

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW PARALLEL EVENTS

1877

Tchaikovsky

Variations on a Rococo Theme**MUSIC**Tchaikovsky
Swan Lake**ART**Gustave Caillebotte
Paris Street, Rainy Day**LITERATURE**Leo Tolstoy
Anna Karenina**HISTORY**

First ever official cricket test match is played: Australia vs England.

1903

Nielsen

Helios Overture**MUSIC**Victor Hubert
Babes in Toyland**ART**Wassily Kandinsky
Der Blaue Reiter**LITERATURE**Jack London
The Call of the Wild**HISTORY**

Orville Wright makes the world's first airplane flight.

1919

Sibelius

Symphony No.5 in E-flat major**MUSIC**Edward Elgar
Cello Concerto in E minor**ART**Claude Monet
Water Lilies**LITERATURE**Sherwood Anderson
Winesburg, Ohio**HISTORY**

The Treaty of Versailles officially ends World War I.

NORTHERN LIGHTS - NIELSEN & SIBELIUS

Balance is an often-elusive goal for conductors. Standing on the podium, the blend of sounds coming at you from the musicians on stage can sound quite different than it does from a seat in the concert hall. This is one of the primary functions of what is called a “cover” conductor – to make sure that the sound in the hall matches what the conductor is envisioning (as well as to be ready to step in if the conductor suddenly falls ill). Tonight’s guest conductor, Benjamin Manis, has ample experience playing this role.

Four-time winner of the Solti Foundation US Career Assistance Awards, Manis cut his teeth doing exactly this for major orchestras in Utah, St. Louis, Dallas, Houston, Washington D.C., and elsewhere; with names well known to Rhode Island audiences, such as Robert Spano, Leonard Slatkin, and former RI Phil Music Director Larry Rachleff.

Today, as a highly respected and sought after conductor in his own right, Manis is known for achieving incredible balance, not just between sections of the orchestra, but also between other, more nuanced musical elements.

Whether it’s contrasting the serene sunrise that grows almost imperceptibly from darkness with the blinding brilliance of an Aegean summer’s day in Carl Nielsen’s *Helios Overture*, finding just the right amount of breathing room for the heavily taxed soloist in Tchaikovsky’s *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, or calibrating exactly the right mix of orchestral dynamics needed to allow the vivid and inventive sonorities of Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony to shine through, Manis’s ability to precisely shape both intense and delicate musical moments reveals a conductor for whom balance is clearly a passion. Tonight’s program, designed by Manis in collaboration with RI Phil Music Director Ruth Reinhardt, is a perfect vehicle for this passion.



NORTHERN LIGHTS - NIELSEN & SIBELIUS

Open Rehearsal: Friday, March 12, 2027

TACO Classical: Saturday, March 13, 2027

Helios: Overture, op.17

CARL NIELSEN (1938-)

This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. This piece is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings

Widely regarded as Denmark’s greatest composer, Carl Nielsen stands alongside Grieg and Sibelius as Scandinavia’s most revered musical figures. His wide-ranging intellectual interests—especially in philosophy, history, and literature—often shaped his music, and *Helios Overture* is a clear example.

But one cannot, in good conscious, overlook the woman who played a seminal role in his development into an artist of spiritual depth and sophistication. Without her artistic partnership, he may well have remained a respected, yet undistinguished composer, known only in elite Danish circles.

That woman was his wife, Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen (née Brodersen). A major sculptor in her own right, Anne Marie was a “strong-willed and modern-minded” artist fiercely committed to her career. Known for her naturalistic animal studies, mythological subjects, and monumental public works, she received rare permission in 1902 to copy statues and bas-reliefs at the Acropolis in Athens. Though her devotion to art sometimes took her away from her young family, she recognized that this opportunity could be artistically stimulating for Carl as well. So, they engaged a housekeeper to look after the children (who ended up staying with the family for the next forty years!) and set off to immerse themselves in all things Aegean.

Their lodgings were idyllic. With views of the Aegean Sea and ancient ruins all around, Nielsen turned to the myth of *Helios*, who was said to carry the sun across the sky in a chariot. This image sparked his imagination and gave rise to the *Helios* Overture.

The overture’s design is straightforward: it depicts sunrise, the sun’s passage across the sky, and its descent in the evening. Nielsen described the work with an epigraph he included in the score:

Stillness and darkness—Then the sun rises to joyous songs of praise—Wanders its golden way—quietly sinks in the sea.

At the outset, low swells in the basses evoke the inky black Aegean Sea before dawn. Horns soon build upon those timeless swells in a series of wide, rising intervals, tracing the first arc of the sun, while the strings stir like morning breezes (remember their first motif, as it becomes the source material for a radiant sunset later on).

As the work reaches midday, the sun blazes forth in brass fanfares and a broad, lyrical hymn in the strings and winds. An energetic fugue then emerges in the strings before the trombones co-opt it with a forceful idea of their own, turning the passage into a delightfully surprising double fugue.

At last Helios and his chariot descend in the west, while the music traces its arc with slippery chromatic lines, gradually returning to the same dark swells from which it began.

***Variations on a Roccoco Theme*, op.33, TH 57**

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Last performed April 14, 2012 with Larry Rachleff conducting and soloist Alban Gerhardt. In addition to a solo cello, this piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns and strings.

