

## **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra February 2 programme complementary content**

Luscious melodies and plenty of drama are promised in this concert which opens February at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall.

Danish violinist Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider also takes on conducting duties in a programme that matches the romance of Bruch's brilliant First Violin Concerto with the musical grandeur of Strauss' *Alpine Symphony*.

Watch Stephen Johnson talking about the concert programme [here](#).

In addition, this companion page draws together a range of complementary content that we hope will help shine further light on the pieces, the people who composed them and the performers bringing them to life here in Hope Street.

### **Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider**

Danish virtuoso violinist [Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider](#) is much in demand as both a conductor and a soloist, and he is appearing in both roles in this concert.

Born in Copenhagen, he studied with Boris Kuschmir and later at the Juilliard in New York. In June 1992, aged 16, he won the prestigious [Carl Nielsen International Music Competition](#), of which he is now president.

Passionate about nurturing the next generation of musical talent, he founded the annual Nordic Music Academy summer school in Denmark and served as its director for 10 years.

Szeps-Znaider is a regular guest conductor of some of the world's leading orchestras and ensembles. He became music director of the [Orchestre National de Lyon](#) in 2020 and has been principal guest conductor of the Mariinsky Orchestra since 2010.

Forthcoming engagements include concerts with the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall, and with the Orchestre National de Lyon. Szeps-Znaider and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra will also repeat this programme at Symphony Hall in Birmingham.

Watch Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider answer 20 questions about his life and career:

<https://theviolinchannel.com/nikolaj-znaider-violinist-vc-20-questions/>

### **Max Bruch**

When [Max Bruch](#) was invited by the Liverpool Philharmonic Society to take up the position of conductor in 1880, he was already one of the most high-profile figures in mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> Century music.

The Cologne-born Bruch was a precocious talent who had written a symphony aged 14 and had studied with composer and pianist [Ferdinand Hiller](#).

A teacher and conductor as well as a prolific composer, the adult Bruch held musical posts across Germany including in Mannheim, Koblenz, Bonn and finally in Berlin.

He had already had success with choral works and his opera *Die Loreley* when he sat down in 1864 to start on what would become his **First Violin Concerto**.

But the piece didn't come easily, and he was still working on the concerto when he took up the post of conductor at Koblenz in 1865.

Unhappy with the score, he asked for feedback from virtuoso Joseph Joachim, as well as his conductor friend Hermann Levi and violinist **Ferdinand David** who, two decades earlier, had premiered Mendelssohn's great violin concerto.

After numerous revisions, Bruch was finally happy enough with his work to allow it to be premiered by Joachim in Bremen in January 1868.

It quickly became a staple for violinists everywhere – and much to his dismay, ended up overshadowing everything else Bruch composed.

Listen to Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider play an excerpt from Bruch's *Violin Concerto No.1 in G minor*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OrpmPdFV6o>

## **Richard Strauss**

Composer, conductor, pianist and violinist, **Richard Strauss** was born in Munich in 1864 – the same year Bruch started work on his violin concerto.

Strauss' father was the principal horn in the Munich Court Orchestra, so perhaps it's not surprising the young Richard spent much of his youth engrossed in music – by the age of 18 he had composed more than 140 works.

Through his father Franz, he was introduced to conductor **Hans von Bulow** which helped to launch the teenager into a stellar musical career of his own.

**An Alpine Symphony** was composed over four years, starting in 1911, and depicts a day spent scaling a mountain, something Strauss had done himself as a teenager.

Depicting the grandeur of the Alps requires a huge orchestra (including quadruple winds and a vast off-stage brass ensemble), plenty of (cow)bells and whistles, and wind and thunder machines.

Despite this, the symphony was premiered in Berlin in October 1915, as elsewhere, war raged. Strauss conducted.

**Did you know? Strauss' father Franz loathed Richard Wagner and his music so the young Strauss had to keep his love for the composer's work a secret.**

Join Strauss' *Alpine Symphony* 'at the summit':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fozsVQ30jqU>

## About the Music

### Max Bruch (1838-1920): Violin Concerto No 1 in G minor, Op. 26

1. Vorspiel [Prelude]. Allegro Moderato -
2. Adagio -
3. Finale. Allegro energico

Composed: 1866

First performed: 7 January 1868, Bremen, Joseph Joachim (soloist), cond. Karl Martin Rheinthal

It would be nice to think that Max Bruch profited from the huge popularity of his First Violin Concerto. But although the premiere of the fully-revised score brought Bruch his first big success, unwisely he then sold it to a publisher for a one-off payment, which meant that for years he had to endure seeing the work appear on concert billings all over the world, while the money went elsewhere. At the end of the First World War, the impoverished Bruch tried to raise some cash by offering the manuscript for sale in America, but he died without receiving a penny.

Like Brahms, Bruch remained a 'classical-romantic', committed to traditional forms, setting his face against the progressives like Wagner and Liszt. But formally speaking Bruch's First Violin Concerto is quite exploratory. In most 19<sup>th</sup> century concertos, the first movement is the most substantial and dramatic, but the dark, turbulent 'Prelude' is relatively short, eventually settling into the *Adagio*, the violin now entering with a long-breathed, exquisite melody, played on the instrument's darkly sonorous lowest string. The Finale follows on very effectively from the *Adagio*'s serene ending, bringing the full explosion of virtuosity anticipated, but never fully delivered, in that 'Prelude' first movement – well, it's often a good idea to save the fireworks to the end!

### Richard Strauss (1864-1949): An Alpine Symphony, Op 64

Composed: 1911-15

First performed: 28 October 1915, Berlin, Dresden Hofkapelle Orchestra, cond. Strauss

Strauss grew up in Munich, within easy reach of the Alps. As early as 1902, he was contemplating an 'Alpine' orchestral work, partly inspired by a memory of a boyhood climbing adventure that had gone badly wrong. But it was the shockingly early death of his half-friend, half-rival Gustav Mahler in 1911 that set Strauss thinking in terms of an 'Alpine Symphony'. The subject was now twenty-four hours in the life of a mountain, from dawn to twilight, and the experiences and impressions of a group of people climbing it: wonder at the marvels they witness, joy on scaling the summit, the terror of the stormy descent and the sense of resolution and relief as the base is reached and night returns – all brilliantly portrayed by a huge, colour-enhanced orchestra, including wind and thunder machines, and the cowbells that Mahler had scandalously included in his own Sixth Symphony.

The opening is breath-taking: a hushed minor scale descends across three octaves, the strings filling in every single note of the scale, creating a shimmering 'cluster' chord, through which a rock-like bass brass theme emerges like a huge mountain peak through early morning mist. An energetic 'Ascent' follows, and later highlights include distant hunting horns, the ethereal textures of the alpine waterfall (harps and celesta), a 'dangerous moment' (nervously shimmering strings and angular brass calls), closely followed by 'At the summit' – high tremolando violins and an oboe solo that seems to catch its breath from sheer wonderment. Then begins the descent,

foreboding gradually erupting into the 'Thunderstorm', in which the orchestra is joined first by the organ, after which the tone turns increasingly sombre and elegiac – unsurprisingly perhaps. As Strauss was finishing the score in 1915, Europe was descending into the catastrophe of World War One. One thing would endure however: nature, in particular those stunning, reassuringly solid mountains.