Philharmonia

2026/27 season

Philharmonia

Mendelssohn Violin Concerto with Nicola Benedetti

Sunday 1 November 2026
Royal Festival Hall

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In a nutshell...

This afternoon's concert opens with an overture – an introductory, short instrumental piece that often opens an opera or ballet – by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana. This overture is taken from the comic opera *The Two Widows*. Smetana wrote eight operas in his career, and many of them remain relatively unknown apart from *The Bartered Bride*.

Next, we hear a concerto (a technically demanding piece composed for a solo instrumentalist accompanied by a full orchestra) by German composer Felix Mendelssohn. We're joined by superstar violinist Nicola Benedetti. A close friend of the Philharmonia, she was one of our Featured Artists in the 2022/23 season. Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto has become one of the most popular pieces in classical music – and today you get to hear it performed by one of the most popular violinists, too!

Concluding the concert is a symphony, a substantial composition written for a full orchestra which is typically divided into sections called movements. Most typical symphonies have four movements, but Schumann's 'Rhenish' Symphony is slightly different and has five – it follows a similar structure and programmatic theme to Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the 'Pastoral', which directly influenced Schumann's composition.

Welcome to this afternoon's concert

Mendelssohn Violin Concerto with Nicola Benedetti

Sunday 1 November 2026, 3pm
Royal Festival Hall

Jakub Hrůša – conductor
Nicola Benedetti – violin

SMETANA Overture, The Two Widows
(7 mins)

MENDELSSOHN Violin Concerto
(26 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

SCHUMANN Symphony No. 3, 'Rhenish'
(32 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 4.40pm

This concert is being recorded for broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 11 Jan 2027. It will be available on BBC Sounds for 30 days.

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Programme notes



BeetBedřich Smetana

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

Overture, The Two Widows (1873-74)
(7 mins)

Bedřich Smetana is widely regarded as the 'father' of Czech national music. Along with his collection of symphonic poems *Ma Vlást* (My Country) he wrote a series of operas that celebrate Czech legends, history and rural life. These range from heroic historical dramas such as *Dalibor* (1868) and *Libuše* (1881) to romantic comedies including *The Bartered Bride* (1866) and *The Two Widows* (1874), whose overture we hear tonight.

The Two Widows is based on a French play, here relocated to the Czech countryside. The opera tells the story of two widowed female cousins, the spirited Karolina and the melancholy Anežka, whose peaceful lives are disrupted when the handsome landowner Ladislav is found trespassing on Karolina's country estate. Following various comic misunderstandings, the work comes to an appropriately romantic conclusion at a harvest feast. *The Two Widows* was not a success at its Prague premiere in 1874, and Smetana revised it extensively three years later. Thereafter it became popular – so much so that Richard Strauss once cited it as one of his favourite operas.

The cheerful overture offers a taste of music to come, including themes associated with the grumpy gamekeeper Mumlal and with Ladislav's trespassing. There is also a foreshadowing of the folklike ballad which Ladislav sings in Act I to express his love for Anežka, with the melody given to horns and clarinets. In the closing section, Smetana introduces an exuberant new theme, thus suggesting that whatever mishaps may follow, love will eventually win the day.



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy by Eduard Magnus (1833)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Violin Concerto in E minor Op. 64
(1838-44, rev. 1845) (26 mins)

Allegro molto appassionato –
Andante –
Allegretto non troppo
– Allegro molto vivace

One of Felix Mendelssohn's greatest adult friendships was with the violinist Ferdinand David, whom he appointed concert master of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835. Mendelssohn first thought of composing a concerto for David in 1838. On 30 July he wrote: "I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs through my head, the opening of which gives me no peace." However, work on other compositions, along with his administrative responsibilities in Berlin and Leipzig, meant that he could not complete the piece for six years. During this time, he regularly consulted David about matters of violin technique. The concerto finally received its premiere in Leipzig on 13 March 1845, with David as soloist. The composer had planned to conduct but was unwell, and the Danish conductor and composer Niels Gade took his place. The piece turned out to be among Mendelssohn's last substantial compositions for orchestra. It has since become one of his most popular works; the great 19th-century violinist Joseph Joachim described it as the "heart's jewel" among the German violin concertos.

The opening Allegro molto appassionato is unconventional in having no orchestral introduction – the soloist enters almost immediately with the impassioned first theme. The second theme is introduced by the woodwind and is contrastingly tranquil. The music that follows is alternately agitated, tender and heroic, with virtuosic writing for the soloist. This includes ricochet bowing (bouncing the bow off the strings) in the elaborate cadenza that follows the central (development) section.

