

Friday 24 April 2026 / 7.30pm  
**Sibelius' Second Symphony**

**Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**

Finlandia, Op.26

In 1899 Finland was a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, and patriotic Finns had to keep their opinions under wraps. So on 4 November 1899, when a gala night was held at Helsinki's Swedish Theatre, everyone except the Russians knew that the performance was actually a veiled attack on Tsarist press censorship. Jean Sibelius, Finland's foremost young composer, wrote music for the six historical *tableaux*, which climaxed with an allegorical scene entitled "Finland Awakes". A month later the Helsinki Orchestral Society gave a repeat performance of the music from these "Press Celebrations".

This time the reaction was overwhelming. The music from "Finland Awakes" immediately became a patriotic anthem, and to avoid censorship Sibelius hastily renamed it *Impromptu*, or simply *Finale*. Only at the end of 1900 did he christen the piece by the name with which it has become part of Finnish national identity (it's even given its name to a brand of vodka), *Finlandia*. The music has no explicit story, but the musical images are easy enough to follow – the snarling brass chords of the oppressor, the trumpet's call to action, the march to victory, and the tranquil, aspiring hymn tune that appears twice - first gently, like a distant vision of freedom, and then – finally – in a blaze of triumph.

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**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

Violin Concerto in D minor

*Allegro - Andante - Allegro*

Two child prodigies a century apart are involved in the remarkable story of this violin concerto. One who composed it at the age of thirteen; and one who later, as a mature musician, chanced upon the 'lost' score and brought its wonders to the world for the first time.

Felix Mendelssohn wrote this Violin Concerto in 1821 for his friend and teacher Eduard Rietz. It's charming and confident, showing a sharp musical mind developing. There's a sense of conversation running through it - between soloist and orchestra, between bold ideas and more reflective moments. But as often happens to youthful works, it was put aside and gathered dust until 1951 when it fell into the right hands.

Yehudi Menuhin was fascinated by the work, bought the rights to the concerto from the surviving Mendelssohn family in Switzerland, edited it for performance and arranged for its publication. In February 1952 he performed it in New York's Carnegie Hall, conducting the string ensemble from the violin. Despite the *New York Times* noting its 'lively jesting finale in the gypsy style' and the *New York Sun* calling it 'utterly delightful', it never achieved the popularity of the later Violin Concerto in E minor.

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**Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**

Symphony No.2 in D, Op. 43

*Allegretto - Tempo andante ma rubato - Vivacissimo - Finale: Allegro moderato*

Conceived on a holiday in Italy in 1901, Sibelius's Second Symphony is also his warmest. You can feel it in the very first bars - aglow with pulsing string chords and dancing woodwinds. He admitted that the Spanish legend of Don Juan had inspired much of the brooding slow movement. And he captured a more painful personal experience in the symphony's *finale*. Sibelius's wife Aino said that he first sketched the long, lamenting melody for winds that comes before the final triumph when he heard of the suicide of his beloved sister-in-law Elli Jarnefelt. Sibelius is too honest to give us simple triumph.

But there's more here than musical storytelling and emotional confession. From the playful fragments of its opening bars, through the dark passions of the second movement, the whirlwind *Vivacissimo*, and into the sweeping melodies and victorious trumpets of the *finale*, it unfolds with the inevitability of nature itself. And that was how Sibelius - who loved the forests, lakes and birds of the far north - wanted us to hear it. He liked to compare the symphony to a great river, into which innumerable tributaries feed before it broadens majestically and flows into the sea. Let the Second Symphony carry you, and see for yourself if this doesn't seem like a wonderfully apt description.

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## **Thomas Zehetmair** conductor/violin

Thomas Zehetmair enjoys wide international acclaim as a violinist as well as a conductor. He is Principal Conductor of Orchestre National d'Auvergne et Rhone-Alps and his position of Chief Conductor of Stuttgarter Kammerorchester has been extended until summer 2029.

Zehetmair has received much inspiration from his work as a soloist with Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Frans Brüggen, David Zinman, Daniel Barenboim, Sir Simon Rattle and Paavo Järvi. As a conductor he has appeared with orchestras including London Philharmonic, Halle Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Orchestra of the Eighteenth-Century, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Hamburger Philharmoniker, Mozarteum Orchester and Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León. He was Chief Conductor of Orchestre de Chambre de Paris, Principal Conductor of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, Artistic Partner of St. Paul's Chamber Orchestra and Music Director of Royal Northern Sinfonia with whom he continues his association as Conductor Laureate.

