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# Borrani & Beethoven

5-6 March 2026



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# Borrani & Beethoven

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**Thursday 5 March, 7.30pm** The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

**Friday 6 March, 7.30pm** City Halls, Glasgow

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**ROSSINI** Overture, The Barber of Seville

**BEETHOVEN** Concert Aria: Ah, perfido!

**BRITTEN** Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge

*Interval of 20 minutes*

**BEETHOVEN** Symphony No.8

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**Lorenza Borrani** director/violin

**Robin Johanssen** soprano

Lorenza Borrani



Robin Johanssen



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# What You Are About To Hear

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## ROSSINI (1792-1868)

Overture, *The Barber of Seville* (1816)

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## BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Ah, perfido!, Op.65 (1796)

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## BRITTEN (1913-1976)

Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op.10 (1937)

### Introduction and Theme

Variation 1: Adagio

Variation 2: March

Variation 3: Romance

Variation 4: Aria Italiana

Variation 5: Bourrée classique

Variation 6: Wiener Walzer

Variation 7: Moto perpetuo

Variation 8: Funeral March

Variation 9: Chant

Variation 10: Fugue and Finale

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## BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Symphony No.8 in F major, Op.93 (1812)

**Allegro vivace e con brio**

**Allegretto scherzando quasi andante**

**Tempo di menuetto**

**Allegro vivace**

Humour in music is a funny business – or at least it tries to be. But how composers manage to raise a smile within the most abstract of art forms requires a whole raft of musical techniques and ideas, from stealth and surprise to outright parody. There's no shortage of humour – of varying shades – among the music in tonight's concert, from the dashing wit of Rossini's *Barber of Seville* Overture to the jokes and high jinks of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony. There's even quite a bit of knowing comedy among the piquant stylistic evocations of Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* – but perhaps quite a bit less in the deeply emotional concert aria by Beethoven that completes today's music.

For many listeners, the Overture to Rossini's 1816 opera *The Barber of Seville* is the epitome of effervescent musical wit, summing up to a tee the scheming hairdresser running rings around local bigwigs at the centre of the composer's comic romp. This music, however, was not conceived for *The Barber of Seville* at all. Rossini had originally composed the Overture for his 1813 opera *Aureliano in Palmira*, and then reused it in his 1815 *Elizabeth, Queen of England*. His rather shameless re-recycling for *The Barber of Seville* marked his third use of the material – but there was a reason.

Rossini had simply run out of time. Remarkably, he dashed off *The Barber of Seville* in less than three weeks – not that you'd ever suspect it from the opera's wealth of wit and melody. But this was hardly unusual. Rossini was a notoriously fast worker: he'd maintain the pace of producing at least two operas per season for 19 years. He'd originally had something Spanish-sounding in mind for *The Barber*



Gioachino Rossini circa 1815

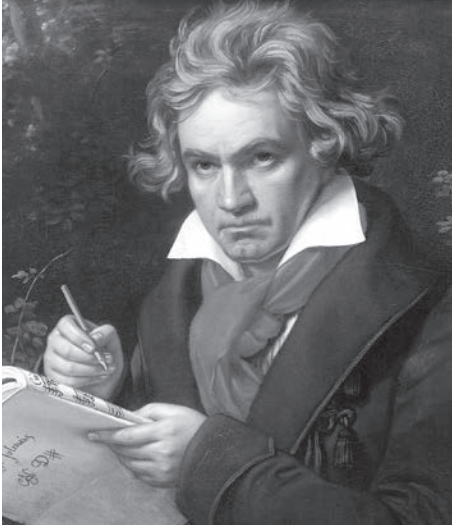
He'd originally had something Spanish-sounding in mind for *The Barber of Seville's* Overture, to match the opera's Iberian setting, but he left things too late to put it together. In the end, recycling older material was his only option.

of *Seville's* Overture, to match the opera's Iberian setting, but he left things too late to put it together. In the end, recycling older material was his only option.

