Philharmonia

2026/27 season

Philharmonia

Manfred Honeck and Emanuel Ax

Thursday 12 November 2026
Royal Festival Hall

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In a nutshell...

This evening's concert features music by composers known for writing some of the most famous orchestral melodies in existence.

If you haven't heard of Johann Strauss II, you will have most likely heard some of his music. Famous for writing dance music, Strauss II's arguably most well-known work is his 'Blue Danube' Waltz. Played as an annual tradition at the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Day concerts, this work has made many a media appearance including in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Premiered in Vienna, tonight's second work is Mozart's 25th piano concerto out of 27. Like Strauss II, Mozart is the mastermind behind many a familiar tune such as *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* or *Rondo Alla Turca*. Much of his music has also been featured on screen. You might recognise the opening movement of tonight's concerto from the opening credits of Miloš Forman's film *Amadeus*.

Although our first and last composers share a name, they did not share compositional styles. Richard Strauss composed music that was much larger in scale and much more serious in subject matter. Both are true of tonight's piece *Elektra Suite* which tells the bloodthirsty and revenge filled story of Elektra from Greek mythology. Like Strauss II, however, Richard Strauss's music was also featured in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The opening of his *Also sprach Zarathustra* is used twice throughout the film.

Welcome to this evening's concert

Manfred Honeck and Emanuel Ax

Thursday 12 November 2026, 7.30pm
Royal Festival Hall

Manfred Honeck – conductor
Principal Conductor Designate
Emanuel Ax – piano

J STRAUSS II Overture, Die Fledermaus
(8 mins)

MOZART Piano Concerto No. 25, K. 503
(31 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

R STRAUSS Elektra Suite
(arr. Honeck & Ille)
(35 mins)

Supported by an anonymous donor

This performance finishes at approximately 9.15pm

BBC RADIO 3

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Programme notes



Johann Staus II via Wikimedia Commons

Johann Strauss II (1825 – 1899)

Overture, Die Fledermaus (1874)
(8 mins)

Viennese man-about-town, Gabriel von Eisenstein, has a wicked sense of humour: something his friend, Doctor Falke, knows all too well. At an infamous incident several years prior, when the pair were walking home from a fancy dress party together, the inebriated Falke passed out in the street. Rather than rousing his friend or helping him home, Eisenstein abandoned Falke, leaving him comatose, and – naturally – dressed as a bat. The humiliation still stings years later, so when the Doctor spies a chance to take revenge, he doesn't hesitate. Through a series of disguises and deceptions, Falke tricks Eisenstein into – among other things - unwittingly seducing his own wife at a New Year's Eve party. Along the way, there's an eccentric Prince, a Russian actress, and a drunken jailor. And, natürlich, there's a lot of champagne.

The plot of Johann Strauss II's *Die Fledermaus (The Bat)* is nothing if not eventful. Infusing the popular form of French operetta with the giddy charm of the Viennese waltz, Strauss struck theatrical gold in 1874 with his witty musical comedy set in the Austrian capital. Despite a subdued opening run in Vienna itself, the opera subsequently toured to Berlin, where it became a runaway success, and the New Year's Eve antics of its characters have sparked annual performances of the opera – and its most popular excerpts – in many quarters.

Nearly all of those 'greatest hits' are present in the opera's Overture – a rip-roaring curtain-opener, fizzing with mischief and charm. From the raucous laughter of the opening chords, to the tipsy, head-spinning momentum of the operetta's famous waltz, Strauss gallops through a potpourri assortment of the opera's catchiest tunes, with enough polkas, waltzes, tempo shifts and beguiling melodies to thoroughly intoxicate any listener.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart via Wikimedia Commons

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

Piano Concerto No. 25, K. 503 (1784–86)
(31 mins)

Mozart gave the premiere of his 25th piano concerto on December 5, 1786 in Vienna, the day after he completed the work. It was a busy time for the 30-year-old composer: the following day, he went to Prague and conducted his newest symphony, the 38th in D major (thereafter nicknamed the 'Prague' Symphony), and while he was there, he also conducted his opera, The Marriage of Figaro. While no performances of the 25th piano concerto were documented in Prague, we do know that Mozart took the work back to Vienna in April, and to Leipzig in 1787. Then, by all accounts, the concerto drops off the radar: it wasn't performed for another 147 years, when the Austrian pianist and composer Artur Schnabel played it with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1934, and it was another decade before it definitively re-entered the repertory.

What caused this piano concerto – now regarded as one of the genre's greatest masterpieces – to fall out of favour? Some have suggested that the sheer scale of the composition, and its imposing tone, may have been at odds with popular taste. Writing in 1798, the music critic, Johann Friedrich Rochlizt described it as 'the most magnificent of all the concertos which have ever been written' but also one of the most 'difficult'. The orchestration is larger than we see in many of his similar works: Mozart added trumpets and timpani to the usual strings, woodwind and horns (although, curiously, clarinets are omitted) – and the piece is notable for its grandiose, 'symphonic' scope, evident from the outset.

