

Royal Conservatory Orchestra with conductor Earl Lee

Friday, May 1, 2026 at 8pm

This is the 1,526th concert in Koerner Hall

Earl Lee, conductor

Sabina Sandvoss, cello

Royal Conservatory Orchestra

PROGRAM

Samy Moussa: *Elysium*

Ernest Bloch: *Schelomo, Rhapsodie Hébraïque*, B. 39

INTERMISSION

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D Major ("Titan")

- I. Langsam. Schleppend [Slow. Dragging] – Immer sehr gemächlich [Always at a very leisurely pace]
- II. Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell [With strong movement, but not too fast] – Trio: Recht gemächlich [Quite leisurely] – Tempo primo
- III. Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen [Solemn and measured, without dragging]
- IV. Stürmisch bewegt [Stormy]

Samy Moussa

Born in Montreal, QC, June 1, 1984

Elysium (2021)

Composer and conductor Samy Moussa was born in Montreal and is now based in Berlin. In Ottawa next week, Moussa's *Ring* will be premiered by cellist Bryan Cheng and the NACO and, a few weeks ago, (March 28), Kent Nagano premiered a new work for strings by Moussa in Berlin.

Moussa's vision of *Elysium*, a Hellenic concept referenced in Homer's *Odyssey*, is influenced by the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, who helped to transform the notion of everlasting paradise into an ideal within reach of all. "The pre-Hellenic Elysian Fields," Moussa writes, "feature many of the tropes we have grown to associate with a paradisiacal afterlife including the absence of time, an endlessly bountiful and peaceful land in which to reside, and the presence of divine beings ... While Homer's *Elysium* is restricted to heroes and demigods, by the 5th century BCE and the time of Empedocles the entry requirements had relaxed somewhat to include the virtuous ... Rather than remaining the sole preserve of the elite, immortal *Elysium* becomes the ultimate ethical aspiration for the common man in conjunction with a new quality of earthly life."

Moussa encapsulates *Elysium* with craft that feels almost architectural. Solemn, vast, slowly transforming chords are underpinned by brass sonority, then a leaping accompaniment figure is slowly introduced from which a melody gradually steps forward. The pulse varies throughout, building in waves and by orchestral layering and varying orchestral shades rather than busy counterpoint – all the while bringing a distant vision gradually into focus and full radiance.

Elysium was premiered in September 2021 by its dedicatee, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Christian Thielemann in the magnificent Basílica de la Sagrada Família, Barcelona.

Ernest Bloch

Born in Geneva, Switzerland, July 24, 1880; died in Portland, OR, July 15, 1959

Schelomo, Rhapsodie Hébraïque, B. 39 (1915-16)

"No country, no home, no land in which to thrust my roots," wrote Ernest Bloch in the 1930s – a stark summary of a life lived between borders. Born in Switzerland, Bloch studied violin and composition in Brussels (with Ysaÿe), Frankfurt, Munich, and Paris. At first, he worked variously as composer, conductor, lecturer, and – out of necessity – in the family business. A first measure of success came in 1910 with his lyric drama *Macbeth* at the Opéra-Comique.

In 1916 Bloch travelled to the United States, conducting a tour for the Maud Allan dance company. When the tour collapsed, he stayed, joining the newly founded Mannes School of Music and soon reuniting with his family. America became his base for the rest of his life, formalised by US citizenship in 1924. Bloch's most distinctive voice emerged in his so-called 'Jewish cycle' – works that channel an intensely personal, expressive idiom rather than literal quotation. Among them are *Trois poèmes juifs*, the *Psalm* settings, the symphony *Israel*, and *Schelomo* (1915–16), now his best-known score.

Schelomo began as an attempt to set passages from the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes for voice and orchestra. After several failed versions, Bloch transformed the idea into a wordless rhapsody for cello and orchestra, written in Geneva just before his departure for America. The solo cello – inspired by his friendship with Russian cellist Alexander Barjansky – becomes the voice of King Solomon: solitary, reflective, and inward. The bleak wisdom of Ecclesiastes spoke directly to Bloch's own temperament – prone to despair, yet fiercely compassionate. Lamenting, often descending cello lines, modal harmony, and long, melismatic phrases convey a music of questioning rather than proclamation. Bloch was clear: "I had no descriptive intentions ... I was saturated with the Biblical text and, above all, with the misery of the world."