Thomas Zehetmair has an extensive and varied discography as a violinist, conductor and with the Zehetmair Quartet. His recording of the Paganini Caprices attracted a Midem Classic Award and he received Gramophone Awards for his rendition of the Elgar Concerto with Sir Mark Elder, and the Szymanowski concertos with Sir Simon Rattle. A Gramophone Award of the Year and four other international prizes were presented to the Zehetmair Quartet for their recording of Schumann quartets.

He has more recently been developing his interest in composition and arrangements; compositions of note include his Rondo for violin and cello, *Passacaglia, Burlesque and Chorale* for string trio (also in a version for string orchestra) and *Variations over a mediaeval theme* for solo viola. He has also completed the first movement of Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante for violin, viola and cello* which has been recorded for Decca with the Orchestre National d'Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes, and created a second violin part for Prokofiev's Solo Sonata which he recorded for Quartz. His double concerto for viola, cello and strings was premiered in November 2025. Zehetmair's works are to be published by Schott.

Zehetmair received an Opus Klassik Award 2020 for his latest CD release of Bach Six Solo Sonatas and Partitas recorded with baroque violin which was also selected by the *New York Times* as one of "The 25 Best Classical Music Tracks of 2019" and by *Die Zeit* as one of their six favourite recordings of 2019. Recently released recordings include symphonies by Haydn with the Orchestre National d'Auvergne et Rhone-Alps and works by Schönberg, Bartók, Beethoven, Brahms and Mozart with Stuttgarter Kammerorchester.

Highlights of this season include touring in Asia with both Orchestre National d'Auvergne et Rhone-Alps and Stuttgarter Kammerorchester, a return to St Paul Chamber Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, and performances of Szymanowski Violin Concerto No. 2 with Orchestre National de Lyon. He also forms a duo partnership with Pierre-Laurent Aimard.

The Zehetmair Quartet has been awarded the Paul Hindemith Prize by the City of Hanau for outstanding musical achievement. Thomas Zehetmair was honoured by the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik and holds honorary doctorates from the Liszt University in Weimar and Newcastle University.

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## **Royal Northern Sinfonia**

### **Internationally renowned, calling Gateshead home.**

37 musicians at the top of their game. Electrifying music, old and new. All the talent, determination, and creativity of the North East on a worldwide stage. From their home at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, Royal Northern Sinfonia share the joy and wonder of orchestral music with thousands of people across the North of England - and beyond - every year.

From symphonies to string quartets, film soundtracks to choral masses, and original performances with awesome artists from Sheku Kanneh-Mason to Self Esteem, the orchestra's members have got one of the most varied jobs there is. They're always looking for fresh new sounds from up-and-coming composers, inviting local communities to share a stage, and doing everything they can to inspire and prepare the musicians of tomorrow to one day take their place.

They're also working hard to smash the barriers that can stop brilliant people getting into classical music. They've teamed up with national partners to support women conductors to develop their careers, to help global majority musicians get vital experience in the orchestra world, and to celebrate disabled and non-disabled musicians breaking new ground together in inclusive ensemble RNS Moves. And they bring new musical opportunities to the region, headlining the first-ever BBC Proms weekend outside London.

Because they whole-heartedly believe orchestral music is for anyone - big cities and rural villages, tiny babies and life-long listeners, die-hard fans and curious minds - they travel far and wide to make sure there's top-notch classical music on offer for anyone ready to say "I'll give that a go". You'll find them in churches, castles, and community venues across the North, as well as leading the charge in Carlisle, Kendal, Middlesbrough, and Sunderland.

With 65 years of success to build on, they've signed a dynamic artistic leadership – Music Director Dinis Sousa, Artistic Partner Maria Włoszczowska, Principal Guest Conductor Nil Venditti and Associate Conductor Ellie Slorach – to lead the way into a bold, bright future.

Wherever the orchestra play and whoever they share a stage with, every performance is a chance to see, hear and feel the music.