Tchaikovsky wrote four concertos—three for piano and one for violin—but *Variations on a Roccoco Theme* is the closest thing we have to a cello concerto from the Russian master.

The work blends Classical elegance with Romantic warmth and reflects his deep admiration for Mozart, whom Tchaikovsky claimed was the entire reason he chose to devote his life to music, a fact which his longtime confidante and benefactor, Nadezhda von Meck, found surprising. In a letter to her, Tchaikovsky explained why:

You say my worship for [Mozart] is quite contrary to my musical nature. But perhaps it is just because—being a child of my time—I feel broken and spiritually out of joint, that I find consolation and rest in the music of Mozart wherein he gives expression to that joy of life which was part of his sane and wholesome temperament, not yet undermined by reflection.

The title is slightly misleading: the theme is not truly Rococo, but Tchaikovsky's own melody written in a Rococo style—lilting, and refined. The piece also showcases his gifts for melody, form, and orchestration. He composed it for, and in collaboration with, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, a German cellist and colleague at the Moscow Conservatory. After the 1877 premiere, Fitzenhagen revised the work to feature the cello more prominently, cutting the final variation, and reordering the remaining seven. It is this revision that is most often heard today.

The theme-and-variations form allowed Tchaikovsky to write with 18th-century poise and clarity, rather than the dramatic sweep of a conventional concerto. In each variation, he keeps the theme's basic melody and harmony but alters its phrasing, proportions, and character, linking the sections with brief orchestral transitions. The result is demanding for the soloist, who has little rest and often plays in the cello's highest register.

After the graceful, lyrical theme, each variation highlights a different expressive or technical side of the cello, while a recurring orchestral coda helps unify the work. Briefly, the variations are as follows:

Variation 1: Lively and playful, emphasizing agility and brilliance.

Variation 2: More inward and lyrical, with a sense of longing.

Variation 3: An expressive waltz in which the cello seems to dance above the orchestra.

Variation 4: A return to a more reflective mood.

Variation 5: A brief flute solo gives the cellist a momentary pause before launching into intricate, virtuosic passagework.

Variation 6: In a minor key, tender and songful, with a more Romantic tone and pizzicato (plucked) accompaniment.

Variation 7: A triumphant close that combines soloist and orchestra in a way that displays the cello's full range.

Variations on a Rococo Theme remains a cornerstone of the cello repertory and a testament to Tchaikovsky's gift for uniting virtuosity with emotional warmth.

Symphony No.5 in E-flat major, op.82

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

Last performed February 21, 2015 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

The years before the First World War brought radical change to music. Some composers pushed the expanded upon late-Romantic symphonic tradition of Brahms, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky, while others turned toward impressionism, neoclassicism, and expressionism. Sibelius stood between these paths, weighing newer harmonic and melodic approaches against a more personal evolution of his own musical language.

With the Fifth Symphony, written for and premiered at his 50th-birthday celebration in 1915, Sibelius found an inspired solution. If the Third and Fourth Symphonies had explored new directions, the Fifth forged a fresh method that still outwardly resembled his earlier style. His own description of the process is revealing:

“God threw down the pieces of a mosaic of heaven’s floor and asked me to find the original pattern.”

The symphony’s melodic ideas are often brief and simple, like pieces of a mosaic, set within shimmering textures that shift constantly in harmony and color. Long lines are sometimes syncopated, blurring the beat, while bitonal passages cloud the music’s tonal center. Dissatisfied with the premiere, Sibelius spent the following four years dismantling and rebuilding the work. The result is a profound and ultimately optimistic score that breaks from conventional symphonic models, giving generations of music scholars much to ponder in its wake. Many, in fact, consider it more of an extended tone poem than a symphony.

The symphony has four movements, though the first two are fused together as one. It begins with a now-iconic horn motif that plants the seed for what follows. From it grow two parallel processes. One unfolds through Sibelius’s distinctive harmony and orchestral color, creating a springlike atmosphere that is gradually overshadowed by a sense of unease. The other works on the level of line and rhythm: fragments evolve steadily against an accompaniment that grows increasingly agitated. Each process is powerful on its own, but together they build tremendous force. An eventual eruption brings release, as the “quickenning spirit” overcomes the “forces of darkness” and surges into the fresh air of the scherzo material, now transformed into a conclusion of unalloyed triumph.

The second movement, *Andante mosso*, quasi allegretto, at first seems to be a set of variations. A calm but sturdy pulse—reminiscent of the slow movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony—supports a rhythmic theme laid over a slowly turning chorale. As the pulsing grows more agitated, however, something strange emerges. The music progresses unevenly; the pulsing theme expands into something aching and expansive, and the chorale becomes infected by it. There is no release, no triumph—the music simply stops. If the first movement suggests a threat from without, this one confronts the more insidious threat from within.

The third movement, *Allegro molto*, opens with a thrilling rush that promises something extraordinary. That promise soon takes shape in the unmistakable horn melody that becomes the movement’s central idea. Sibelius wrote it after seeing a flock of whooper swans fly overhead “like a gleaming silver ribbon.” Expansive and majestic, the theme drives the movement forward without ever turning sentimental. At moments of strain it falters ominously, only to rise again on a swelling tide of optimism until six orchestral hammer blows bring the symphony to a striking and resounding finish.