

Appassionato



Blending Innovation with Tradition

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From the President & CEO



Welcome to the Spring 2026 edition of Appassionato, a celebration of the innovations and traditions that continue to shape the Vancouver Academy of Music.

This issue arrives at a seminal moment as we push the boundaries of our artistic offerings while celebrating the dedication and talent of our musicians. Among the academy's most exciting developments is the inaugural year of the Stradivari and Amati Players. In this cover story, we reflect on the inspiring journey of these elite string ensembles, whose achievements in just a single year have been nothing short of extraordinary, from championing new works to embarking on an international concert tour.

We are also delighted to reconnect with James G. Choi, a former VAM cello student turned Oral & Maxillofacial surgeon. James reflects on his time at the academy and shares how music has continued to shape his life and career beyond the classroom. His story is a powerful reminder of the many paths VAM students take and the lasting impact of a musical education.

This spring also shines a light on a meaningful initiative created by cello student Sophie Cheung. After moving to Canada, Sophie recognized a gap in how newly arrived immigrant families were connecting with their local community. She responded by founding the *Connecting Communities Program*, which has brought hundreds of families together to explore the city and experience the joy of music through the academy's orchestral concerts.

As always, we thank you—our readers, supporters and extended VAM family—for being part of this shared journey. Your belief in the power of music education continues to inspire everything we do, and we hope the stories in this issue celebrate the creativity, ambition and sense of community that define the Vancouver Academy of Music.

Musically Yours,
Joseph Elworthy,

VANCOUVER ACADEMY OF MUSIC

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From the Board Chair

Dear Members of the VAM Family,

Welcome to VAM's bi-annual newsletter, Appassionato. As the Chair of the VAM Board, it is my privilege to connect with you through this enduring showcase of our community's accomplishments and inspirations.

At the Vancouver Academy of Music, our commitment extends beyond training accomplished musicians; we are dedicated to developing leaders and innovators across a spectrum of professions. Appassionato reflects this broader mission by celebrating the diverse achievements of our students and alumni, who excel not only in the music industry but in various fields around the world.



This newsletter highlights these significant accomplishments, illustrating the profound impact of a rich musical education on personal and professional development. Our stories inspire current students and faculty, encouraging them to explore and expand the boundaries of their own potential.

By sharing these narratives, we foster a culture of excellence and aspiration that is central to the VAM ethos. Each feature contributes to the ongoing story of our institution—a story marked by a passion for the arts and a commitment to fostering versatile, forward-thinking individuals.

Thank you for your continued support and involvement in our vibrant community. Together, we celebrate the transformative power of music and the remarkable achievements of our extended VAM family.

Kindest regards,
Monique Wilberg
Chair, VAM Board of Directors

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Stradivari & Amati Players: An Incredible Inaugural Year



This has been one of the most stimulating parts of my teaching career.

- Joseph Elworthy, President and CEO



VAM's Stradivari and Amati Players have mastered the art of blending tradition with innovation. In just their inaugural year, the conductorless string ensembles have premiered new works by emerging composers, built a culture of artistic collaboration, and travelled halfway across the world on an unforgettable concert tour.

Inspired by the Academy Strings, VAM's former advanced touring ensemble, the Stradivari and Amati Players are carrying forward a legacy of musical excellence while reimagining what a young string ensemble can be.

"With Strad and Amati, we're resurrecting that tradition of outstanding string ensemble playing and also adding some new elements to it," said Joseph Elworthy, VAM's CEO and President and leader of the Stradivari and Amati Players.

"We are committed to championing and premiering new works, so each concert program features a commissioned composition that alternates between one of our esteemed VAM faculty composers and an illustrious VAM composition alum. Having a conductorless ensemble is also a significant

factor, and we have wonderful mentorship and leadership from our faculty, Caitlin Wong, Adrian Kwan, and Luci Barz.”

Just months after the ensembles were formed, the Stradivari Players embarked on a concert tour of the United Kingdom, performing in London and Cambridge and taking part in a residency at Pembroke College. For Elworthy, the experience was nothing short of transformative.

“Within the span of a week, there were multiple performances in London and Cambridge. It basically had the itinerary of a professional tour,” he said.

“This was an opportunity to really test the talent level of our students. To embark on a UK tour, where we were performing repertoire primarily by English composers such as Edward Elgar, and to play it in the country where it was created and where its source of inspiration was derived from, was certainly ambitious, to say the least.”