A single bassoon note leads directly from the Allegro molto appassionato into the Andante (unusually, this concerto has no breaks between movements). Its serene outer sections feature a seamless, soaring violin melody reminiscent of Mendelssohn's piano pieces *Songs Without Words*. The central section is more troubled, and for the soloist includes passages of demanding double-stopping (where two notes are played simultaneously). A wistful Allegretto transition looks back to the work's opening melody, before a trumpet fanfare announces the finale. This recalls the fairy music from the composer's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in its rapid pace, delicate textures and melodic brilliance, and closes the concerto in effervescent high spirits.



Robert Schumann by Johann Anton Völlner

Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

Symphony No. 3 in E flat, Op. 97, 'Rhenish'
(1850)
(32 mins)

Lebhaft
Scherzo: Sehr mäßig
Nicht schnell
Feierlich
Lebhaft

In early September 1850, Robert and Clara Schumann and their five children moved across Germany from Dresden to Düsseldorf, where Robert had been appointed Municipal Music Director. In the long term, his tenure was not a success, and he was forced to step down in late 1853 following multiple complaints about his poor conducting and social awkwardness. The family's initial months in the city, however, were happy: they received a warm welcome, and enjoyed exploring the Rhineland, including a day trip to the great cathedral in Cologne.

The move also sparked off one of Schumann's characteristic bursts of creative energy. In October 1850 he wrote his Cello Concerto in a fortnight, and on 2 November he embarked on another orchestral work, inspired by his new surroundings. He completed his Symphony No. 3 (in fact, the last of his four symphonies, but the third to be published) on 9 December 1850.

Schumann originally titled it 'pictures of life by the Rhine' and gave its movements descriptive titles, which he subsequently abandoned. He intended the work to be easily accessible to listeners, and told his friend and former student Wilhelm von Wasielewski – who gave the symphony its nickname, the 'Rhenish' – that he intended "popular elements should prevail". He appears to have succeeded: the symphony's premiere in Düsseldorf on 6 February 1851, which he conducted, was his biggest triumph in the city.

The 'Rhenish' has the same predominantly good-humoured mood as Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony – a work Schumann loved – and is likewise in five movements rather than the conventional four. Much of the music of the opening movement (marked 'Lebhaft' – lively) is based around the heroic opening theme, which perhaps represents the mighty Rhine. It uses the rhythmic device of hemiola, where music appears to move between triple and duple time. A brief subsidiary theme introduced by the woodwind is contrastingly pensive. Schumann originally titled the second movement 'Morning on the Rhine'. Less boisterous than most scherzos, it alternates between varied statements of a rustic 'rocking' theme introduced by cellos, violas and bassoons, and contrasting episodes that include a dreamy melody for horns and woodwind. The tranquil third movement contains three main musical ideas: a tender opening theme for clarinets, a gently pulsing figure which moves between violins and woodwind, and a hymn-like melody introduced by the violas. Schumann's symphonies have sometimes been criticized for thick textures, but here he proves he could write orchestral music of remarkable delicacy.

Trombones make their first appearance in the fourth movement, which was allegedly inspired by a ceremony in Cologne Cathedral in which an archbishop was elevated to the position of cardinal. Following a solemn opening brass chorale, the music steadily builds in textural intricacy, reflecting Schumann's studies of Baroque counterpoint – the combination of two or more melody lines – in the 1840s. Stately trombone fanfares, hushed string and woodwind responses and three massive chords underpinned by rolling timpani ensure the closing bars are suitably impressive.

The writer Stephen Johnson has described the final movement as like "stepping out from a vast, dimly lit cathedral […] into the bright sunlight of a bustling Rhineland market town". Characterised by catchy dance-like tunes and irrepressibly bouncy rhythms, this exhilarating finale ends with a triumphant transformation of the fourth movement's chorale theme, followed by cheers of joy from the brass.

Programme notes by Kate Hopkins

Kate Hopkins is English-language editor for the Salzburg Festival. She has written programme notes for the Philharmonia, the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC orchestras and the Salzburg and Edinburgh Festivals, among others, and writes on music and literature for The Wagner Journal *and other publications.*

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About the Philharmonia

Founded in 1945, the Philharmonia Orchestra is one of the world's great orchestras.

Finnish 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 figures who have shaped the renowned Philharmonia sound over eight decades.

The Orchestra has premiered works by Richard Strauss, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Kaija Saariaho, Errollyn Wallen, Laufey and many others, and performs with many of the world's most admired soloists. The Philharmonia thrives on creative collaborations: in the 2026/27 season, pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii and cellist Sol Gabetta are Featured Artists. The Philharmonia's Emerging Artists Programme nurtures and develops the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.

The Philharmonia is resident at the Southbank Centre in the heart of London, and also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, at Garsington Opera and at the Three Choirs Festival. In each of these residencies, the Orchestra is deeply embedded in the community. Projects with primary and secondary schools, children in foster care, people living with dementia and their carers, young people learning instruments, and adults who face barriers to experiencing the arts, all testify to the many ways music enriches our lives.

