

GRIEG'S PIANO CONCERTO

7.30PM, Thursday 19 November
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

Helios Overture (1903)

DURATION: c.8'

In 1903 Nielsen's wife, the sculptor Anne Marie Brodersen, was granted permission to make copies of statues in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. With the help of a stipend from his publisher, Nielsen accompanied her and was given access to a room with a piano at the Athens Conservatory of Music. It was there that he wrote his *Helios Overture*, a tone poem depicting the journey of the sun throughout the day. When it was published, the score included the following description: 'Stillness and darkness – then the sun rises to joyous songs of praise – wanders on its golden way – quietly sinks in the sea.'

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Piano Concerto (1868)

I. *Allegro molto moderato*

II. *Adagio*

III. *Allegro moderato molto e marcato*

DURATION: c.30'

Grieg was only in his mid-twenties when he wrote the piano concerto that would make him famous throughout the world. Schumann's Piano Concerto had made an indelible impression on him when he heard it performed by Clara Schumann in Leipzig in 1858 and when he embarked on his own concerto ten years later it was only natural that Schumann would be his model. All the same, Grieg's concerto is by no means a slavish tribute to Schumann's. By the time he wrote it he had fully developed his own style, strongly influenced by Norwegian folk music.

The concerto opens with a stirring call to attention – a timpani roll leading to a fortissimo A minor chord for the full orchestra and a cadenza-like passage for the solo piano. Having led his audience to expect high drama, Grieg instead gives us mystery and tender lyricism. At the suggestion of Liszt the exquisitely beautiful second theme was originally introduced by a solo trumpet, but Grieg later changed it to the version we know today, with the theme announced by the cellos.

The second movement begins with a delicate folk-like melody presented by muted strings. On the piano's first entry it initially provides florid decoration to the melody. When it finally takes over the theme it presents it in much bolder colours before subsiding into gentle reverie.

The most typically Norwegian tune in the concerto is the main theme of the finale, which is in the style of a lively dance known as a *halling*, traditionally danced by young men at weddings and other celebrations. A soothing interlude is introduced by the flute over tremolo strings, but the dance soon returns. The concerto ends with a grandiose transformation of the interlude.

INTERVAL

Conductor Giordano Bellincampi

Piano Christian Ihle Hadland

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme: Suite (1911-17; rev. 1920)

I. *Overture*

II. *Minuet*

III. *The Fencing Master*

IV. *Entry and Dance of the Tailors*

V. *Lully's Minuet*

VI. *Courante*

VII. *Entry of Cléonte*

VIII. *Prelude to Act II (Intermezzo)*

IX. *The Dinner*

DURATION: c.36'

After the highly successful premiere of *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1911, librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal suggested to Richard Strauss that they might collaborate on an adaptation of Molière's 1670 play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*. In the play Jourdain, a middle-class cloth merchant with ambitions to be accepted as an aristocrat, hires teachers of music, dance, fencing and philosophy so he can learn what he believes to be 'aristocratic ways.' Hofmannsthal's adaptation proposed to end the play with a banquet, followed by a performance of an opera based on the story of Ariadne, abandoned on the island of Naxos by her former lover Theseus.

The combination of play and opera was not a success. As Strauss later remarked, 'a public that goes to the theatre does not want to hear an opera and vice versa.' Strauss and Hofmannsthal made several efforts to revise the work, but eventually the opera was shorn of its theatrical prologue. Eventually Strauss compiled an orchestral suite from his incidental music for the play, and it's in this form that the music has become well known.

Following an overture anticipating the various character portraits in the play, a minuet depicts the dancing master's repeated attempts to teach the inept Jourdain to dance it. Next, the fencing master demonstrates to Jourdain the rudiments of the sport, with little success. Tailors arrive to make alterations to Jourdain's suit in preparation for the banquet.

The next three movements are Strauss adaptations of music by Lully for Molière's play. Cléonte is in love with Jourdain's daughter, but as he is middle-class Jourdain rejects his suit. The *Intermezzo* shows Jourdain preparing to welcome his guests. The banquet itself gives Strauss an opportunity for some musical jokes – Rhine salmon is accompanied by an excerpt from Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, while saddle of mutton is accompanied by the bleating of sheep from Strauss's own *Don Quixote*.

COPYRIGHT © ROBERT JOHNSON 2026

Notes Fund: Music for this concert has been supported by Steven Brodie