

Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

November 10 programme complementary content

Sir Simon Rattle

With his captivating charisma, deep enthusiasm, great love of experimentation and meticulous artistic seriousness, it is no surprise that the Liverpool-born Sir Simon Rattle is one of the most fascinating conductors of our time. He first conducted the BR Chorus and the BRSO in 2010. This developed into an intensive collaboration, and his performances in Munich have always been true highlights. In 2023, the 70-year-old Brit with a German passport took over as chief conductor of the orchestra he has admired since his youth. Sir Simon Rattle's repertoire ranges from Bach, Haydn and Mozart to modern and contemporary music, and from classical symphonies to concertante opera. Under the label 'BRSO barock', he has also established performances of early music on original instruments at the BRSO. He is equally passionate about music education, and challenging projects with the BRSO Academy, of which he is patron, are just as important to him as broader-impact projects that bring together professional and amateur musicians. These include the 'Symphonischer Hoagascht' in 2024 and 'Singen mit Sir Simon' (Singing with Sir Simon) in July 2026.

Sir Simon Rattle's meteoric career began with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, which he made internationally famous between 1980 and 1998. From 2002 to 2018, he was chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and, from 2017 to 2023, music director of the London Symphony Orchestra. He remains associated with the latter as Conductor Emeritus. He is also 'Principal Artist' of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Principal Guest Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra ('Rafael Kubelík Conducting Chair'). He has longstanding relationships with the Vienna Philharmonic and the Berlin Staatskapelle, the Royal Opera House in London, the Berlin State Opera, the New York Met, and the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, where he conducted the BRSO in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in the summer of 2025. Recently he has also begun working with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. Simon Rattle has received numerous high honours, including the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize in May 2025. Several of his CDs released with the BRSO have received awards: Mahler's Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth Symphonies received a Gramophone Editor's Choice; the Sixth was included in the German Record Critics' Award list of the best recordings; the Seventh was awarded the Diapason d'or ARTE; and his recording of Haydn's *The Creation* received a Pizzicato Supersonic Award. At the Gramophone Classical Music Awards 2025, Simon Rattle was honoured as Artist of the Year.

Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

With the 2023/24 season, the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra welcomed its new principal conductor: Sir Simon Rattle. As the sixth chief conductor in the line of important orchestra leaders after Eugen Jochum, Rafael Kubelík, Sir Colin Davis, Lorin Maazel and Mariss Jansons, he is a conductor of great openness to new artistic paths.

The BRSO developed into an internationally renowned orchestra soon after its founding in 1949. In addition to the interpretation of the classical-romantic repertoire, the orchestra's central concern from the beginning was to cultivate contemporary music within the framework of *musica viva*, founded by Karl Amadeus Hartmann in 1945. Since its beginnings, many renowned guest conductors such as Leonard Bernstein, Sir Georg Solti, Carlo Maria Giulini and Wolfgang Sawallisch have left their mark on the symphony orchestra.

Today, Herbert Blomstedt, Franz Welser-Möst, Daniel Harding, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Jakub Hrůša and Iván Fischer are important partners. The orchestra tours regularly throughout Europe, Asia and North and South America.

The BRSO has received many awards for its extensive recording activities, such as the Grammy, the Diapason d'or and the Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik. Simon Rattle has already added important milestones to the discography, including works by Mahler and Wagner.

Another focus of the BRSO is the promotion of young musicians, The BRSO Academy, one of the most renowned training facilities of its kind, and the ARD International Music Competition, which was founded in 1952, are dedicated to this. Music education 'BRSO und du' also plays an important role in the orchestra's program, with various formats and offers for schools and families with children.

In an orchestra ranking by *Bachtrack*, the world's leading website for classical music events, for which internationally renowned music critics were asked about 'the world's greatest orchestras', the BRSO came in third place in 2023.

Robert Schumann

When Robert Schumann sat down to sketch out the outline of his Second Symphony in December 1845, he had already begun to experience the effects of the mental instability which would dog his final years. The 35-year-old composer, conductor and music critic suffered from depression (perhaps exacerbated by feelings of inadequacy in the face of wife Clara's professional success), ringing in the ears and 'nervous protestation'.

Schumann had already written two of the four symphonies that would form part of his canon: his *Symphony No.1 in B-flat major (Spring)*, performed under the baton of Felix Mendelssohn, and his pioneering *Symphony No.4 in D minor*. He had also composed the celebrated *Piano Concerto in A minor*, and was in the middle of setting Goethe's Faust to music.

