CBSO

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

Kazuki conducts Strauss
Symphony Hall,
Wednesday 10 December 2025,
7:30pm

CBSO.CO.UK

Programme £4

KAZUKI CONDUCTS STRAUSS

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Jonathan Kelly
Oboe

INTRODUCTION

Tonight's concert means a lot to me. On this very stage back in 1993 I played Richard Strauss' Oboe Concerto when I auditioned for the position of principal oboe of the CBSO.

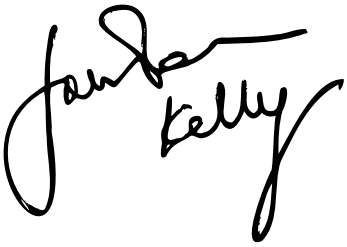
A decade later I performed it with the CBSO just a week before my audition for the Berlin Philharmonic. I'm delighted to be back many years later to perform it once again with old friends (and quite a few new faces too).

Strauss wrote this concerto when he was in his eighties, with the smoke, dust and ashes of the second world war still settling around him. His response to the horror and destruction of war was a composition of lyrical simplicity and autumnal beauty. In this concerto Strauss honours the classical proportions and intimacy of the composer he idolised, Mozart. I particularly enjoy the highly vocal nature of Strauss' writing; it's such fun to have the opportunity to 'sing' my very own extended operatic aria on the oboe!

Contrast the modest scale and restraint of the concerto with the other works on tonight's programme. In his early tone poem Tod und Verklärung, the young and ambitious Strauss employs a large orchestra to probe deeply into metaphysical questions of mortality and spiritual enlightenment.

In Also sprach Zarathustra, Strauss, at the height of his powers, treats us to a tour de force of orchestral effects and virtuosity whilst grappling with the existential questions about life, the universe and everything posed by Nietzsche in his philosophical novel. The final chords of this masterpiece seem to leave those questions hanging in the air.

Fifty years later, writing his oboe concerto, having experienced political upheaval, societal collapse, two world wars and untold destruction, had Strauss found the answer to these questions? Listen and decide for yourselves!



Strauss, Death and Transfiguration, 24mins
- I. Largo
- II. Allegro molto agitato
- III. Meno mosso
- IV. Moderato

Strauss, Oboe Concerto, 26mins
- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Andante
- III. Vivace – Allegro

Interval

Strauss, Also sprach Zarathustra, 32mins
- I. Sonnenaufgang (Sunrise)
- II. Von den Hinterweltlern (Of the Backworldsmen)
- III. Von der großen Sehnsucht (Of the Great Longing)
- IV. Von den Freuden und Leidenschaften (Of Joys and Passions)
- V. Das Grablied (The Song of the Grave)
- VI. Von der Wissenschaft (Of Science and Learning)
- VII. Der Genesende (The Convalescent)
- VIII. Das Tanzlied (The Dance Song)
- IX. Nachtwandlerlied (Song of the Night Wanderer)

Kazuki Yamada, Conductor
Jonathan Kelly, Oboe

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Wednesday 10 December 2025
Symphony Hall, Birmingham

KAZUKI CONDUCTS STRAUSS

Two epic tone poems from early in Strauss' career find the composer questioning the meaning of life and death. Epic fanfares, waltzes and soaring themes seem to provide the answers. Decades later, his sweet and lyrical Oboe Concerto rose out of the rubble of war-devastated Germany, effectively commissioned by a young American soldier (who happened to be an oboist!). Principal Oboist of the Berlin Philharmonic and former CBSO Principal Oboe Jonathan Kelly takes on the solo duties, with the CBSO conducted by Kazuki Yamada.

A GUIDE TO MUSICAL TERMS

Turn to page 19 to see key words linked to this programme.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION

The young Richard Strauss was hardly short of ambition. As Bryan Gilliam puts it in a biographical sketch of the composer, by the age of 22 he was 'brash and talented', well on his way to achieving a successful career as a conductor, but ruffling feathers as he went. Applying the same character traits to his compositions resulted in an extraordinary outburst of experimentation and originality in the mid-late 1880s, largely centred around his cultivation of the tone poem. Under the influence of both Liszt – who had written 'symphonic poems' – and Strauss's friend Alexander Ritter, Strauss increasingly believed that 'abstract music', such as sonata form, was nothing but 'a hollow shell'.