Where typically, Mozart's piano concertos lay out one or two main themes, the opening Maestoso provides at least three, showing the scale and ambition of the work. The concerto – the last of four C major concertos – opens with a ceremonial C major orchestral introduction – a theme which is restated by the piano with the orchestra, before the soloist embarks on a mercurial, musical journey of virtuosity and poise. The richness of the writing was novel at the time, and comparisons have been drawn between this work and Beethoven's own piano concerto in C (No.1), written in 1795. Jovial cascades and semiquavers are offset by fleeting moments of minor-key jeopardy, but the mood overall remains jubilant. The movement ends with Mozart throwing the musical gauntlet down to the soloist, who must decide whether to perform their own improvised cadenza, or to choose from a myriad of options provided by later pianists and composers.

The serene melodies of the Andante's introduction recall the sublime vocal ensembles of his operas, with songlike, intertwining lines in the woodwinds and strings. The foot-tapping finale Allegretto takes the form of a Rondo (a returning theme). Again, multiple themes vie for our attention, but despite brief forays into the minor key, the work ends in upward-leaping, celebratory style, rounded off with a rousing orchestral flourish.



Richard Strauss via Wikimedia Commons

Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949)

Elektra Suite (arr. Honeck & Ille)
(1906-08, arr. 2014)
(35 mins)

"The colour of blood". This was how one critic described the score of Richard Strauss's 1909 opera, which is distilled from 100 minutes down to 33 in this orchestral Suite by Austrian conductor Manfred Honeck and longtime collaborator Czech composer Tomáš Ille. The librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal adapted Sophocles's 4th-century BC tragedy, with Strauss's kaleidoscopic music turning the ancient Greek matricidal play into an orgy of Freudian, expressionist emotion.

According to Honeck's own commentary, the Suite begins with two dramatic utterances of the fanfare-like brass theme of Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae, murdered by his own wife. This is followed by a mournful echo in the strings, intended as the voice of his lonely, grieving daughter, Elektra. At just under two

minutes in, a thunderous battery of brass gives powerful expression to her vision of her father, crying out for revenge. The mood turns wistful in what Honeck describes as the 'father-love' theme at around the 3-minute mark, as Elektra sings, "Father I long to see you." Unlike Elektra, who is consumed with the desire for revenge, her sister, Chrysothemis – whose yearning theme we hear at four minutes in – longs to escape the palace and to have a family of her own.

At around six minutes, we hear a preview of Elektra's skipping, triumphal final dance, followed by a climactic encounter between Elektra and her guilt-stricken mother, Klytämnestra, whose death Elektra presages in a nightmarish vision: "Here I stand and finally I see you die." Crashing cymbals, blazing horns and tremolo strings signal Klytämnestra's delight when she learns that her revenge-bound son, Orest, has died – but she has been misinformed. Soon, uneasy, lilting woodwinds and twisting string melodies hint at the presence of a mysterious stranger: Orest has returned. Violence soon erupts as Orest and a Nurse conspire and murder his mother: snarling brass and savage whip-cracks in the percussion depict their brutality.

When Elektra uncovers her brother's identity, we hear her joy in the surging string writing – listen out for the tender solo sections – as she cries, "Oh, let me see your eyes." The murder of the Queen's lover, Ägisth follows, and we then hear the opera's full, uncut Finale, in which the sisters celebrate the murders, before Elektra descends into a frenzied, ecstatic dance, all stomping, dotted-rhythm delirium (listen out for that trilling tambourine roll!), which ultimately claims her life. As she lays dying, Agamemnon's chilling fanfare rings out again, before the 'father-love' theme briefly soars over the orchestra one last time, "thus closing the arc", as Honeck writes, and ending the cycle of revenge – for now…

Programme Notes by Sophie Rashbrook

BBC RADIO 3



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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.

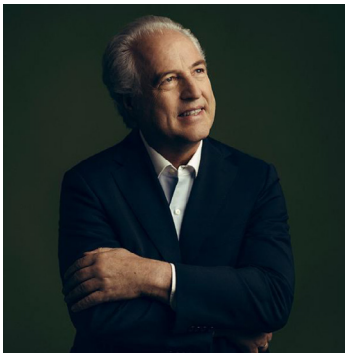
The Philharmonia is resident at the Southbank Centre in the heart of London, and also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, at Garsington Opera and at the Three Choirs Festival. In each of these residencies, the Orchestra is deeply embedded in the community. Projects with 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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Manfred Honeck – conductor



Manfred Honeck © Todd Rosenberg

Manfred Honeck has firmly established himself as one of the world's leading conductors, renowned for his distinctive interpretations that have garnered international acclaim. As Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, where he is now in his 19th season, he continues to shape the Orchestra's artistic identity with a deep sense of purpose and passion. His tenure, recently extended through the 2032/33 season, has seen the Orchestra flourish artistically while strengthening its role as a cultural ambassador for the city of Pittsburgh.

