenberg’s own list of landmarks for this part names “the scene with Melisande’s hair” and the love scene. It is the broad, passionate centre of the work, the lovers’ farewell, and it ends when Golaud kills Pelleas.

Finale. The themes of the opening come back in what Berg described as a recapitulation, and the love theme is recalled. Schoenberg’s summary of this last part names the dying Melisande, the entrance of the ladies in waiting and her death.

Tonight’s artists

Sebastian Breit *oboe*

The soloist comes from inside the orchestra: Breit is one of the Philharmonic’s own principal oboes, and he plays the concerto at all three concerts. He plays the Viennese oboe, the instrument the orchestra has kept while the rest of the world moved to the French model, so this is a chance to hear Strauss’s solo line in the particular colour of the Vienna woodwind.

Sebastian Breit, born in 1998, is a principal oboe of the Vienna State Opera orchestra and of the Vienna Philharmonic, whose members are drawn from it; the magazine *Rondo* dates his appointment to 2019. He began his musical training at six and took up the oboe at eight with Peter Mayrhofer. From 2015 to 2017 he attended the preparatory course at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, and he went on to study in Harald Hörth’s oboe class there. He plays the Viennese oboe, an instrument used almost nowhere outside the city, which differs from the oboe played elsewhere in its construction, its fingering and its sound. With the pianist Stephanie Timoschek-Gumpinger he recorded *The Viennese Oboe* for the Supreme Classics label, an album of sonatas written for the instrument by Alexander Wunderer, Hans Gál and Karl Pilss. The project was produced by the American oboist Abby Yeakle Held of Ohio State University.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Richard Strauss**

Bryan Gilliam, Cambridge University Press 1999

A concise biography that follows Strauss from the tone poems to his last years, when the Oboe Concerto was written.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Its opening chapters set Strauss and the young Schoenberg side by side in the years around 1900, the world *Pelleas und Melisande* comes from.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss**

Charles Youmans (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2010

Essays by Strauss scholars, including Jürgen May's chapter on the last works, the Oboe Concerto among them.

SOURCES

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2. 9th Subscription Concert, 5 June 2027, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/9th-subscription-concert/10881/>
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5. Oboe Concerto (Strauss), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oboe_Concerto_\(Strauss\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oboe_Concerto_(Strauss))
6. Richard Strauss: Oboenkonzert D-dur TrV 292, Breitkopf & Härtel. <https://www.breitkopf.com/en/work/20319/o-boe-concerto-in-d-major-trv-292>
7. Strauss, de Lancie and the Oboe Concerto, YourClassical (Composers Datebook). <https://your-classical.org/episode/2025/02/26/composers-datebook-richard-strauss>
8. Concerto pour hautbois et orchestre, op. 144, IRCAM. <https://brahms.ircam.fr/en/works/work/36637>
9. Minors of the Majors: Richard Strauss, Oboe Concerto, Interlude. <https://interlude.hk/minors-majors-richard-strauss-o-boe-concerto/>
10. Pelleas und Melisande (Schoenberg), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelleas_und_Melisande_\(Schoenberg\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelleas_und_Melisande_(Schoenberg))
11. Behind the scenes of Pelleas and Melisande with the Arnold Schönberg Center, Chicago Symphony Orchestra. <https://cso.org/experience/article/22611/behind-the-scenes-of-pelleas-and-melisande-wi>
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13. Pelleas und Melisande (Schönberg), Wikipedia (German). [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelleas_und_Melisande_\(Sch%C3%B6nberg\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelleas_und_Melisande_(Sch%C3%B6nberg))
14. Sebastian Breit: The Heart of the Viennese Sound, Rondo. <https://www.rondomagazin.de/en/gefragt/sebastian-breit-the-heart-of-the-viennese-sound-4602/>
15. The Viennese Oboe: Sebastian Breit & Stephanie Timoschek-Gumpinger, HIGHRESAUDIO. <https://blog.highresaudio.com/album/view/3jpuhm/sebastian-breit-stephanie-timoschek-gumpinger-the-viennese-oboe>
16. Here Speaks the Soul: A program with and around the Viennese Oboe, Austrian Cultural Forum New York. <https://acfn.org/event/here-speaks-the-soul/>
17. Held produces first-ever album dedicated to the Viennese Oboe, Ohio State University, Office of International Affairs. <https://oia.osu.edu/news/held-produces-first-ever-album-dedicated-to-the-viennese-oboe>

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19. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>

20. The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521728157>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2027-06-04-thielemann>

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