The performances left a lasting impression on audiences and students alike.

“It was so inspiring to see how our performances were received and how much the audiences valued the level of expertise and



The Stradivari Players inside the King's College Chapel.

musicianship of our students,” said Elworthy. “We had really good banter with the audiences we performed for, where we were basically saying that performing Elgar for you is like you coming to Canada and telling us how to play hockey.”

Beyond the music, the tour gave students the chance to form friendships and memories that extended well beyond the stage.

“It’s such an exhilarating experience working with these students, who are so passionate and so hungry to learn and contribute. Seeing how they rose to this challenge and did so with a smile on their faces, while still making time for sightseeing in London and Cambridge and socializing as a group, certainly created indelible memories that I know we’ll all cherish forever,” Elworthy said.

That sense of community is just as important as musical achievement with these ensembles, with Elworthy hoping that future students will continue to find a place where they can challenge themselves, grow as artists, and build lasting connections.

“Joining Stradivari and Amati is one of the most ambitious ways of testing your musical aspirations. You will stretch yourself in terms of your ensemble skills, your technical



The Stradivari Players outside Bush House in Central London.

skills and your foundational musicianship, and along the way, you'll embark on this challenge with people who will become lifelong friends. We're all in this together," he said.

The ensembles' first year may have set a high bar, but their journey is only beginning.

Following the success of the UK tour, the players will travel to Cremona, Italy, for the prestigious Cremona International Music Festival.

"We're delighted that, on the heels of the UK tour, we'll be heading to Cremona, Italy, for the prestigious Cremona International Music Festival. String players will embark on a trip to Cremona, which is essentially the birthplace of the modern string instrument as the hometown of Antonio Stradivari, Niccolò Amati and the great Italian masters," said Elworthy. "It is an incredible opportunity for students to develop a tangible

connection to the instruments they have in their hands and the place where they originated."

The international opportunities will continue next year as well.

"We have also been invited to Portugal next June for Stradivari to perform at the Porto Festival, which coincides with an international violin competition. These wonderful collaborative opportunities are really a springboard from everything that happened in our inaugural year, which is quite an accomplishment considering it's only been year one."

From championing new music to performing on international stages, the Stradivari and Amati Players are building a tradition that honours the past while creating new opportunities for the next generation of young musicians.



The Stradivari Players during their London Concert on February 17, 2026.

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

AK COOPE (Clarinet, Faculty) as part of Standing Wave Ensemble was nominated for a 2026 Juno award for their latest album, *In an Archipelago*.

MAGGIE DANG (Voice, Robyn Driedger-Klassen) has been accepted to Boston Conservatory at Berklee.

GLENN DELOEG (Flute, Paul Hung) has been accepted to the UBC School of Music.

CHIIHIRO DIONIGI (Guitar, Hanh Nguyen) won first place in the Concert Group Level 7 class at the 2026 Kiwanis music festival.

KATHERINE FORBES (Piano, Chad Emry Heltzel) won First Place at the 2026 Canadian Music Competition BC Provincial 19-25 category and was selected as a National Finalist. She will perform Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54 as part of the competition's final round in July.

SAMUEL HWANG (Cello, Ashton Lim) was awarded First Prize at the National Young Virtuoso Competition and received the New York State Senate Award, leading to an invitation to perform at Carnegie Hall in New York as part of the New York Rising Stars Concert. He also won First Prize of the Cello Repertoire Level 9 Class at the 2026 Kiwanis Music Festival.

YUSUF JIMENEZ (Flute, Paul Hung) has been accepted to the UBC School of Music.

JUNO TRIO (Coach, Thomas Law) consisting of **JUBLIEE CHOW** (Flute, Thomas Law), **NICKY TABATABAEE** (Flute), **JOLIE XIE** (Flute, Thomas Law) won First Place of the Intermediate Chamber Music class at the 2026 Kiwanis Festival and have been recommended to compete at BC Provincials.

ANGELYN KIM (Harp, Miya Otake) won first place in the Celtic & Folk Level 9 class at the 2026 Kiwanis music festival. She also received Gold standing for the Harp Duo Category with Anna Kim at the 2026 Vancouver Kiwanis Music Festival.

ANNA KIM (Harp, Miya Otake) won first place in the Classical Level 8 category at the 2026 Kiwanis music festival. She also received Gold standing for the Harp Duo Category with Angelyn Kim at the 2026 Vancouver Kiwanis Music Festival. Anna was also a finalist at the 2026 Canadian Music Competition and was selected to perform at the CMC Gala.