Though cast as a rhapsody, *Schelomo* is tightly structured in three broad sections, each framed by a cello soliloquy and an orchestral surge. Two core themes bind the work together. The orchestra represents the world – history, experience, resistance – while the cello speaks Solomon's inner voice. Unlike almost all Bloch's other works, *Schelomo* ends without consolation. As he put it bluntly: "The subject required it."

Gustav Mahler

Born in Kalischt, nr. Iglau [now Kaliště, Jihlava], Czech Republic, July 7, 1860; died in Vienna, Austria, May 18, 1911
Symphony No. 1 in D Major (1884–88, rev. 1893–96)

Gustav Mahler's First Symphony was written when its composer was renowned primarily as an opera conductor. Mahler gave an early version the title *Titan: A Tone Poem in Symphonic Form*, only to later reject both title and program, presenting the work in 1896 simply as a four-movement symphony. Yet the sense of titanic struggle never left the music.

The opening instantly establishes Mahler's vast canvas. Marked "like a sound of nature," a barely audible 'A' – spread across seven octaves – evokes the deep stillness of the Moravian forests of his childhood. It remains one of the most original symphonic beginnings ever written: light slowly shifts, the air stirs, distant bird calls, and offstage bugle fanfares drift in from nearby barracks. As the scene clarifies – Beethoven's Ninth providing an obvious precedent – a cuckoo call on the interval of a fourth leads directly to the movement's main theme. This material comes from the second song of *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer), in which a young man rediscovers joy in spring after the collapse of a love affair. Mahler wrote the song at 24, following his infatuation with the singer Johanna Richter. Four years later, a further emotional upheaval provided the spark to complete the symphony at speed. "It came gushing out like a mountain torrent!" Mahler wrote. Despite this apparent spontaneity, the first movement is meticulously organised, its transitions finely judged, building to a blazing brass-led climax before closing with exuberant, teasing wit.

The second movement continues Mahler's fusion of symphony and song. An earthy Austrian Ländler, it draws on his early song "Hans und Grete" (1880). For the most part, the music radiates rustic innocence and good humour, though the trio introduces a flash of irony, with high woodwinds cutting through the dance. If this movement was designed to charm early audiences, the third did anything but. Here, Mahler unleashes a sardonic funeral march. Inspired in part by a popular woodcut, *The Huntsman's Funeral*, showing forest animals escorting their fallen enemy to the grave, the music builds a macabre canon on the nursery tune known in English as "Frère Jacques." Snatches of village-band and klezmer-like music add to the irony of the march. Yet at the centre of this procession lies one of Mahler's most touching moments: a tender quotation from the final *Wayfarer* song, a quiet farewell to the world from a wounded heart.

The monumental finale – the longest movement – completes the journey. It erupts with what Mahler describes as "the sudden despairing cry of a heart wounded to its depths," then drives forward through turmoil towards affirmation. Earlier ideas return and are transformed: the dawn music from the opening, sweeping new melodies of extraordinary breadth, and renewed conflict. Throughout, Mahler is striving to reassert the symphony's home key of D major, unheard since the end of the first movement. A violent, triple-forte jolt sets the process in motion, though doubt persists almost to the end. At last, triumph breaks through. Seven horns are asked to stand and blaze out their chorale. Mahler's Titan has fought his way through struggle and irony to arrive, battered but victorious, in paradise.

- Program notes copyright © 2026 Keith Horner

Earl Lee

Conductor

Winner of the 2022 Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award, Korean-Canadian conductor Earl Lee has emerged as one of the most compelling and versatile artists of his generation. He has led many of the world's foremost orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra. In August 2025, Lee stepped in on short notice to replace Zubin Mehta in the Boston Symphony Orchestra's performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 at Tanglewood, where *The Boston Globe* praised his interpretation as "an unhurried, momentous ritual ... the finale nothing short of spectacular."

In the 2025-26 season, Lee's engagements include return appearances with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as debuts with the Korean National Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic in a special project with the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA).