Death and Transfiguration (or Tod und Verklärung) was composed in 1888, and depicts the final moments of a dying artist. Rather than descending into pathos and gloom, it journeys from initial anxiety and agitation to fond memories, and ultimately to a final, blissful 'transfiguration'. Strauss had asked Ritter to provide some words describing the internal journey of a dying soul; when the piece was performed, Ritter's poem was adapted as a four-part description of the 'action'. The first part depicts a man 'lying in a shabby room', listening to the irregular beat of either a clock or his own heart; periodic rising fourths in the woodwind emerge from the misty texture, foreshadowing the 'transfiguration' theme. Solo violin, flute and oboe play out various lyrical themes, suggesting happy memories of the man's childhood. Yet before these can be developed further, there is a passage of great turbulence – as Ritter's description

has it, a 'struggle between life and death'. The music peaks dramatically with the first presentation of the full 'transfiguration' theme, rising heroically through the texture.

The man, however, is not quite ready to let go, and further memories keep him tied to earth, depicted by variations on the earlier woodwind themes, along with terrifying 'hammer blows' and an ominous thwack on the tam-tam. In the final section – which moved even Strauss's deeply conservative father Franz – the man's soul is transfigured into an ecstatic release.

PORTRAIT OF RICHARD STRAUSS. TUCKER COLLECTION. FMSKY, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

OBOE CONCERTO

Strauss's Oboe Concerto has one of the most unusual back stories of his works. It was written during Strauss's remarkable 'late' period from 1942-45, when the composer was entering his ninth decade and writing some of his most graceful and deeply-felt works. When the war ended in 1945, he was living in his villa at Garmisch in Bavaria, where his son and Jewish daughter-in-law had been under house arrest for several years. (Strauss's behaviour during World War II can be perceived as an uncomfortable mix of self-interest, an apparently wilful obliviousness to the politics of Nazism, but also some genuine efforts on behalf of his family, particularly his Jewish in-laws.) He had in the previous few months poured his complex feelings into a work of 'memorial', the profoundly tragic Metamorphosen for string orchestra. After its completion in April 1945, the American army had arrived on the outskirts of Garmisch with, according to Jeremy Eichler, the intention of commandeering Strauss's villa. The composer greeted the soldiers cheerily with offers of tea and waltzes from Rosenkavalier on the piano, and they left his house alone. One of their number, a corporal by the name of John de Lancie, had been principal oboist with the Pittsburgh Orchestra in civilian life and asked Strauss whether he had ever considered an oboe concerto. The composer was not interested at first, but within a few weeks a concerto began to form in his mind and he had completed it by October 1945. De Lancie was somewhat astonished to read about it in a newspaper the following year.

Compared with Metamorphosen the Oboe Concerto is an uncomplicated and absolutely sunny work, strong on charm and unabashed in its avoidance of modern harmonic developments. It could, almost, have been composed several decades earlier, though the opening shuddering figure in the strings, murmuring throughout the movement, gives it a contemporary edge. The soloist is challenged from the outset: after only a few beats, it launches into a lung-busting melody, some 51 bars in length with barely a pause for breath. This passage sets the tone for the abundance of lyrical invention in the movement as a whole, shared between orchestra (small by Strauss's usual standards) and soloist, including a reprise of the opening salvo towards the end. The 'shuddering' both concludes this movement, and heralds the

start of the next, which treats us to another long-breathed solo from the oboe, this time aria-like in character, as if lifted from a bel canto opera. The brief cadenza, over plucked strings, is similarly operatic and structured like an anticipatory passage of recitative; indeed, it plunges straight into the absolute romp of a finale. Dance-like and playful, this movement is an expression of sheer high spirits: an alternative universe, perhaps, to the rubble and horror of 1940s Europe.

ALSO SPRACH ZARATHUSTRA

Strauss' sixth tone poem has possibly the most famous opening of any musical work, apart from that of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. As a result, both pieces are not only regulars on the concert platform but have made the often difficult journey across cultural boundaries. There is a disco version of the Beethoven symphony ('A Fifth of Beethoven'), while Also sprach Zarathustra has been given the jazz-funk treatment by Brazilian artist Eumir Deodato, as well as by Stan Kenton in 'Zarathustrevisited'). The opening movement ('Sunrise)' of Strauss's tone poem has, of course, appeared in the soundtrack for several films, such as the opening of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, itself parodied in The Simpsons, and the recent Barbie movie, both retaining the Strauss music.