AARON KO (Piano, Alana Chan) won First Place in the Grade 10 General Category Group at the Pacific Rim Piano Competition.

ADRIAN LEE (Cello, Joseph Elworthy) was invited to represent the Vancouver Kiwanis Music Festival as a Merited Participant for the PABC Provincial Festival in Prince George.

HANNA LI (Piano, Alana Chan) won Gold Standing of the Grade 7 Piano Class at the Vancouver Area Youth Arts (VAYA) International Festival.

JOHN MACLACHLAN (Composition, Edward Top) won a performance by the Thessaloniki State Symphony Orchestra of his composition "Peripeteia" at the Thessaloniki Art and Music Summit in Greece. He also won a performance by the Trio Kanon of his composition "Contingency" at the HighSCORE Festival in Venice, Italy.

LEXIE PANG (Cello, Ashton Lim) won First Place and Overall Class Winner of the Cello Repertoire Levels 5-6 Class at the 2026 Kiwanis Music Festival. She also received the Cello/Bass Medallion at the 2026 Kiwanis Music Festival, and was nominated to compete in the Junior A Strings Class at the 2026 Performing Arts BC Provincial Festival in Prince George.

PEAK QUARTET (Coach, Joseph Elworthy) consisting of **HYDEN HO** (Violin, Lawrie Hill), **CHARLES LIM** (Cello, Joseph Elworthy), **VALERY LOU** (Viola), **MICHIYO YU** (Violin, Lawrie Hill) have been invited to represent the Vancouver Kiwanis Music Festival as Merited Participants for the PABC Provincial Festival in Prince George. The quartet was also selected as a finalist at the National Final for the Canadian Music Competition.

JIMMY QUAN (Guitar, Hanh Nguyen) won first place in the Concert Group Level 5 class at the 2026 Kiwanis Music Festival. Jimmy was also selected to compete in the Provincial.

LIAM SCHACHTE (Composition, Edward Top), was selected with his composition "Romance for Strings No.1" for the Student Composer Masterclasses presented by the BC Registered Music Teacher Music Teachers' Association (BCRMTA) Student Composers' Club the Canadian Music Centre (CMC) in downtown Vancouver.

SNOWBIRD TRIO (Coach, Chad Emry Heltzel) consisting of **CAROLINE GARDNER** (Clarinet, Christopher Lee), **ELLIOTT MENDOZA** (Flute, Brenda Fedoruk), **HART ZAWADIUK** (Piano, Donna Lee) won First Place in the 18 years and under Brass and Woodwind Ensemble category at the 2026 Kiwanis Music Festival.

STARLIGHTS TRIO (Coach, Paul Hung) consisting of **ATHENA DAI** (Flute, Paul Hung), **VIVIAN GARDNER** (Flute, Paul Hung), **NANAKO KASAHARA** (Flute, Paul Hung) won the Kiwanis junior division and was recommended to provincial BC competition.

DANIEL WOOLLEY (Cello, Ashton Lim) won First Place in the Baroque Sonata Class - 10 years and under at the 2026 Kiwanis Music Festival. He also received the medallion for the Baroque Sonata - 12 years and under category at the 2026 Kiwanis Music Festival.

ARTHUR XU (Cello, Joseph Elworthy) was invited to represent the Vancouver Kiwanis Music Festival as Merited Participants for the PABC Provincial Festival in Prince George.

IRIS ZHU (Cello, Joseph Elworthy) won First Prize at the CMC Provincial Awards and was selected as one of the 40 finalists for the CMC National Final.

