

**80th Birthday  
Season 2025/26**

**Kavakos conducts Dvořák,  
Schumann, and Brahms  
Thursday 7 May 2026  
Royal Festival Hall**

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## In a nutshell...

Tonight's Philharmonia concert places a focus on music of the Romantic period, and on the personalities of its composers.

With lush orchestration, the Romantic period sees music that brings the impulsive and volatile together with the lyrical and introspective. The era's growing nationalism is also reflected in Dvořák's music, who leant into Czech legend for his opera *Vanda*, from which we hear the overture to open the concert.

Robert Schumann's Cello Concerto winds a poetic, intimate path. Its deep emotion, perhaps indicative of the relationship between the Schumanns is the 'Romantic quality' his wife Clara, herself a pianist and composer identifies. The music of the Romantic composers often reflected their personal struggles and emotions, and no personal

struggle was more keenly felt than Brahms's in front of the Symphony. While Schumann completed his work in just two weeks, Brahms, intimidated and in awe of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, took twenty years.

The symphony starts with a pounding timpani, oppressively accompanied in the orchestra, leading through three movements of light and dark. Finally the struggle concludes with a magnificent melody which stretches out from the strings, in a moment which J.B. Priestley memorably immortalised in his novel *Angel Pavement*, describing "the strings in a rich deep unison sweeping on, and you were ten feet high and had a thousand years to live."

As the symphony concludes in a blaze of C major, we feel the struggle resolved, the heart race, and the psychological weight lifted.

# Welcome to this evening's concert

Philharmonia80

## Kavakos conducts Dvořák, Schumann, and Brahms

Thursday 7 May, 7.30pm  
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Leonidas Kavakos – conductor  
Kian Soltani – cello

**DVOŘÁK** Overture, Vanda  
(10 mins)

**SCHUMANN** Cello Concerto  
(25 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

**BRAHMS** Symphony No. 1  
(45 mins)

This performance finishes at  
approximately 9.30pm

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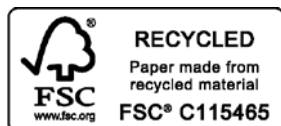
**Zsolt-Tihamér Visontay**  
Concert Master

## Philharmonia Debates... Music and Mentoring

6pm, Clore Ballroom

Join us for the last of our series of debates. Ahead of our concert, we look at the role of musical mentors. The crucial relationship between teacher and pupil creates a sense of continuity in musical interpretation. Is this always a positive thing, or are there hidden dangers?

We are joined by Dr Diana Salazar, Kira Doherty, Judith Webster and Mica Sefia.



# Programme notes



Antonín Dvořák, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

## Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904)

### Overture, *Vanda*, Op. 25 (1879) (10 mins)

Dvořák is best remembered for his symphonies and chamber music. However, he aspired to win fame as a composer of operas. He wrote ten, only one of which, *Rusalka*, is still regularly performed.

*Vanda*, his fourth opera, was composed in 1875, two years before he got to know Brahms. He modelled its structure on the successful French grand operas of Giacomo Meyerbeer. Its plot reflects the resurgence of nationalism in 19th-century Central Europe.

The medieval Polish Queen Vanda is torn between her love for the knight Slavoj and her devotion to her country, which she vows to defend against the German prince Roderich. In the dramatic final scenes, she defeats Roderich in battle, then throws

herself into the Vistula as a sacrifice to ensure Poland's independence. herself into the Vistula as a sacrifice to ensure Poland's independence. Czech opera expert Jan Smaczny describes Dvořák's score as "one of his most lyrically beautiful". Clearly the audience at the 1876 premiere in Prague was equally impressed: the composer was called out multiple times to receive applause.

Initially, *Vanda* only had a short orchestral introduction. For its second production in 1880, Dvořák created a full-length overture. He cast it as a rondo, whose heroic recurring theme alternates with contrasting material. Striking features include allusions to the opera's later music, lovely folk-like woodwind melodies, and much dramatic development of the main theme. Although *Vanda* is a tragedy, its overture closes in triumph – perhaps a tribute to its central character's courage.