The eclectic and sometimes hyperbolic range of purposes to which 'Sunrise' has been put is appropriate, in some ways, to Strauss's musical treatment of the piece as a whole. The musical styles range from sweet string chorales (second section) to a 'scientific' fugue (sixth section, following a sepulchral trip to the 'grave') to a delirious waltz in the penultimate section. The orchestra itself embodies glorious excess, including organ (making a spectacular first appearance towards the end of 'Sunrise') and a large brass section. Indeed, Strauss's approach needed to be all-embracing and huge in scale to match, as far as possible, the ambition of the source material: Nietzche's 80-part work of philosophical fiction of the same name. It represents the journey of the hermit-philosopher Zarathustra as he travels through the world, discoursing on many subjects including the death of God, the 'Übermensch' and the natural world. The opening C-G-C (outlining, for any physicists in the audience, the first three notes of the harmonic series) symbolises nature; while the key of B major represents the progressive and enquiring spirit of humanity. These two keys play off each other throughout, right until the concluding bars: a high B major chord in the wind, counterpointed by almost inaudible low Cs in the double basses.

In between are seven movements, mostly with subtitles taken from Nietzsche's work, and traversing a vast range of human and spiritual experiences. Perhaps the most extraordinary sequence is that of the final three sections. In the seventh, entitled 'The Convalescent', the C-G-C motif blasts out against a backdrop of frantic harmonic and orchestral activity before blazing into the foreground followed by a sudden silence; B major then intervenes, darkly and in a low register at first, before gradually working through the registers to a thrillingly strange, high-pitched texture of whistling woodwind and twinkling percussion. The C-G-C motif is heard once more, before segueing into a C major waltz. Nature now appears to have the upper hand, but after tolling bells, the final section begins to slide back into man's realm of B. Zarathustra's musical quest concludes, though, with that ambiguous dialogue between the two key centres in the final bars.

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Conductor

KAZUKI YAMADA

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Kazuki Yamada is Music Director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Yamada is also Artistic and Music Director of Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo and from 2026/2027, Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin. Time spent with Seiji Ozawa underlines the importance of Yamada's "Japanese feeling" for music. Born in Kanagawa, Japan, he continues to work and perform in Japan every season. The current season begins at the BBC Proms with CBSO, followed by returning to Tanglewood Festival with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He recently took the CBSO on tour to Japan and in March 2026 they embark on a European tour. Following his debut with the Berlin Philharmoniker he makes debuts with the Bamberger Symphoniker, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, Rotterdam Philharmonic and Wiener Symphoniker. Yamada appears annually as a guest artist at the Seiji Ozawa International Academy Switzerland and is strongly committed to the outreach programme at CBSO. Yamada studied music at the Tokyo University of the Arts and first achieved international attention upon receiving first prize in the 51st Besançon International Competition for young conductors in 2009.

JONATHAN KELLY

Jonathan Kelly grew up in Northamptonshire and began learning oboe at his local school thanks to the provision of free musical instrument tuition at that time. He went on to study History at the University of Cambridge before devoting himself to music in postgraduate studies at the Royal Academy of Music, London with Celia Nicklin and then at the CNSM de Paris with Maurice Bourgue. Immediately upon completing his studies, Jonathan was appointed solo oboist of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in 1993. He held this position for ten years, and was a regular guest with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. In 2003 Jonathan realised his youthful ambition of winning the position of solo oboist in the Berliner Philharmoniker. He participates regularly in the Zermatt Festival of the Scharoun Ensemble Berlin and is a member of the world-renowned Ensemble Wien-Berlin. Jonathan has taught at the Hochschule für Musik Berlin 'Hanns Eisler' and at the Karajan Akademie of the Berliner Philharmoniker. He is Visiting Professor of Oboe at the Royal Academy of Music London, of which he is a Fellow.

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EDUARDO'S LAST CONCERT

GOODBYE AND THANK YOU FROM THE CBSO CELLO SECTION

As we have been approaching Eduardo's last concert with the CBSO, it still seems impossible to imagine that he won't be sat at the front of the cello section in the new year. Judging by the number of enquiries to us cellos when he had a sabbatical last year, our audience is going to miss him hugely too.

Eduardo's sound is what strikes one the most. "His ability to sustain and project this beautiful deep rich tone is incredible", one member of the section said. "You can literally feel it in your gut." His ability to always confidently play an entry inspires confidence in us all, so we can focus on the music.

Edu's leadership of the CBSO cello section over the past three decades, jointly with Ulrich Heinen until he retired 14 years ago, has produced an inspired and stable team. This loyalty and commitment has set an example to his cello colleagues, many of whom have over 25 years of service with the orchestra.

Throughout his time as Section Leader Cello, Eduardo has been a terrific ambassador for the orchestra. Respectful of its past, committed in the present and mindful of the future.