The irony, of course, is how indelibly we associate the Overture's bubbling comedy and good humour with the opera itself – despite the fact that it contains precisely no themes or melodies that we'd encounter later in the opera. And for eagle-eared listeners at the opera's first performance – on 20 February 1816 at Rome's Teatro Argentina – that redeployment of existing music was perhaps just one reason behind the show's fiasco of a premiere.

For a start, rival composer Giovanni Paisiello – who'd already scored a hit with his own operatic version of Beaumarchais's 1775 comedy – turned up with some

cronies to disrupt this new version by the upstart Rossini before it gained a foothold in audiences' affections. Paisiello and his mates caused mayhem, allegedly releasing a stray cat to prowl around the stage, and the poorly rehearsed cast hardly helped by tripping over scenery, falling through trapdoors and missing their cues. From knowing wit and good humour, the show had descended into farce. Appalled, Rossini left early, and stayed away for the following night too. When a mob of torch-wielding locals approached his residence after the second performance, he feared the worst. In fact, they were there to proclaim and celebrate his genius, and Rossini's *Barber* soon found a permanent place in the repertoire. Its music became so well known and widely loved, in fact, that it later inspired affectionate parodies from the likes of Woody Woodpecker, Bugs



Ludwig van Beethoven

**Beethoven's aim (and, let's be frank, Duschek's too) was to showcase her legendary vocal abilities, and with its huge range, its florid writing and its deeply expressive melodic lines, the piece remains a challenge for sopranos today.**

Bunny and Tom and Jerry, each in their own individual animated take.

Launching with some attention-grabbing loud chords, Rossini's Overture seems barely able to contain its excitement in its restrained opening section. The loud chords return to kick off the Overture's faster section, contrasting a nimble but melancholy violin tune against a wittier, far more mischievous oboe melody. After a couple of Rossini's trademark swelling crescendos, the tempo surges forward even faster before the Overture's exuberant conclusion.

We veer away from humour for tonight's second piece, and plummet into a world of turmoil, turbulence and tragedy. Beethoven's *Ah! perfido* follows in a long line of vocal showpieces for wronged opera

heroines that stretches back to opera's earliest days. Its style might be operatic, but it's not taken from a larger stage work: instead, Beethoven wrote *Ah! perfido* in 1796 expressly for concert performance, and for a recital being given by the accomplished soprano Josepha Duschek, in Leipzig on 21 November that year. His aim (and, let's be frank, Duschek's too) was to showcase her legendary vocal abilities, and with its huge range, its florid writing and its deeply expressive melodic lines, the piece remains a challenge for sopranos today.

The woman in front of us is Deidamia, Princess of Scyros, who's been abandoned by her lover, Greek hero Achilles, as he flees to follow his destiny in the Trojan War. She curses him and calls on the gods to make him suffer, yet also longs for his return and

prays for his good fortune. Accordingly, Beethoven uses his orchestral backdrop to illustrate her shifting, quicksilver moods. Don't be fooled by the positive, heroic sounds of the work's opening: there's undeniable turmoil in the composer's rushing figurations and juddering sudden halts. A lyrical clarinet solo marks Deidamia's acceptance, and leads to the tender, lyrical aria itself – but the turmoil of the opening makes several unexpected returns.

Don't be taken in by the piece's relatively mature opus number (65) either. That was a late addition to the piece by Viennese publisher Artaria, who'd spotted a gap in Beethoven's own numbering and took the opportunity to cast the piece as a creation from his pioneering middle period. It's actually one of his earliest pieces (he was 24 at its premiere), and if you hear a fair bit of Haydn and Mozart in its clean, clear musical style, that's almost certainly what the composer intended – even if its more rugged, emotionally charged writing also hints at what was to come.