Robert Schumann, Public Domain via Wikimedia

## Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856)

**Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 129**  
(1850) (25 mins)

- I. Nicht zu schnell**
- II. Langsam**
- III. Sehr lebhaft**

Robert Schumann wrote his Cello Concerto in just two weeks in October 1850, during his brief and unsuccessful tenure as Music Director of the City of Düsseldorf. It was one of his last substantial orchestral compositions, and one of the first significant works for cello and orchestra since Joseph Haydn's C Major Concerto of 1765. Schumann's wife Clara especially admired it, praising "the Romantic quality, the vivacity, the freshness and humour", the "highly interesting interweaving of violoncello and orchestra" and the "deep feeling" in its melodies.

However, feedback from both the principal cellist of the Düsseldorf orchestra, Christian Reimers, and the composer and cellist Robert Bockmühl was less positive, leading Schumann to revise the work extensively. By the time it was published in 1854 he had suffered a devastating and permanent mental collapse. The concerto's premiere took place in Leipzig in 1860, four years after his death. The work was subsequently championed by leading cellists such as Carlo Alfredo Piatti and Pablo Casals, bringing it to international recognition.

Schumann hated applause between movements and, like his friend Felix Mendelssohn in his Violin Concerto, wrote his concerto to be played continuously. He also followed Mendelssohn in having his soloist enter straight away rather than after a lengthy orchestral introduction in his first movement.

Marked 'Nicht zu schnell' (not too fast), this movement has two principal themes, one ardent and yearning, the other graceful and placid. Its central section features abrupt dynamic contrasts and much volatile dialogue between soloist and orchestra. Following a recapitulation of the opening material, the music flows seamlessly into the central movement, marked 'Langsam' (slow). This tender song without words includes a duet between the soloist and the orchestra's principal cellist. (It has been suggested this represents a conversation between Schumann and Clara.)

Other striking features include pizzicato (plucked) passages in the orchestral strings, and a section in which the soloist plays two notes simultaneously (double-stopping).



Robert and Clara Schumann, lithograph by Eduard Kaiser, 1847 via Wikimedia Commons

A brief orchestral reminiscence of the concerto's opening bars and an agitated solo episode lead into the finale, marked 'Sehr lebhaft' (very lively). This may be the movement Schumann was thinking of when he called the concerto "quite a jolly piece". The recurrent principal theme, a jaunty march, alternates with more lyrical episodes. There is plenty of virtuosic writing for the soloist, culminating in a flamboyant cadenza with discreet orchestral accompaniment, before the full orchestra bursts in to sweep the piece to a spirited conclusion.

*Interval (20 mins)*



Johannes Brahms, c. 1870, via Wikimedia Commons

## Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

**Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68**  
(1855-76) (45 mins)

- I. **Un poco sostenuto – Allegro**
- II. **Andante sostenuto**
- III. **Un poco allegretto e grazioso**
- IV. **Adagio – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio**

In 1853, the 20-year-old Johannes Brahms visited Robert and Clara Schumann to show them some of his compositions. The excited Robert subsequently wrote the article *Neue Bahnen (New Paths)*, in which he hailed Brahms as Beethoven’s heir, and eagerly anticipated his symphonic works. Shortly before his permanent mental collapse in 1854, Schumann impatiently asked their mutual friend Joseph Joachim if Johannes was now ready “to let drums and trumpet sound”.

In fact, it would be 22 more years before Brahms completed a symphony. He began one in 1854 but soon abandoned it, though he re-used some of its material in his First Piano Concerto. Clara Schumann, who had become his closest friend, urged him to persist, and by 1862 he was ready to show her a draft of what was to become his First Symphony’s opening movement. But although she found it “full of wonderful beauties”, Brahms struggled to progress further. He experienced another breakthrough in September 1868, when he sent Clara birthday greetings in a melody he would later incorporate into his finale, accompanied by the words “High on the mountain, deep in the valley, I greet you a thousand times”.

By around 1871, however, he was telling the conductor Hermann Levi that “I shall never write a symphony! You have no idea what it feels like always to hear such a giant [Beethoven] marching at one’s back!” Fortunately, this didn’t last, and on 4 November 1876 his First Symphony received its acclaimed premiere in Karlsruhe.

The work opens with a slow, sombre introduction characterised by steadily pulsing timpani and sigh-like figures in strings and woodwind. In the ensuing Allegro, fierce, fulltextured and rhythmically emphatic music alternates with brief tender episodes featuring prominent woodwind parts. Some writers have suggested that the movement’s agitated mood depicts Brahms’s grief at

Schumann's death and his troubled love for Clara. It ends with an ambience of brooding melancholy.