He's an advocate for the CBSO and for Birmingham, both to audiences across the globe and prospective members of the section. "I remember him enthusiastically advising that I thoroughly explored all the wonderful green spaces of Birmingham as well as the City Centre, to inform my decision to join the section."

> You were a great teacher who always believed in me and my potential as a cellist. I got to enjoy several great years of being a regular colleague in the CBSO section and will always cherish our friendship.

Edu's infectious enthusiasm for the CBSO and everything 'cello' is only surpassed by his obsession and joy for everything 'football'! He came to the orchestra as a Manchester United fan but switched allegiances to Manchester

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City when a couple of Argentinian players joined City. One of the section was an Aston Villa fan and on Monday mornings, after the weekend's matches, football became the topic of our conversation, even during rehearsals!

Eduardo has always been a sought after teacher, both at the Royal Northern College of Music and here at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, as well as frequently returning to his homeland of Argentina to teach masterclasses. He is a great supporter of students and encourager of young cellists, many of whom are now established professionals, and he always loves meeting former students on the professional stage.

Not all of Edurado's students pursued careers as cellists, with some swapping the bow for a baton. There was a lovely occasion when Eduardo was concerto soloist with the CBSO a few years ago, the conductor his former student, Alpesh Chauhan. Just as the audience hushed, anticipating the start, Eduardo's stand was not at the right height. Alpesh immediately jumped down off the podium, to fix it to Eduardo's satisfaction. Alpesh turned to the audience: "Once my teacher, always my teacher!"

One past member of the CBSO Cellos sent us this: "Edu is one of the most fun desk partners you could have, with a wicked sense of humour. He always made me giggle, whether during a slow rehearsal or mid performance. One thing I always admired was his ability to steer a rehearsal to an early finish by dropping in a few comments, making the conductor think it was their idea.

He is a real people person and a wonderful section leader. I will always be grateful for my years sat next to him."

Everyone at the CBSO wishes Eduardo the very best for his next cello adventures; the CBSO certainly will not be the same without him.

Two final messages from cello colleagues past and present:

"Thank you so much, Edu, for your honesty, your empathy and music making. It has been an honour to share so many wonderful moments with you and the CBSO family. You are an example to all young cellists, and you should be proud of your legacy in Birmingham and around the world. I will always remember your warm welcome to the orchestra and the countless pieces of advice and lessons you have shared with us all."

"Eduardo has been a true friend and an inspiring leader, whose help, humour, and warmth I will miss dearly."

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A GUIDE TO MUSICAL TERMS

In an ongoing collaboration with the Shireland CBSO Academy, we are working with music students to jointly develop a glossary of useful terminology to ensure all audience members can understand the orchestral terms used in programmes.

Through workshops taking place since February 2025, students from Shireland CBSO Academy have developed a list of key words within orchestral music alongside their own definitions. We will continue to collaborate with students to develop and grow this list, which will be accessible on the CBSO website and in specific printed programmes going forward.

Below you can find a selection of key words and definitions linked to this programme. You can find the full glossary on our website. Thank you to the students who have contributed to this project so far, including Lewis, Emilia and Abigail.

Conductor	The person who leads musicians by directing expression, speed and volume to ensure a unified or individual message is addressed and actualised in a performance.
Concerto	A musical structure that features a solo instrument accompanied by an orchestra, often organised in several movements to focus on the interchange between the soloist's skill and the orchestra's sound.
Key	The key tells you what set of pitches the music sits on and what notes and chords to play.
Opera	A story that is told largely by music, acting and singing, often accompanied by elegant sets and costumes.
Tone Poem	Music that aims to tell a narrative or evoke imagery without the use of words, often taking inspiration from a poem, painting, or landscape.

Discover more definitions at **cbso.co.uk/a-guide-to-musical-terms**

CBSO Centre, Birmingham
Friday 12 December 2025, 3pm

JONATHAN KELLY PLAYS STRAUSS

In this performance, Principal Oboe of the Berlin Philharmonic and former CBSO musician Jonathan Kelly returns to the home of the CBSO, joined by our terrific wind ensemble and conductor Catherine Larsen-Maguire, for an afternoon of Strauss.

Programme to include...
Strauss, Serenade in Eb Major, 11mins
Strauss Arr. Nigel Shore, Der Rosenkavalier, Harmoniemusik, 45mins

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Sat 25 Apr 2026, 7:30pm

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We're working to better understand our audiences, and by completing a survey following a CBSO concert, you can opt in to be entered into the prize draw.

If you'd like to share any additional feedback, or have any questions, please email us at **marketing@cbso.co.uk.**

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