From Beethoven's abandoned heroine, we jump forward to the 20th century for tonight's next piece, and back into a world of wit and humour – well, partially, at least. In his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, the 23-year-old Benjamin Britten set out to make his mark on the musical world. It's ironic, however, that the piece that established Britten's international reputation was – like the Rossini Overture that launched tonight's concert – also a bit of a rush job.

It was in May 1937 that the young Britten was approached by conductor Boyd Neel to write a piece for his virtuoso chamber

orchestra, with the performance date set for the following August – a mere three months later, and at no less an occasion than the Salzburg Festival, which fellow composer Richard Strauss had co-founded in 1920. Of course Britten accepted, and in the end worked astonishingly quickly, taking little more than a month to complete his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*.

It helped that the piece had been in Britten's mind for some time. He'd first thought about writing something based on his former teacher's music back in 1932, but was forced to put the idea aside because of other commitments. Britten had known and loved Bridge's music since his childhood – it was the older man's orchestral suite *The Sea* that had first inspired him to become a composer.

The pair first met in 1927 at the premiere in Norwich of Bridge's *Enter Spring*, when the 13-year-old Britten approached a reluctant Bridge begging for composition lessons. Seeing the quantity and quality of Britten's childhood output, Bridge quickly agreed, and went on to nurture the prolific, rather over-enthusiastic young composer into a master craftsman who honed every line and every harmony in his music for maximum expressive effect. Britten later called him 'my musical father'.

And his set of variations is in many ways a character portrait of his beloved teacher: in the score he gave to Bridge, Britten even indicated that each variation referred to an aspect of the older man's personality. It's also been suggested that its wildly contrasting moods – from despair to exuberant joy – may reflect two momentous events in the younger composer's recent life: the death of his beloved mother in



Benjamin Britten

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January 1937, and his first meeting with tenor Peter Pears, who would go on to become his life partner, in March of the same year.

Britten took the theme for his work not from one of Bridge's later, more complex scores, but from second of the wistful *Three Idylls* for string quartet, making the contrasts between Bridge's Elgarian language and his own modernist style all the more striking. He fractures the theme into its constituent parts, disguises it and transforms it radically in a set of variations that conjure a remarkable range of sounds and textures from its small-scale forces, yet remain immediately accessible.

Two dramatic plucked chords kick off the opening 'Introduction and Theme', followed by a double bass drumroll and fanfares

heralding Bridge's poignant melody, heard in its original quartet arrangement. The 'Adagio' (representing Bridge's integrity) has dark, pensive harmonies interspersed with yearning melodies in the violins, and the brusque, military rhythms of the 'March' (his energy) contrast plucked and bowed playing. The 'Romance' (Bridge's charm) is a graceful waltz, and the droll 'Aria Italiana' (his humour) shows the Variations at their most parodic, with violins and violas strummed guitar-style and a soaring, extrovert tune on top. The 'Bourrée classique' (Bridge's tradition) seems to look back to the Baroque string music of Bach and Vivaldi, and the humorous, over-the-top 'Wiener Walzer' (his enthusiasm) is a parody of a Viennese waltz that has something of the barely controlled frenzy of Ravel's *La valse*. Scurrying strings characterise the propulsive 'Moto perpetuo'

(his vitality), and the achingly tragic 'Funeral March' (Bridget's sympathy) sets a wailing violin melody against a remorseless bassline. The otherworldly 'Chant' (his reverence) precedes the 'Fugue and Finale' (Bridget's skill and affection), where the older composer's star pupil shows off his technical abilities before concluding with a glowing return of the opening theme.

We return to Beethoven for tonight's final piece, and we find him – quite unusually, it has to be said – in something of a mischievous mood, despite challenging personal circumstances. So iconic and influential are the composer's nine symphonies that it's almost inevitable some get overshadowed by others. In between the heroic grandeur of No.3 and the death-to-life journey of No.5, for example, sits the far more modest No.4. Likewise, between the obsessive dance rhythms of No.7 and the choral grandeur of No.9 comes little No.8.