Hermann Levi wondered if the lighter second and third movements might be "more suited [to a] serenade than to a symphony". Both are in A – B – A (ternary) form. The gentle *Andante sostenuto* is notable for its melodic beauty, and contains exquisite solos for oboe, clarinet and, in the closing section, violin. For his third movement, Brahms opted for a lyrical *intermezzo* rather than a boisterous *scherzo*. Tranquil outer sections featuring a flowing clarinet melody contrast with a livelier central episode dominated by a fanfare-like motif. The late conductor Roger Norrington proposed that the alternately placid and playful ambience conveys Brahms's affection for Clara's children.

The finale initially returns to the symphony's sombre opening mood, with the same funereal timpani. However, a radiant horn melody inspired by traditional alphorns (the tune Brahms sent Clara in 1868) soon breaks through the gloom. A serene trombone chorale follows, and only then do we hear the finale's main theme: a noble, broad-breathed string melody which, as Brahms somewhat testily acknowledged, pays homage to the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Although the ensuing music is often stormy, a majestic reworking of the trombone chorale and jubilant C major chords close the work in triumph. Brahms had won out and completed a symphony. Several more orchestral masterpieces, including three further symphonies, were to follow.

*Programme notes by Kate Hopkins*  
© *Philharmonia Orchestra/Kate Hopkins*

# Leonidas Kavakos – conductor



Leonidas Kavakos © Gregor Hohenberg

Leonidas Kavakos is recognised across the world as a violinist and artist of rare quality. Acclaimed for his captivating artistry, superb musicianship, matchless technique and the integrity of his playing, Kavakos performs with the world's leading orchestras as both soloist and conductor, and in recital at the world's premier venues. In 2022 Kavakos founded the Apollon Ensemble, a chamber group of elite Greek musicians who are in increasing demand internationally, and in 2025 he took over as the Artistic Director of the 'Classic Revolution' Festival at Lotte Concert Hall, Seoul.

Highlights of Kavakos's 25/26 season include performances with the Concertgebouw Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, NHK Symphony, NDR Symphony, Santa Cecilia, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and conducting engagements with Czech Philharmonic, Philharmonia, Barcelona Symphony and Minnesota Orchestras.

He appears in recital in London, Milan, Oslo, Budapest, Zagreb and elsewhere; with the Apollon Ensemble he performs at the Edinburgh International, Verbier, Santander festivals, London's Wigmore Hall and Vienna's Musikverein.

Kavakos's extensive and award-winning discography includes the Brahms Violin Concerto with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig and Riccardo Chailly (Decca), and the Beethoven Violin Concerto which he also conducted with the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks (Sony Classical). He was named ECHO Klassik Instrumentalist of the Year for his recording of the complete Beethoven Sonatas with Enrico Pace. With Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma, Kavakos has released a series of trio recordings to the highest critical acclaim. With the Apollon Ensemble, he has recorded Bach's Violin Concertos.

Kavakos curates an annual violin and chamber music masterclass in Athens, where he was born and brought up in a musical family. In 2022, He was elected by the Academy of Athens as a member of the Chair of Music in the Second Class of Letters and Fine Arts for his services to music. In 2024, he was appointed professor of violin at the Basel Academy of Music.

# Kian Soltani – cello



Kian Soltani © Marco Berggreve

Hailed by *The Times* as a “remarkable cellist” and described by *Gramophone* as “sheer perfection”, Kian Soltani’s playing is characterised by profound depth of expression, individuality and technical mastery, complemented by his charismatic stage presence. He now appears regularly with many of the world’s esteemed orchestras and conductors.

Highlights of his 25/26 season include performing with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Gianandrea Noseda at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, a return to the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France as well as several much-anticipated debuts with the Orchestre National de France, and the Sydney, New Zealand, Atlanta, and St. Louis Symphony Orchestras. Further highlights include a residency with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, and a European tour with their Chief Conductor Eva Ollikainen. An active recitalist, he tours Europe in trio with Renaud Capuçon and Mao Fujita, in duo with Benjamin Grosvenor, while joining Andreas Ottensamer and

Alessio Bax for performances across the United States.

