

An Evening with Nicola Benedetti

Wednesday, February 4, 2026 at 7pm

This is the 1,497th concert in Koerner Hall

Nicola Benedetti, violin

Plínio Fernandes, guitar

Hanzhi Wang, accordion

Adrian Daurov, cello

PROGRAM

Maria Theresia von Paradis: *Sicilienne*

Henryk Wieniawski: Polonaise Brillante, op. 4

Manuel Ponce: *Estrellita*

Niccolò Paganini: Cantabile in D Major, op. 17

Niccolò Paganini: Caprice No. 1 in E Major, op. 1, no. 1

Niccolò Paganini: Caprice No. 24 in A Minor, op. 1, no. 24

Pablo de Sarasate: *Navarra*, op. 33

INTERMISSION

Traditional: *A Choille Ghruamach* (air) (arr. Brighde Chaimbeul)

Traditional: *Skye Boat Song* (arr. Chaimbeul)

Traditional: *Hacky Honey Reel* (arr. Chaimbeul)

Vittorio Monti: Csárdás

Ernest Bloch: "Prayer" from *From Jewish Life*

Claude Debussy: *Beau Soir*, L. 84

Pablo Sarasate: *Carmen Fantasy*, op. 25

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

The music you will hear tonight is intended as a thank you to you all: audiences I have known and been supported by for over 22 years; people of all ages from across the UK and around the world who share with me a deep love of classical music and the violin; people whose children I have taught after concerts and whose curiosity of the arts I share. This selection of music combines warm and uplifting virtuosity with seductive romance, but we have also discovered an innocent sweetness in much of this repertoire – a sentiment quite hard to come by in this time.

The ensemble combination of violin, guitar, accordion, and cello came to me in the middle of the night. The standard violin and piano duo has a formality I knew wasn't right, and this line-up of instruments delivers a communal, conversational "café-appropriate" sound; a sound with the flexibility to work across genres, cultures, and performance environments. The guitar and accordion are beloved around the world, and in the masterful hands of Samuele Telari and Plínio Fernandes these intelligent, creative arrangements have breathed new life into virtuosic violin classics and seductive, lilting melodies. The cello – an instrument I secretly wished I had learnt as a child – brings an indispensable resonance, a grounding and an irresistible soulfulness.

Our first rehearsal – given we were tackling brand new arrangements for the first time – had a higher dose of anticipation than is normal. But as we tore through one arrangement after another, we became increasingly bound as a group. We discovered the humour, textural wit, and instrumental virtuosity of Stephen Goss's *Carmen Fantasy*. We indulged in the conversational polyphony and sweet sonority of Juliette Pochin and James Morgan's *Sicilienne*. We were challenged and inspired to bring our best playing to the integrity of Paul Campbell's *Farewell to Stromness*. We searched and gazed our way through the layering of Simon Parkin's tender *Beau soir* and I was hypnotised and compelled to follow the stillness, darkness, and present-ness of arrangements of traditional works by Brighde Chaimbeul.

Although this formation of musicians, the combination of their instruments, and the written arrangements were all brand new, things always have a way of coming back around. For me this is particularly true of my time at the Yehudi Menuhin School. As we began our first play-through for a small invited audience in order to test out this eclectic mix of pieces in front of a real – not just imagined – public, I realised just quite how much relevance this program has to that time in my life. I learnt all the virtuosic pieces for the first time when in my early teens at the school, studying with professor Natasha Boyarsky. The first time I tackled a technique called "fingered octaves" (using alternating pairs of fingers for each successive double-stop) was in Wieniawski's *Polonaise de concert* (1852), learnt aged 13.

The first time I attempted a tremolo (bowing very fast with very little bow to give a shivering, exciting effect), which we aptly called "as fast as possible till your muscle tires," was in Sarasate's *Navarra* (1889), learnt aged 12. And the first time I learnt to trust muscle memory from hours of practice, accepting I had to play passages much faster than my brain could think, was in Sarasate's *Carmen Fantasy* (1881), learnt aged 14. I acquired not only the fundamentals of technical playing, but also understood how to deepen the fire, passion, and sonority of playing and interpreting music. As young students, our minds were filled with elaborate tales of the composers we played. Take the wild and formidable Wieniawski: a musical prodigy and polymath in the truest, deepest sense. Composer, virtuoso, showman, and genius, his unruly, unpredictable nature combined with his prestige and sophistication conjured up colourful, wild images in my young mind. Then there was Sarasate's noble, somewhat aloof demeanour: his blinding virtuosity, technical skill, and relentless touring schedule served as an inspiration for many an hour of practice. But as we continued to address these pieces this time around, each time we'd begin I became increasingly comfortable with really playing within a group. I was struck by the innocent, romantic purity of the music: charm and delight and smiles and uplift and so, so many opportunities to enjoy ourselves.

As you listen to the *Navarra* violin duo, you will hear quick decisions leading to shifts in rubato, colour, and phrase emphasis. As we practiced, you can imagine us smiling and laughing as we pushed our tempos to the limit – not to mention that closing tremolo until muscles ache – and gave our all, interpreting the Northern Spanish jota dance. But although a fun, fulfilling yet challenging time was had in tackling all those notes and basking in all that charm, it is the slow, luscious, emotional writing that has had my heart from my first days learning the violin.