It's indeed the shortest of all Beethoven's symphonies, and one that the composer himself was rather modest about: he described it as 'my little Symphony in F', partly to distinguish it from his far longer and more ambitious 'Pastoral' Symphony, No.6, in the same key.

He began work on it in 1812 at the age of 41, straight after he'd finished the Symphony No.7. It was a time of great personal turmoil, as revealed in the notorious unsent letter in which the composer unburdened his surging emotions to his still unidentified 'immortal beloved'. He'd also had a serious run-in with his brother Johann, attempting to break up the younger man's relationship with Therese Obermayer, of whom he strongly disapproved. He failed – Johann and Therese were married a few months

later – but succeeded in driving a wedge between himself and his sibling. And of course, Beethoven's hearing was steadily deteriorating. He conducted the Eighth Symphony's premiere on 27 February 1814 in Vienna's Redoutensaal, but, reportedly, 'the orchestra largely ignored his ungainly gestures and followed the principal violinist instead'.

There's little evidence, however, of any of Beethoven's misfortunes in the Eighth Symphony's music. Indeed, it contains some of his most overtly comic writing, surely intended to raise a smile. It's even been suggested – not without evidence – that Beethoven may have been poking gentle fun at the whole idea of what a symphony is. Just as he'd made the point of replacing the symphonic form's traditional minuet dance movement with a more tricky, playful scherzo, it's not impossible to view the Symphony No.8 as a large-scale, four-movement 'scherzo' in place of an entire symphony – one that delights in defying expectations, thwarting conventions and subverting traditions across melody, harmony, rhythm and much more.

Even Beethoven's very opening seems gently subversive. He launches straight in with his hearty opening theme, but it's suddenly interrupted by a quiet, tentative response from the woodwind, an answer that has to be repeated more forcefully across the full orchestra just in case we hadn't noticed it. Elsewhere, there are unexpected accents, rhythms that confuse the ear, and sudden silences that keep the listener guessing as to what's coming next. Listen out, too, for the grand return of the movement's opening theme towards the end of the movement. It's hardly difficult to spot: Beethoven cranks up the musical

tension almost to breaking point, only to then bury the theme itself deep in the bassoons, cellos and basses, where it can barely be heard for the joyful clamour from the rest of the orchestra.

Beethoven marks his slow movement *Allegretto scherzando*, indicating not only that it's not slow, but also that we should expect a few jokes. And with its sudden contrasts in volume, its ticktocking woodwind accompaniment, and its song-like melody, it sounds like it might have been lifted straight out of a fashionable comic opera of the time. This is, however, an entirely instrumental opera in which the orchestra's musicians play the characters: when an immovable figure from the violins never wants to settle during the movement's closing bars, for instance, it takes a loud, growling response from the rest of the orchestra to make them see reason.

And, perhaps predictably, where we might expect to find a typically Beethovenian scherzo as a playful third movement, the composer gives us – what else? – an old-fashioned minuet. It's as if he's returning to the kind of music that his own innovations had rendered obsolete. This is no straightforward dance, however: Beethoven sets strings, woodwind and trumpets apart as though they should be playing in time but keep missing their cues, and there are sudden, military-style intrusions from thunderous trumpets, horns and timpani into what might be the elegance of the ballroom.

Beethoven is at his most overtly comic, however, in his boisterous finale, kicked off squarely by the loud, parping 'wrong' note that interrupts the flow of its dashing main theme early on. He takes his music

**No wonder the Symphony received a somewhat lukewarm reception as its Vienna premiere – though it's a piece that demonstrates beyond doubt what remarkable fertile bedfellows music and humour can make.**

through so many unexpected key shifts that at a certain point it simply breaks down, seemingly unsure of where it should head next. And he fills his supposedly short and pithy sign-off coda section with so much incident and activity that it fills nearly half the whole movement's length. Listen out for a remarkable passage just before the movement's final peroration where everything seems to get stuck, with the same bell-like chord passed down from flutes to oboes, clarinets, horns and bassoons, and then all the way back up again – all very pretty, but going nowhere. No wonder the Symphony received a somewhat lukewarm reception as its Vienna premiere – though it's a piece that demonstrates beyond doubt what remarkable fertile bedfellows music and humour can make.