Soltani has performed with many leading ensembles such as the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Staatskapelle Berlin, Munich Philharmonic, Wiener Symphoniker, the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and the Toronto and NHK Symphony Orchestras. He is a frequent guest at Verbier, Rheingau Music Festival, Dvořák Prague Festival, Gstaad Menuhin Festival, and the Bregenz, Grafenegg, and Salzburg festivals.

In 2017, Soltani signed an exclusive recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon, releasing his debut album *Home* in 2018 featuring works by Schubert, Schumann, and Reza Vali. He has since recorded Dvořák’s Cello Concerto with the Staatskapelle Berlin and Daniel Barenboim in 2020, and a Schumann album with Camerata Salzburg in 2024. His 2021 album *Cello Unlimited* earned him the Innovative Listening Experience Award at the 2022 Opus Klassik Awards.

Born in Bregenz to a family of Persian musicians, Soltani began playing the cello at four and was twelve when he joined Ivan Monighetti’s class at the Basel Music Academy. He received the Anne-Sophie Mutter Foundation scholarship in 2014 and completed studies at the Kronberg Academy in Germany and International Music Academy in Liechtenstein.

Kian Soltani plays ‘The London, ex Boccherini’ Antonio Stradivari cello, kindly loaned to him by a generous sponsor through the Beare’s International Violin Society.

Founded in 1945, the Philharmonia Orchestra celebrates its 80th birthday in the 2025/26 season.

Conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali took up the baton as Principal Conductor in 2021, and Marin Alsop joined him as Principal Guest Conductor in 2023.

They follow in illustrious footsteps: Herbert von Karajan, Otto Klemperer, Riccardo Muti, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Christoph von Dohnányi, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Esa-Pekka Salonen are some of the key conductors who have shaped the Philharmonia's reputation as one of the world's great orchestras.

The Philharmonia has premiered music by composers including Richard Strauss, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Errollyn Wallen and performs with many of the world's most admired soloists. Vikingur Ólafsson is this season's Featured Artist, and Gabriela Ortiz is Featured Composer.

Resident at the Southbank Centre since 1995, the Philharmonia also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, and tours extensively worldwide. A major US tour in October culminated in two concerts at Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonia's 80-year recording history includes many benchmark LPs and more than 150 film and videogame soundtracks. The Orchestra's recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and immersive installations and virtual reality experiences introduce orchestral music to new audiences.

The Philharmonia is committed to nurturing and developing the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.



Santtu-Matias Rouvali and the Philharmonia Orchestra, credit: Marc Gascoigne

# Who's who

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 Dr Judith and Harold Paisner  
 Kim Polman  
 Stuart Poyner  
 David Pratt  
 Michael and Nina Richards  
 Professor John and Mrs Alison Sheperd  
 David and Ruth Simkins  
 John and Helen Skinner  
 Joe and Lucy Smouha  
 Mr and Mrs Colin Stevens

*Thank you to all our supporters  
 who wish to remain anonymous*

**Music is  
not what  
we do.  
It's what  
we are.**

# Phil har mo nia

## Just announced: Autumn 2026

**Season Opening  
Concert: Santtu and  
Sol Gabetta**

*Featuring Elgar's timeless Cello  
Concerto*

Thu 24 Sep, 7.30pm

**Tchaikovsky Piano  
Concerto No. 1 with  
Seong-Jin Cho**

*Santtu conducts Shostakovich's  
Symphony No. 11*

Thu 22 Oct, 7.30pm

**Mahler 6 with Marin  
Alsop**

*Supersized symphonic drama,  
plus Esther Yoo in Bernstein's  
Serenade*

Thu 19 Nov, 7.30pm

**Bruckner 5 with  
Herbert Blomstedt**

*Living legend Herbert  
Blomstedt returns to the  
Philharmonia at the age of 99*

Sun 4 Oct, 3pm

**Manfred Honeck and  
Emanuel Ax**

*Mozartian elegance meets  
Straussian drama*

Thu 12 Nov, 7.30pm

**A German Requiem:  
Diana Damrau &  
Gerald Finley**

*A journey from grief to hope*

Sun 29 Nov, 3pm

**SOUTHBANK  
CENTRE  
RESIDENT**

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