

SONIC SCULPTURES

2:00 PM
SUNDAY 12 OCTOBER 2025
REARDON THEATRE



Johann STRAUSS II (1825 – 1899) / Adolf SCHULZ-EVLER (1852 – 1905)
Arabesques on Waltz Themes from Johann Strauss's "By the Beautiful Blue Danube"

Peter de Jager, *Piano*

Erich Wolfgang KORNGOLD (1897 – 1957)
Piano Trio in D major, Op. 1

1. *Allegro non troppo, con espressione*
2. *Scherzo. Allegro – Trio. Viel langsamer, innig*
3. *Larghetto. Sehr langsam*
4. *Finale. Allegro molto ed energico*

Monica Curro, *Violin*
Jonathan Békés, *Cello*
Stefan Cassomenos, *Piano*

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Few melodies in history have so vividly captured a city, its people and even a whole era as those found in Strauss's *Blue Danube*. Premiered in February 1867 as a lighthearted piece for choir with comic verses poking fun at Vienna's bureaucracy, it was only in a purely orchestral form unveiled later that year at the Paris World's Fair that the *Blue Danube* went on to conquer the world. Today it is Austria's unofficial anthem, familiar from the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's concerts and the whirling spaceships of Kubrick's *Space Odyssey*.

Already at the turn of the 20th century, the *Blue Danube* was hugely popular, its enchanting waltz tunes inspiring dozens of transcriptions, fantasies and paraphrases in a wide variety of guises, from salon piano to military band. But none of them have attained the success and longevity of the *Arabesques* by Polish pianist-composer Adolf Schulz-Evler, published around 1900. An arabesque is essentially a musical form or style that involves intricate, highly ornate melodic embellishment – and this is exactly what Schulz-Evler does, supercharging Strauss's music into a kaleidoscopic dance of glittering passagework and bravura virtuosity.

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A prodigy to rival Mozart and Mendelssohn, and arguably the last of the great Austro-German Romantic composers, Erich Korngold enjoyed near universal acclaim for much of his life. Yet in his later years, and for decades following his death, Korngold's music slipped almost into oblivion. To the musical elite, his opulent, "old-fashioned" style came to be seen as the last vestige of a bankrupt tradition, eclipsed by the avant-garde modernism of the likes of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. There was also the stigma of his association with Hollywood, where he escaped before the war and spent the last 19 years of his life, initially composing film scores. Thankfully, Korngold's standing has been revived in the last few decades, and this afternoon's concert concludes with a performance of his magnificent Piano Trio in D major, written when he was just 12 years old.

Even at that tender age, Korngold was already a seasoned little composer. In 1906, shortly after his 9th birthday, he played his cantata *Gold* for Gustav Mahler, who proclaimed the boy a musical genius on the spot. By the time Korngold had completed his Opus 1 Piano Trio in April 1910, he had written a further piano sonata, a few other piano pieces, and a ballet called *The Snowman*. The successful premieres and repeat performances of the Piano Trio and *The Snowman* springboarded his reputation as a musical *wunderkind*, though one critic at the trio's New York premiere opined, "If we had a little boy ... who preferred writing this sort of music to hearing a good folk tune or going out and playing in the park, we should consult a specialist."

The expansive and luxurious first movement flows gently into being with a rippling, iridescent theme in the piano, quickly taken up by the strings with a gusto that seems straight out of a Richard Strauss tone poem. The dialogue between the three instruments builds to a harmonically lush and heated climax in the development, but ends cryptically with suspended chords and sharp pizzicato jabs in the cello. A brilliantly capricious scherzo follows, full of rhythmic vigour and waltz-like swing. Fleeting calm is found in the trio section, which displays an expressive poise that belies its composer's youth.

One's disbelief at such precocious emotional depth only increases in the Larghetto, an introspective slow movement that opens with a starkly beautiful melody on the cello, soon joined by the violin over translucent harmonies in the piano. The restful air of its closing bars is broken by a unison outburst in the strings marking the arrival of the finale. Bouncing from wild playfulness to passionate lyricism, near the end Korngold artfully works in the opening theme of the first movement, before the final race to the finish line.