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# Libretto

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## BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

### Ah, perfido!, Op.65 (1796)

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Ah! perfido, spergiuro,  
Barbaro traditor, tu parti?  
E son questi gl'ultimi tuoi congedi?  
Ove s'intese tirannia più crudel?  
Va, scellerato! va, pur fuggi da me,  
L'ira de' numi non fuggirai!  
Se v'è giustizia in ciel, se v'è pietà,  
Congiureranno a gara tutti a punirti!  
Ombra seguace, presente, ovunque vai,  
Vedrò le mie vendette;  
Io già le godo immaginando;  
I fulmini ti veggo già balenar d'intorno.  
Ah no! Fermate, vindici Dei!  
Risparmiate quel cor, ferite il mio!  
Sei non è più qual era, son io qual fui,  
Per lui vivea, voglio morir per lui!

Per pietà, non dirmi addio!  
Di te priva che farò?  
Tu lo sai, bell'idol mio!  
Io d'affanno morirò

Ah crudel! Tu vuoi ch'io mora!  
Tu non hai pietà di me?  
Perchè rendi a chi t'adora  
Così barbara mercè?  
Dite voi, se in tanto affanno  
Non son degna di pietà?

*Ah, you're leaving, you wicked,  
Lying, brutal traitor?  
And are these your final goodbyes?  
Could tyranny ever be more cruel?  
Go, scoundrel! You can flee from me,  
But you will not escape the anger of the Gods!  
If the heavens are just and merciful,  
They will plot your demise together!  
Like an ever-present shadow, I shall pursue you  
And see my revenge through.  
I'm already relishing the scene,  
With flashes of lightning all around you.  
Ah no, stop, vengeful Gods!  
Spare his heart, strike mine instead!  
He has changed, though I have not:  
I have lived for him, and would die for him!*

*Have pity, do not bid me farewell!  
What would I do without you?  
You know, my idol,  
That I would die of anguish.*

*Ah, cruel one, you want me to die!  
Have you no compassion?  
Why do you treat one who loves you  
So heartlessly?  
Tell me, does my torment  
Make me unworthy of your pity?*

Director/violin

## Lorenza Borrani



Lorenza Borrani's inspiring programmes and inclusive approach in music making are recognized and appreciated by the renowned orchestras throughout the world. Alongside her orchestral activities, she is a committed chamber music partner in special projects with her close musical friends.

This season Borrani returns to Arctic Philharmonic and Vasteras Sinfonietta where she has been the Artistic Partner. Other return visits include engagements with Orchestre de Paris, Bilbao Symphony Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Mozarteumorchester Salzburg in programmes she play/directs and increasingly conducts.

As a chamber musician, Lorenza Borrani is one of the founders of Spunicunifait, an ensemble dedicated to playing Mozart's string quintet works which have been released on the Alpha label to critical acclaim. Lorenza Borrani is one of the co-founders of Spira Mirabilis, a laboratory for the study, research and performance of orchestral and chamber music repertoire of all periods, working without a conductor or a leader, all musicians taking equal responsibility.

*For full biography please visit [sco.org.uk](http://sco.org.uk)*

Soprano

## Robin Johannsen



American soprano Robin Johannsen is known for her virtuosity, energy, agility, endurance, and above all for her scintillating coloratura. On the operatic stage she has appeared at Deutsche Oper Berlin where she started her career as a young artist, Theater an der Wien, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, Athens' Megaron, Staatsoper Berlin, Hamburgische Staatsoper, Semperoper Dresden, Teatro Regio Torino, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Oper Frankfurt, Vlaamse Opera, Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Komische Oper Berlin, Oper Leipzig and Bayreuth Festival in roles including Susanna *Le nozze di Figaro*, Norina *Don Pasquale*, Oscar *Un ballo in Maschera*, Marzelline Beethoven's *Leonore*, Konstanze *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Fiordiligi *Così fan tutte*, the title role of Telemann's *Emma und Eginhard*, and Leocasta in a new production of Vivaldi's *Il Giustino* at the Berliner Staatsoper.