Did you know? Schumann was at first determined to be a pianist but damaged his hand with a homemade practice contraption and turned to composing instead.

Igor Stravinsky

When the great Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev heard a *Scherzo Fantastique* at a concert in St Petersburg in 1909, he was impressed enough to engage its young composer to write some short pieces for his Ballet Russes.

But Igor Stravinsky wasn't the first choice when it came to creating the music for the company's full-length production *The Firebird*. Instead, Diaghilev approached fellow Russian Anatoly Liadov to provide the score. Unhappily for Liadov, he failed to come up with the goods – but Stravinsky, approached in his place, had no such problem.

The Firebird opened at the Paris Opera on June 25, 1910 and turned its composer into a star overnight. It also became the first of a trio of collaborative works which continued in 1911 with *Petrushka* and culminated in the famously riotous *The Rite of Spring* two years later.

But it was *The Firebird* that Stravinsky returned to when he made his conducting debut in December 1915 (two wartime concerts in aid of the Red Cross) – and many times again over the rest of his long career.

About the Music

Robert Schumann (1810-56): Symphony No 2 in C major, Op 61

Composed: 1845-6

First Performed: Leipzig, 5 November, 1846, cond. Felix Mendelssohn

For a long time, Schumann's Second Symphony divided the crowds. Some compared it to Beethoven, while others struggled to make sense of it: one eminent critic even dismissed it as a 'pathetic failure'. It made Schumann himself uneasy, but for different reasons: it reminded him, he said, of 'dark days'. It was certainly written during a particularly dark time for Schumann. Always unstable and prone to extreme mood-swings, after three astonishingly productive years, he experienced a 'violent and nervous attack' in 1844, followed by severe depression and creative paralysis. His Second Symphony was the main focus of his attempt to claw his way back out of the abyss.

You'd never guess that anything was wrong from the opening: a slow brass fanfare sounds with calm dignity through flowing strings. But then the struggle begins, with a tense, jagged theme repeated and developed obsessively. Is this Schumann willing himself to be positive? If so, is that why some people find this music difficult? Go with it though, and it's thrilling. Nervous obsessiveness can also be heard in the following Scherzo, but then comes the wonderful Adagio, beginning with a noble, long, almost Bachian melody. Here, Schumann seems determined to face the darkness with courage. The finale begins resolutely, but memories of the slow movement keep coming back. Then, after a pause, Schumann sounds a new, more hopeful theme, based on the line 'Take, oh take these songs I offer' from Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* ('To the distant beloved') – a favourite of Schumann's wife Clara, and almost certainly a gesture to her for sticking with him during the crisis. Significantly, it's this theme that's raised aloft in triumph at the end.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971): The Firebird (complete ballet)

Composed: 1909-10

First Performed: 25 June 1910, Paris, Palais Garnier, cond. Gabriel Pierne

The hugely influential ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev was also a talent-spotter of genius. When he first floated the idea of adapting the Russian folk legend of the Firebird for performance by his Paris-based Ballets Russes in 1909, the composer he had in mind was his old teacher Anatoly Liadov. But when it became clear that Liadov wasn't up to the job, Diaghilev remembered the young composer he'd worked with on an adaptation of the ballet *Les Sylphides*, Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky had no reputation to speak of in 1909, but Diaghilev seems to have sensed a potential major talent. Surprised and flattered, Stravinsky dropped work on his opera *The Nightingale* and began work in November, finishing the full orchestral score in just five months.

The premiere of *Firebird* was a sensation. As Stravinsky noted, 'The stage and the whole theatre glittered'. He could have added that his music glittered too. For all his later expressions of distaste for all forms of 'illustrative' music, Stravinsky's Firebird score is a triumph of musical storytelling and scene-painting. We can sense the magic and nocturnal menace in the ogre Kashchei's enchanted garden as the young Prince Ivan strays into it in pursuit of the magical Firebird. We hear her heart-rending cries when he catches her, then frees her in exchange for one of her magical feathers. A delicate round dance portrays the thirteen captive princesses, with one of whom Ivan falls in love. The music darkens as Ivan is captured, and Kaschei performs a

terrifying dance of triumph. But Ivan remembers the feather, and the Firebird reappears, to reveal the secret of Kashchei's immortality - his soul is contained in a hidden egg. The egg is destroyed and Kashchei's power ebbs away. Finally, there is a magnificent long crescendo on a nobly beautiful Russian folk theme (first heard on horn) as Ivan and his Princess are betrothed in full splendour.