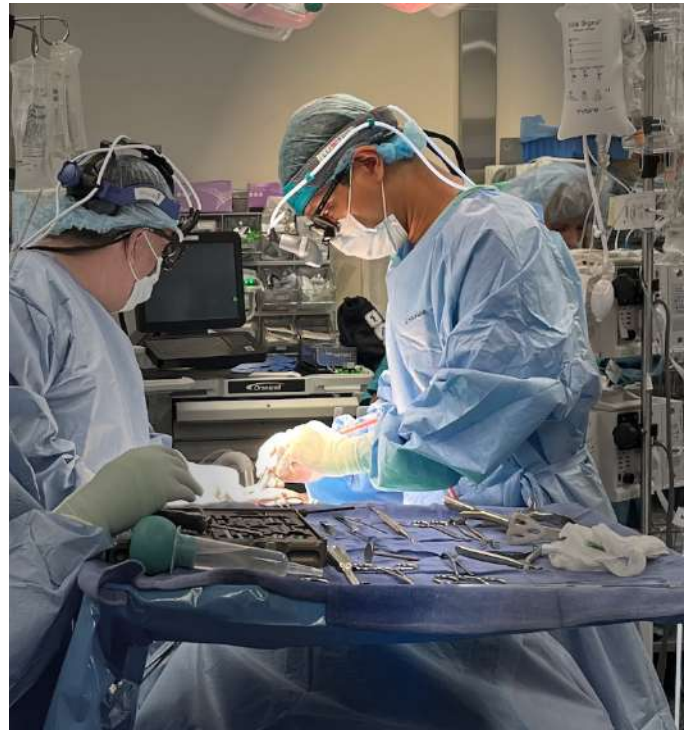
Checking in with VAM Alum James G. Choi

Students at VAM go on to pursue a wide range of remarkable careers. One prime example is alum James G. Choi, who went from studying cello to leading an operating room as an Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeon (OMFS) in New York.

“OMFS is a profession that treats the mouth, jaw and the face. No two days really look the same. One day I could be in the trauma bay assessing facial fractures and suturing lacerations post motor vehicle accident and another day in the OR fixing malformed jaws,” said Choi.

Choi discovered his passion for corrective jaw surgery during college, where he noted just how impactful the results could be in people’s daily lives.

“Our jaws form the basis of half of our face and it has profound functional (eating, speaking, breathing) and aesthetic (facial imbalance and disproportions) significance to our daily living. Whether it’s improving function, restoring balance, or boosting confidence, it’s incredibly rewarding to help people realize their full potential after surgery,” he shared.



James G. Choi performing surgery in New York.

One case in particular left a lasting impression. Choi shared how he worked on the case of a baby girl born with Pierre-Robin Syndrome, a rare congenital condition where her small jaw would obstruct her breathing and feeding.

“She required a breathing tube and feeding tube to sustain her airway and nutrition shortly after birth. Kim and TJ, who were first time parents, were devastated and heartbroken. This is where we were called in to help,” he recounts.

Choi and a team of surgeons, speech language pathologists, pediatricians, and intensivists completed a jaw surgery on the girl at just 6 weeks old, helping her to regain the ability to breathe independently.

“She underwent surgery under general anesthesia and in just over a week, she was free of the breathing tube. The following week, she was discharged home, sleeping soundly in her crib where she belonged.”

But long before he was performing complex surgeries in hospitals, Choi was studying cello at VAM.

“VAM was a big part of my adolescence growing up. I still remember my time there like it was yesterday, even though it’s been over 20 years,” he said. “I began my cello studies with the wonderful Ms. Audrey Nodwell, who played such an important role during my formative years and taught me the foundation of everything I know about the instrument.”

Choi continued his love for classical music well beyond his time at the academy, forming a musical trio with his peers at the University of Pennsylvania.

“Thanks to VAM, classical music has remained a constant during my journey through dental school, medical school and surgical residency at UPenn where I spent 10 years. Along with fellow colleagues at the Hospital of the UPenn, we formed a Hippocrates Trio - Neurologist at Violin, MD-PhD student at Piano and OMFS resident at Cello. We were simply brought together by a shared love of classical music that had been part of each of our lives growing up,” he said.

While the trio started out as a simple way for the members to share their love for music with one another, it soon became an important part of their surgical lives as well.

“What began as a personal outlet evolved into something more meaningful. We found ourselves



James G. Choi at the Vancouver Academy of Music, with cello teacher Audrey Nodwell.

performing in hospital spaces, offering music to patients and families—moments of respite that spoke not to physical healing alone, but to something deeper. In those settings, music became a quiet extension of care, reaching places that medicine alone sometimes cannot,” he said.

Reflecting on his journey, Choi shared that music had a meaningful impact not only on his patients, but also on himself.

“I can confidently say I wouldn’t be who I am today without VAM and the incredible mentors I had along the way. Music teaches you so much—patience, persistence, equanimity, and grit. Those lessons stay with you.”



James G. Choi performing as part of the Hippocrates Trio with colleagues at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

Congratulations Competition Winners!