Robin has a special affinity for the Baroque and Classical repertoires. She has close working relationships with René Jacobs and Andrea Marcon and is a frequent guest with the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, La Cetra Basel, the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, Concerto Köln, Kammerakademie Potsdam, and Belgium's B'Rock. She has also collaborated with conductors such as David Afkham, Marin Alsop, Jonathan Cohen, Ottavio Dantone, Laurence Equilbey, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Thomas Hengelbrock, Philippe Herreweghe, Manfred Honeck, Philippe Jordan, Ton Koopman, Antonello Manacorda, Alessandro De Marchi, Andrea Marcon, Hans-Christoph Rademann, Christian Thielemann and Robin Ticciati.

Robin has worked with some of the finest orchestras around the world and in some of the most prestigious festivals, performing at venues such as the Berliner Philharmonie, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Gasteig Munich, Konzerthaus Berlin, Paris Philharmonie, the Vatican, Salzburg's Mozarteum and Großes Festspielhaus, Tonhalle Zürich, Elbphilharmonie, the Wiener Musikverein and Santa Cecilia in Rome.

**For full biography please visit [sco.org.uk](http://sco.org.uk)**

# Scottish Chamber Orchestra



© Christopher Bowen

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra (SCO) is one of Scotland's five National Performing Companies and has been a galvanizing force in Scotland's music scene since its inception in 1974. The SCO believes that access to world-class music is not a luxury but something that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in, helping individuals and communities everywhere to thrive. Funded by the Scottish Government, City of Edinburgh Council and a community of philanthropic supporters, the SCO has an international reputation for exceptional, idiomatic performances: from mainstream classical music to newly commissioned works, each year its wide-ranging programme of work is presented across the length and breadth of Scotland, overseas and increasingly online.

Equally at home on and off the concert stage, each one of the SCO's highly talented and creative musicians and staff is passionate about transforming and enhancing lives through the power of music. The SCO's Creative Learning programme engages people of all ages and backgrounds with a diverse range of projects, concerts, participatory workshops and resources. The SCO's current five-year Residency in Edinburgh's Craigmillar builds on the area's extraordinary history of Community Arts, connecting the local community with a national cultural resource.

An exciting new chapter for the SCO began in September 2019 with the arrival of dynamic young conductor Maxim Emelyanychev as the Orchestra's Principal Conductor. His tenure has recently been extended until 2028. The SCO and Emelyanychev released their first album together (Linn Records) in 2019 to widespread critical acclaim. Their second recording together, of Mendelssohn symphonies, was released in 2023, with Schubert Symphonies Nos 5 and 8 following in 2024.

The SCO also has long-standing associations with many eminent guest conductors and directors including Principal Guest Conductor Andrew Manze, Pekka Kuusisto, François Leleux, Nicola Benedetti, Isabelle van Keulen, Anthony Marwood, Richard Egarr, Mark Wigglesworth, Lorenza Borrani and Conductor Emeritus Joseph Swensen.

The Orchestra's current Associate Composer is Jay Capperauld. The SCO enjoys close relationships with numerous leading composers and has commissioned around 200 new works, including pieces by Sir James MacMillan, Anna Clyne, Sally Beamish, Martin Suckling, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Karin Rehnqvist, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Nico Muhly and the late Peter Maxwell Davies.

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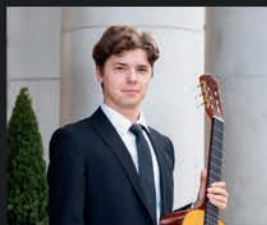
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