Beginning with the 2028/29 season, he will become the seventh Principal Conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra in London, which will serve as his artistic anchor in Europe. Across the Atlantic, he will also take on the role of Festival Director of the San Francisco Symphony, starting that same season with a five-year term to create his own annual, multi-week festival exploring universal elements of the human experience.

Born in Austria, Manfred Honeck completed his musical training at the Academy of Music in Vienna. His many years as a member of the Vienna Philharmonic and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra have had a lasting influence on his work as a conductor. He began his conducting career as an assistant to Claudio Abbado and was subsequently engaged by the Zurich Opera House, where he was awarded the prestigious European Conductor's Award. Following early posts with the MDR Symphony Orchestra in Leipzig and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, he served as Music Director of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra in Stockholm and as Music Director of the Staatsoper Stuttgart.

As a guest conductor, Manfred Honeck works with the world's most prestigious orchestras, including the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, the Staatskapelle Dresden, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Philharmonia Orchestra, and the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. In the United States, he has conducted all of the nation's leading orchestras: the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Cleveland Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the San Francisco Symphony. He also maintains a distinguished profile as an opera conductor: most recently, he returned to the Salzburg Festival in summer 2026, conducting Ariadne auf Naxos with the Vienna Philharmonic.

In the 2026/27 season, he will commemorate the 200th anniversary of Ludwig van Beethoven's death with special programs and a new commission from Jüri Reinvere, to be presented worldwide.

Emanuel Ax – piano



Emanuel Ax© Marie Mazzucco

Born to Polish parents in what is today Lviv, Ukraine, Emanuel Ax moved to Winnipeg, Canada, with his family when he was a young boy. Mr. Ax made his New York debut in the Young Concert Artists Series, and in 1974 won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Tel Aviv. In 1975 he won the Michaels Award of Young Concert Artists, followed four years later by the Avery Fisher Prize. Emanuel Ax was recently named the 2026 Musical America Artist of the Year.

Artist in Residence with Radio France during the 2026/27 season, Emanuel Ax will perform five concerts in Paris throughout the year. Other highlights include appearances with the Munich Philharmonic, Philharmonia Orchestra, Spanish National Orchestra and Lucerne Festival Strings, as well as a European tour with the Dresden Philharmonic under the baton of Sir Donald Runnicles. Following its world premiere with Boston Symphony at Tanglewood Music Festival, John Williams's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (2025), dedicated to Mr. Ax, receives further performances with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic and Orchestre National de France. The season also includes a series of solo recitals in Paris, Cambridge, Monte Carlo, Milan and Turin.

Mr. Ax has been a Sony Classical exclusive recording artist since 1987 and following the success of the Brahms Trios with Leonidas Kavakos and Yo-Yo Ma, the trio launched an ambitious, multi-year project to record all the Beethoven Trios and Symphonies arranged for trio of which the first four discs have been released with the fifth arriving this fall. He has received GRAMMY® Awards for the second and third volumes of his cycle of Haydn's piano sonatas. He has also made a series of GRAMMY-winning recordings with Yo-Yo Ma of the Beethoven and Brahms sonatas for cello and piano. In the 2004/05 season Mr. Ax contributed to an International EMMY® Award-Winning BBC documentary commemorating the Holocaust that aired on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. In 2013, Mr. Ax's recording *Variations* received the Echo Klassik Award for Solo Recording of the Year (19th Century Music/Piano).

Mr. Ax is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and holds honorary doctorates of music from Skidmore College, New England Conservatory of Music, Yale University, and Columbia University.

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Philharmonia

2026/27 season highlights

Mahler 6 with Marin Alsop

Thu 19 Nov, 7.30pm

Violinist Esther Yoo joins in music by Bernstein

A German Requiem: Diana Damrau and Gerald Finley

Sun 29 Nov, 3pm

A selection of Strauss songs followed by Brahms's Requiem

Elgar Symphony No. 1 with Alexander Soddy

Sun 7 Feb, 3pm

Paired with Mozart and Vaughan Williams

Beethoven 4 & Schnittke's Piano Concerto

Thur 11 Mar, 7.30pm

Played by Steven Osborne

Sibelius Lemminkäinen with Santtu-Matias Rouvali

Thur 1 Apr, 7.30pm

Santtu conducts Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto

Beethoven 7 & MacMillan's Veni, Veni, Emmanuel

Thur 8 Apr, 7.30pm

Manfred Honeck returns

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