DECEMBER 2025 - JUNE 2026

2026 EDITH & ESMOND LANDO GIFTED YOUTH COMPETITION

Name	Award	Teacher
Kaitlin Janelle Hui, harp	Edith & Esmond Lando Scholarship (\$1,000)	Joy Yeh
Race Li, cello	Chua Tiampo Memorial Scholarship (\$600)	Joseph Elworthy
Kara Sun, violin	Eugenie & Edward Yeung Scholarship (\$500)	Domagoj Ivanovic
Yewon Cho, cello	Malcolm G. Aikman Scholarship (\$250)	Joseph Elworthy
Sophie Florence Deng, violin	Ann Lesley Bain Memorial Scholarship (\$250)	Domagoj Ivanovic
Chloe Chong, piano	Joseph & Frances Cohen Scholarship (\$250)	Jocelyn Lai
Samuel Hwang, cello	Harold & Florence Morris Scholarship (\$250)	Ashton Lim
Stanley Li, violin	Yashwant & Tarun Damji Sidpra Memorial Scholarship (\$250)	Domagoj Ivanovic

2026 JEROLD GERBRECHT WOODWIND & BRASS COMPETITION

Name	Award	Teacher
Junior Category		
Wing Sum (Kate) Cheng, percussion	First Prize (\$300)	Katie Rife
TaeOh Seong, clarinet	Second Prize (\$200)	Christopher Lee
Darren Leung, trumpet	Third Prize (\$100)	Jeremy Vint
Senior Category		
Annabel Lancaster, Flute	Second Prize* (\$200)	Paul Hung
*First and Third Prize have not been awarded.		

2026 PHYLLIS SALTER PIANO COMPETITION

Name	Award	Teacher
Category A (26 and under)		
Katherine Forbes	\$500 Scholarship	Chad Emry Heltzel
Category B (18 and under)		
Chloe Chong	\$500 Scholarship	Jocelyn Lai
Connor Chong	\$500 Scholarship	Bogdan Dulu
Sam Javadi	\$500 Scholarship	Ian Parker
Michael Xue	\$500 Scholarship	Amanda Chan
Tianli Zhou	\$500 Scholarship	Noel McRobbie
Category C (12 and under)		
Charisma Kate Chow	\$500 Scholarship	Amanda Chan
Yanxi (Yancey) Liu	\$500 Scholarship	Alejandro Ochoa

2026 ALTO CLEF VIOLA COMPETITION

Name	Award	Teacher
Senior Category (13 years and older)		
Diana Shoar	First prize (\$400 scholarship)	Isabelle Roland
Quintin Li	Second prize (\$350 scholarship)	Isabelle Roland
Ashleigh St John	Third prize (\$300 scholarship)	Isabelle Roland
Intermediate Category (10 to 12 years old)		
Enid Gao	First prize (\$350 scholarship)	Isabelle Roland
Zixin Joyce Wang	Second prize (\$300 scholarship)	Isabelle Roland
Claire Chan	Third prize (\$250 scholarship)	
Junior Category (up to 9 years old)		
Hannah Sun	First prize (\$275 scholarship)	Sarah Kwok
Anna Lysenko	Second prize (\$225 scholarship)	Isabelle Roland
Aiya Badylak	Third prize (\$200 scholarship)	Isabelle Roland

2026 KAY MEEK COMPETITION

Name	Award	Teacher
Isabella Wang, violin	Kay Meek Scholarship (\$1500)	Domagoj Ivanovic
Michael Xue, piano	Alex Drennan Scholarship (\$1,300)	Amanda Chan
Jimmy Wang, cello	I.O.D.E. Scholarship (\$1,100)	Joseph Elworthy
Michiyo Yu, violin	Willie Shen Scholarship (\$1,000)	Lawrie Hill
Jiayu Angela Li, violin	VAM Scholarship (\$1,000)	Ji Eun Jenny Lim
Sam Javadi, piano	VAM Scholarship (\$1,000)	Ian Parker

2025 WINTER THEORY SCHOLARSHIPS

Name	Award	Teacher
Luke Collins	\$400 Scholarship	David Drucker
Joshua Cheung	\$300 Scholarship	Daniel Marshall
Brittany Chung Yan Lau	\$300 Scholarship	Daniel Marshall
Ellie Hin Yau Lau	\$300 Scholarship	Daniel Marshall
Bella Yang	\$300 Scholarship	Jacque Leggatt
Noah Suen	\$200 Scholarship	Daniel Marshall
Amytis Taheri	\$200 Scholarship	Tiffany Lee
Bonnie Yu Yee Wong	\$200 Scholarship	Daniel Marshall
Joyce Yu	\$200 Scholarship	Edward Top
Judy Zhou	\$200 Scholarship	Jacque Leggatt
Rose Kim	\$100 Scholarship	Tiffany Lee
Miya Shen	\$100 Scholarship	Janna Renae Berg