The Philharmonia tours extensively throughout Europe and has performed in China, Colombia, Japan and the United States. In October 2025 the Orchestra celebrated its 80th birthday with a major US tour culminating in two performances at Carnegie Hall. In 2024, the Philharmonia became the first major international symphony orchestra to perform in Mauritius.

The Philharmonia is known for embracing innovative technology. The Orchestra's recordings include benchmark LPs, more than 150 film and videogame soundtracks, and streamed performances. The Philharmonia Records label was established in 2023 and has released live recordings of major works by Strauss, Mahler, Stravinsky and Shostakovich, with Santtu at the helm. Its recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and its immersive installations and virtual reality (VR) experiences have introduced many thousands of people to orchestral music.

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Jakub Hrůša – conductor



Hrusa Jakub © Marian Lenhard

Born in the Czech Republic, Jakub Hrůša is Chief Conductor of the Bamberg Symphony, Music Director of The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, and Chief Conductor and Music Director Designate of the Czech Philharmonic. He is Musical America's Conductor of the Year 2026 and ICMA's 2026 Artist of the Year.

He performs with the world's greatest orchestras, including the Vienna Philharmonic, Berlin Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Tonhalle Orchester Zürich, Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and NHK Symphony; and in the US with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and Boston Symphony Orchestra.

He has led opera productions for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Salzburg Festival, Vienna State Opera, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Opéra National de Paris, and Zurich Opera. He has also regularly appeared with Glyndebourne Festival and was previously Music Director of Glyndebourne On Tour.

In 2024, he won Gramophone Awards for his recordings of Britten's Violin Concerto with Isabelle Faust and Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, and *Kát'a Kabanová* at Salzburg Festival. With Bamberg Symphony, he received the ICMA Prize for Symphonic Music in 2022 and 2023, for recordings of Rott's Symphony No. 1 and Bruckner's Symphony No. 4. He was awarded the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik for his recording of Mahler's Symphony No. 4, and his discs of Dvořák and Martinů Piano Concertos with Ivo Kahánek and the Bamberg Symphony, and *Vanessa* from Glyndebourne won BBC Music Magazine Awards.

Hrůša is an Honorary Member of London's Royal Academy of Music. In 2026, he received the Orchestra of the Year Gramophone Award with Bamberg Symphony. He was awarded the Medal of Merit in the field of Arts by the President of the Czech Republic, and the Silver Medal of the President of the Czech Senate, its highest award. He was the inaugural recipient of the Sir Charles Mackerras Prize, and also holds the Bavarian Order of Merit, the Bavarian Culture Prize, the Bavarian State Prize for Music with Bamberg Symphony, and the Czech Academy of Classical Music's Antonín Dvořák Prize.

Nicola Benedetti – violin



Nicola Benedetti © Craig Gibson

Nicola Benedetti is one of the most sought-after violinists of her generation. Her ability to captivate audiences and her wide appeal as an advocate for classical music has made her one of the most influential artists of today.

Nicola opens the 2026/27 season with two major North American engagements, performing the Marsalis Violin Concerto with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra conducted by Cristian Măcelaru, before appearing with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 with Karina Canellakis.

Highlights elsewhere in the season include returns to the Philharmonia Orchestra for Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto with Jakub Hrůša, the Los Angeles Philharmonic for further performances of the Mendelssohn Concerto, and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, where she closes the season with Brahms's Double Concerto directed by Maxim Emelyanychev.

Winner of the GRAMMY® Award for Best Classical Instrumental Solo in 2020, as well as Best Female Artist at both the 2012 and 2013 Classical BRIT Awards, Nicola records exclusively for Decca (Universal Music). Her latest release, *Violin Café*, topped the UK's Official Specialist Classical Chart and inspired her first solo tour in over a decade, a unique and deeply personal programme presented at many of the UK and Ireland's leading concert halls.

Her latest Beethoven recordings have both received widespread acclaim: the Violin Concerto with Aurora Orchestra and the Triple Concerto with Benjamin Grosvenor, Sheku Kanneh-Mason and the Philharmonia Orchestra. Other recent recordings include her GRAMMY® Award-winning album of works written especially for her by jazz musician Wynton Marsalis: Violin Concerto in D and *Fiddle Dance Suite* for Solo Violin.

Nicola has always been a dedicated, passionate ambassador and leader in music education and her commitment was underlined in 2019 when she established The Benedetti Foundation. The Foundation delivers transformative experiences through mass music events and unites those who believe music is integral to life's education.

In October 2022, Nicola became the Festival Director of the Edinburgh International Festival. In taking the role she became both the first Scottish and the first female Festival Director since the Festival began in 1947.

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Shostakovich Piano Concerto No. 2 with Nobu

Thu 5 Nov, 7.30pm

See our Featured Artist live

Mahler 6 with Marin Alsop

Thu 19 Nov, 7.30pm

Violinist Esther Yoo joins in music by Bernstein

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Sun 29 Nov, 3pm

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