As Music Director of the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, Lee has revitalized the ensemble's artistic vision with programming that bridges tradition and innovation, and has presented bold repertoire alongside genre-crossing collaborations with artists such as Jacob Collier and Chris Thile, broadening the ensemble's reach and musical scope. Beyond Ann Arbor, Lee has worked with many composers including Unsuk Chin, Tod Machover, Donghoon Shin, Katherine Balch, and Carlos Simon, conducting works by these leading voices of our time and giving world premieres of new compositions by Machover and Balch. Through these collaborations, he continues to champion music that expands the expressive range of the modern orchestra.

Earl Lee is an alumnus of The Phil and Eli Taylor Performance Academy for Young Artists and this is his fifth time conducting the RCO.

Sabina Sandvoss

Cello

Sabina Sandvoss is a Canadian cellist recognized for her compelling musical voice and distinguished accomplishments as a soloist and chamber musician. Born into a musical family, she received her first cello at the age of four and has since pursued a deeply immersed musical life shaped by extensive concertgoing and a wide range of artistic influences.

In 2025, Sabina won first prize at the Zara Nelsova Competition at the International Cello Festival of Canada. In 2024, she was also awarded second prize in the Canada Council for the Arts' Michael Measures Prize, recognizing her as one of the country's most promising young classical musicians. She has advanced to the provincial and national levels of both the Canadian Music Competition and the Calgary Performing Arts Festival on numerous occasions.

Sabina received her formative training in the Advanced Performance Program at the Mount Royal Conservatory, where she performed in masterclasses with leading cellists including Laurence Lesser, Gustav Rivinius, Colin Carr, Johannes Moser, Tanja Tetzlaff, and Melissa Kraut, among others.

She holds a Bachelor of Music (Honours) from The Glenn Gould School, where she studied with Hans Jørgen Jensen and Andrés Díaz, and is currently continuing her studies in the Artist Diploma Program under their guidance. She is the recipient of a full-tuition Temerty Foundation Scholarship. Sabina received her early tutelage from her mother, cellist Beth Root Sandvoss, and performs on a cello handcrafted by her father, luthier Christopher Tilman Sandvoss.

Royal Conservatory Orchestra

Joaquin Valdepeñas, Resident Conductor

The Royal Conservatory Orchestra (RCO), part of the Temerty Orchestral Program, is widely regarded as an outstanding ensemble and one of the best training orchestras in North America. Four renowned conductors work with the RCO each season, allowing Glenn Gould School students to gain experience through professional rehearsal and performance conditions. A full week of rehearsals culminates in a Koerner Hall performance under the batons of such distinguished guest conductors as Sir Roger Norrington, former Ichnatowycz Chair in Piano Leon Fleisher, Bramwell Tovey, Johannes Debus, Peter Oundjian, Gábor Takács-Nagy, Ivars Taurins, Tania Miller, Andrei Feher, Mario Bernardi, Richard Bradshaw, Nathan Brock, Julian Kuerti, Uri Mayer, Tito Muñoz, Andrés Keller, Earl Lee, Naomi Woo, William Eddins, and Lior Shambadal. With four annual performances, participation in the RCO ensures that instrumental students in the Bachelor of Music and the Artist Diploma Program of The Glenn Gould School graduate with extensive orchestral performance experience. Additionally, winners of The Robert W. and G. Ann Corcoran Concerto Competition have the opportunity to appear each year as soloists with the RCO. Graduates of the RCO have joined the ranks of the greatest orchestras in the world, including the Cleveland Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the BBC Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Tafelmusik, the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, the Calgary Philharmonic, the Quebec Symphony Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra of Manchester, the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and Leipzig Gewandhaus. In addition to performances in Koerner Hall, the RCO has performed on numerous occasions at the Isabel Bader Performing Arts Centre in Kingston, has

been heard repeatedly on the national broadcasts of the *CBC Radio*, and in May 2024 made its Carnegie Hall debut under Maestro Peter Oundjian.

The RCO's Resident Conductor, Joaquin Valdepeñas, is supported by a generous gift from Robert & Ann Corcoran.