I would love to believe the *Sicilienne*, written in the earthy key of E flat major, was composed by the pianist and composer Maria Theresia von Paradis (1759–1824), blind from a young age and uniquely gifted. But this is sadly

untrue. In fact Samuel Dushkin, a 20th-century violinist who thought a romantic “rediscovery” tale might bring extra attention and notoriety to this music, claimed to have unearthed the lost “Sicilienne by Paradis” for the world. In actuality, it is an adaptation by Dushkin – though quite a significant one – of the Larghetto from Carl Maria von Weber’s Violin Sonata, op. 10, no. 1 (1810). I’m sure the false attribution helped Dushkin with the initial popularity of his *Sicilienne*, but its continued beloved status has little if anything to do with that. It is the tenderness, sweetness, and sincerity of the piece that has us all still playing it, singing it and being moved by it. This arrangement by Juliet Pochin and James Morgan, with its interwoven lines and mastery of register and texture, was a joy to learn.

Estrellita, written by Mexican composer Manuel Ponce in 1912, and *Farewell to Stromness* by Peter Maxwell Davies, written in 1980 in protest against a proposed uranium mine in Orkney – both arranged by my good friend Paul Campbell – along with *Beau soir*, a *mélodie* penned by a 16-year-old Claude Debussy in 1878 and arranged here by Simon Parkin, all share a sentimentality, a romanticism, and a longing and nostalgia for times gone by. Manuel Ponce speaks of the pain and anguish of someone asking their all-seeing guiding star above whether their love will ever be requited, and Paul Campbell’s string writing is sumptuous and full while retaining the song’s simplicity across all four instruments. The same can be said for his treatment of *Farewell to Stromness*. I’ve played this piece with a variety of forces, memorably in an arrangement for strings with violin and viola solos that I toured with violist Lawrence Power and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra – they would be the final notes played for an audience of real people before lockdown during the pandemic.

Here too, Paul’s arrangement expands and deepens this “simple” song, thickening and dramatising the central section and inspiring a generally slower tempo. *Beau soir* advises us “to savour the gift of life while we are young and the evening fair.” Its subtlety is always difficult to interpret, but the challenge is even greater with four diverse instruments serving very different purposes. Of all the works on this program, this one probably saw us experiment with the most wildly different approaches.

I fell in love with Bloch at the Menuhin School: in my secret desire to play the cello, through the abundance of cellists around, and with the amount of Bloch’s music that was being played. I remember hearing *Prayer* for the first time in a lunchtime concert and wondering why I’d never come across this sound before. The theme’s recapitulation is assigned by our masterful arranger Simon Parkin to its rightful place: the hands of our cellist who plays it with such freedom, yet integrity, after Samuele and I have done our best to match the cello’s depth and sonority.

I could not pull together a collection of music intended as a gift for audiences without featuring Scotland – this comes first in *Farewell to Stromness*, but second in my collaboration with leading Scottish smallpipe player Brighde Chaimbeul for the arrangements of *A’ Choille Ghruamach* (air), *Skye Boat Song*, and *Hacky Honey Reel*. She is hypnotic, magnetic, virtuosic, yet internal and still. We didn’t say much to each other during rehearsals about what to do; I simply tried to listen, to feel her feeling the music, and to join in. And that was an honour and was enough. These pieces have been beautifully arranged by Paul Campbell for this concert, capturing the delicate interplay between cello and accordion as they take turns providing the drone and counter melody. Although the choice of songs was guided by Brighde and we discussed our way through a whole list of options, the *Skye Boat Song* was my request. I played it on repeat when my baby girl was tiny, and it calmed her right down. Brighde, luckily, liked the idea. This song is therefore dedicated to my daughter.

We hope you feel closer to music, closer to us, and closer to each other by the end of tonight’s performance. Thank you so much, from the bottom of my heart, for being here and choosing to spend tonight with us.

- Nicola Benedetti

Nicola Benedetti

Violin

Nicola Benedetti is one of the most sought-after violinists of her generation, captivating audiences worldwide with her expressive artistry and passionate advocacy for classical music.

In the 2025–26 season, Nicola embarks on her first solo tour in over a decade, performing across leading UK and Irish venues including the Royal Albert Hall, Usher Hall, and National Concert Hall Dublin. Coinciding with the release of her new album *Violin Café*, the tour showcases popular virtuosic and romantic works arranged for violin, guitar, accordion, and cello. She also returns to the New York and Czech Philharmonic Orchestras with the Marsalis

Violin Concerto, and performs the Elgar Violin Concerto with the Royal Scottish National, Philharmonia, London Philharmonic, and Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, as well as the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

A Grammy Award winner for Best Classical Instrumental Solo (2020) and two-time Classical BRIT Award recipient, Nicola records exclusively for Decca. Her acclaimed recordings include Beethoven's Violin and Triple Concertos, Vivaldi and Elgar Concerti, and Wynton Marsalis's Violin Concerto in D and *Fiddle Dance Suite*.

A dedicated advocate for music education, Nicola founded The Benedetti Foundation in 2019, which has engaged nearly 70,000 participants across 105 countries. She was appointed CBE in 2019 and received the Queen's Medal for Music (2017) and an MBE (2013).

In 2022, Nicola became Festival Director of the Edinburgh International Festival, the first Scot and the first woman to hold the position since its founding in 1947.

Nicola Benedetti made her Royal Conservatory debut on March 3, 2017, and this is her fourth appearance in Koerner Hall.