

Welcome to our first concert of 2026, which our guest maestro has rather dashingly entitled *Wings of Fire*. Donald explains that the title reflects the freedom, flight and the fiery spirit of music across centuries.

While he is not now the most prominent of Russian composers, Mikhail Glinka was the first to be widely recognised. He was from a noble family wealthy enough to keep an orchestra, which he heard performing Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven as a teenager in the 1810s; but early musical influences also included Russian peasant choirs and poorly-tuned church bells, which gave him a greater tolerance for dissonance and abrupt tonal shifts than was common among Western musicians at the time. He studied music formally in St Petersburg and went on to an undemanding civil service job which enabled him to focus mainly on composing. He is best known for a couple of suitably patriotic operas, *A Life for the Tsar* and *Ruslan and Ludmila*, but also produced some foreign-inspired works as a result of travels in southern Europe. This **Spanish Overture**, from 1845, opens with a call to the dance floor, and then kicks off into an Aragonese *Jota* to which Glinka brings a wide range of colourful orchestral effects and harmonic handbrake turns. The rhythmic patterns and form of the *Jota* have been used in many other works, including in *Carmen* and *My Fair Lady*.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's **Violin Concerto No. 4** also draws on dance rhythms, in this case the minuet and the contredanse. This was the third of four concertos written 1775, when he was nineteen. It appears that he originally composed it for himself to play with the Salzburg Court Orchestra and subsequently revised it to make it more difficult. This suggests respect for the greater technical ability of his successor, Antonio Brunetti, but Mozart clearly did not like the person, describing him as "a thoroughly ill-bred fellow" and a "disgrace to his master, to himself and to the whole orchestra". The first movement is nicknamed "military" for its march rhythms and bugle-like calls. The slower second movement indulges us with graceful melodic lines, while the third movement sparkles with exuberance and fun.

There's beverages and biscuits at the back during the Intermission.

"I now belong to a higher cult of mortals, for I have seen the albatross"; thus American ornithologist Robert Cushman Murphy, having spent a year on a whaling ship in 1812. Nowadays residents of Dunedin can achieve the same elevated status by driving down the road, but the sight of an albatross riding thermals on a summer's evening at Taiaroa Head is still impactful enough to inspire Anthony Ritchie's 1996 orchestral fanfare **An Albatross in Flight**. Ritchie explains further:

Opening motifs played on the woodwinds suggest slow gliding, and are accompanied by wind chimes and delicate strings. Eventually a lyrical melody emerges on violins, syncopated in character.

In the 90's I had deliberately simplified my musical style, and part of that owed a debt to popular music. I had recently been 'blasted' at a gig by The Exponents and the shapes of their vocal lines stayed with me when composing this piece. As the music gathers in energy, the gliding motifs and lyrical melody get scrambled closer together. There is also a short canon based on the gliding motifs. The increased activity suggests an albatross enjoying the thermals, and leads to a climax where both lyrical melody and gliding motifs are combined simultaneously. The piece ends with a brief piccolo/flute solo, as the bird comes in to land.

Aram Khachaturian's 1954 ballet *Spartacus* is loosely based on a real historical episode which saw Kirk Douglas leading Tony Curtis and an army of Roman slaves in an initially successful, but ultimately doomed, rebellion against the tyranny of Laurence Olivier. The character became a cultural and political hero in Soviet Russia, where he was seen as reflecting the Soviet emphasis on strength, solidarity, and, often, communist ideals. Moscow's football team is still named for him. The work remains prominent within the repertoire of the Bolshoi Ballet, whose 2008 production with Cuban supernova Carlos Acosta is available on YouTube and much recommended.

Khachaturian created four Suites from the ballet music, of which No. 2 is the most often performed since it is the one which opens with the glorious *Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia*. This became famous in the West when it was used in the romantic movie *Mayerling*, and then in the TV series *The Onedin Line*, both during Khachaturian's lifetime. Spartacus and his wife celebrate their newfound freedom with a series of gravity-defying lifts and improbable leg extensions, but the threat of war is never far away.

The Suite was arranged for musical rather than dramatic coherence, so the narrative now gets a bit out of order. The next extract shows how scheming hussy Aegina seeks to win the favour of autocratic Roman general Crassus by bringing some underdressed friends to distract some of Spartacus' soldiers with a frankly awesome party. Following her R-rated pole dance, the party gets even wilder before being brought to an abrupt halt when Crassus crashes it. Aegina does get her reward, but not in this suite.

Previously, there was trouble in Spartacus' camp when the rebellious slave army split into opposing factions. We hear their quarrelling in the edgy irregular tempo, and Spartacus' impassioned pleading as he tries to hold his forces together. He is unsuccessful, some of them storm off - to the fate we have already heard - and the 'cellos drag him down into despondency. All this is secretly observed by Aegina, who now uses the slightly sinister music at the end of this section to devise the cunning plan which will eventually bring Spartacus to his doom.

The final movement does nothing to advance the plot, but it does provide an opportunity for the men of the Bolshoi to demonstrate just how splendid they are at jumping about.

*Programme notes by The Jabberer*