Stradivari & Amati Players

2026/27
Audition Now Open

2026/27 Featured Artists



MARK FEWER,
VIOLIN



ELISEU SILVA,
VIOLIN



Registration
Now Open



Student Spotlight: Sophie Cheung

Sophie is a talented cello student at the Vancouver Academy of Music who recently started the inspiring initiative Connecting Communities Program. Through this campaign, Sophie brings together newly settled families into Canada through shared events and the magic of music. Here, she shares more about the work she does through this initiative, alongside the meaningful impact it's having on multiple lives.



You've recently started a new initiative to assist recent immigrant families in integrating into Canadian life with various activities and gatherings. What inspired you to start this initiative?

“My campaign, called *Connecting Communities Program*, started 2 years ago when I first observed a problem: As recent immigrants settle down in their new lives in Canada, they will face problems like language barriers, different cultural norms and social isolation. Apart from physical resources, I realised how important it is to feel welcomed and included through being involved in community service and interacting with newcomers.

I hoped that through this initiative, I could help new immigrants build a sense of belonging and comfort in their new life and community in Canada. We have seen increasing engagement from participants, and the word spread to people who haven't heard about my campaign yet. I also hope this initiative can plant a seed in musical education for young children, which can hopefully grow into long-term commitments.”



Part of your initiative has been to invite hundreds of newly immigrated families to VAM's orchestral concert at the Orpheum Theatre. What has the impact been on families that have been involved in the Connecting Communities Program?

“The response has been strongly positive. For most of the immigrant families, attending a live orchestral performance at the Orpheum Theatre was a completely new experience. Many had never been inside a concert hall before, let alone heard a full orchestra perform live. So it’s been a great opportunity to spread the beauty of music.

VAMSO performed various types of music, ranging from classical music to widely known modern music, like the Disney or the Grinch concert we did. Parents shared that their children felt entertained and were looking forward to the next concert!”



As a cello student with our CEO and President Joseph Elworthy, can you share what it means for you personally to bring these families to VAM’s orchestral concerts?

“First of all, I need to thank Joseph for giving his full support in this initiative. As a cello student under him, I not only improved my technical skills, but also learnt how to appreciate the beauty of music and deepened my appreciation for it.



Music has the power to overcome language and cultural barriers. It is what connects us all. It’s like a language that we can all speak, and by inviting these families to our VAMSO concerts, I really hope they can have a first hand experience of the power of music and also spread the beauty to others too.”



What are your future hopes for the initiative?

“Looking ahead, I hope to expand the initiative to reach more families, and to also provide a wider range of opportunities and a greater variety of experiences by collaborating with different events. Ultimately, I aim to build a welcoming community where newcomers can feel empowered and be able to support each other. If we can continue creating spaces where people feel seen and connected, then this initiative will have achieved something meaningful and lasting.”



VAMSO 2026/27

IAN PARKER, MUSIC DIRECTOR & PRINCIPAL CONDUCTOR

Ian Parker Plays Gershwin

Experience an afternoon of wit, energy, and timeless melodies featuring the music of Bernstein and Gershwin.

OCT 18, 2026, 2:00PM | ORPHEUM THEATRE

Legends of the Console

Video Games featuring themes from Halo, Civilization IV, Bounty Hunter, Kingdom Hearts, World of Warcraft, Undertale and many more!

NOV 8, 2026, 2:00PM | ORPHEUM THEATRE

Rachmaninoff: Symphonic Dances

Experience an afternoon of sweeping melodies, dazzling virtuosity, and symphonic brilliance, spotlighting Isabella Wang, winner of the 2026 Kay Meek Competition.

Isabella Wang (2026 Kay Meek Competition Winner), violin

MAR 7, 2027, 2:00PM | ORPHEUM THEATRE

Kerson Leong Plays Tchaikovsky

Join us for the season finale as the Vancouver Academy of Music Symphony Orchestra celebrates the timeless music of Tchaikovsky. Featuring acclaimed violinist Kerson Leong, this concert promises a showcase of Tchaikovsky's gift for unforgettable melody and dramatic storytelling.

Kerson Leong, violin

MAY 2, 2027, 2:00PM | ORPHEUM THEATRE