

*Program subject to change*

## **BRAHMS**

### ***String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, Op.36***

Allegro non troppo  
Scherzo: Allegro non troppo, presto giocoso  
Poco adagio  
Poco allegro

## **McPHERSON**

### ***Concerto for 2 Horns (Mountain Triptych):* Chamber version\***

Sunrise  
Rundle  
Sunset, Night Sky

\*this marks the first performance of the chamber version of this concerto

### ***String Sextet No. 2 in G Major, Op.6***

#### **Johannes Brahms**

(b. Hamburg, 1833 / d. Vienna, 1897)

First performed: November 20, 1866 in Zurich

String sextets are a rarity in music, so the fact that Brahms wrote two speaks to a fondness he clearly had for the combination of two violins, two violas, and two cellos. His first sextet precedes the second by some five years, and the intervening time was a period of intense maturity and development for Brahms. But it also marked a period of personal hardship – Brahms wrote the work under a cloud of personal reminiscing for a woman (named Agathe) whose love he had not won. From a sanctuary in Baden-Baden, he allowed his feelings to come out in a set of lieder (Op.32), and in this *G Major Sextet*.

The work's intensely personal nature is given a tremendous compositional architecture, however. The opening movement alone is a marvel of ingeniously layered ideas, beginning with the uncertainty of an ostinato at the start that wobbles between two semitones – G and F-sharp, and he uses each to create harmonies from each. Bits and fragments of thematic ideas grow from this, until the second main theme of the movement gives us our first truly sustained melody of the work. At the climax of the exposition, Brahms spells out the name of this lost beloved: above we hear A – G – A – D – H – E (the D substitutes for the T, while H in German music notation is B); below the notes of A – D – E are stressed (“Ade” is the German word “farewell”). “By this work,” Brahms wrote to a friend, “I have freed myself of my last love.”

This is no mere heart-on-the-sleeve parlour trick. It blends into the structure of the movement with the surehandedness of a master, and Brahms is only 31 at this time. The second movement is the work's Scherzo and Trio. The Scherzo section has a theme in the upper strings set to plucked accompaniment in the lower, until a new idea is shared between upper and lower registers. The Trio section is that favourite German folk dance – the Ländler – which springs out from the strings as if held in pent-up anticipation. An abbreviated Scherzo concludes

the movement. The third movement is a theme and five variations which ventures into some dramatically intense and musically forward-thinking harmonies – this is the soundtrack of a lost love.

The final movement is a balm for the wounds of the preceding. It is marked *Poco allegro*, and the first presentation of the theme is tellingly marked “*tranquillo*.” Its tempo is gently propulsive, the contrapuntal ideas weave around and through each other as if the destination is clear, but the voyage itself does not need to rush to get there. The pace quickens noticeably in the coda, and the ending has a sense of affirmation and good humour, dispersing the clouds in a positive and happy ending.

***Concerto for 2 Horns (Mountain Triptych):*** Chamber version

**John McPherson**

(b. Edmonton, 1958)

The original version of this piece was commissioned by the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, and given its World Premiere on January 13, 2018 by the ESO in the Winspear Centre.

Program note by the composer:

The primary impulse behind this composition was the desire to fashion a fitting vehicle to feature my dear friends and colleagues, Allene Hackleman and Megan Evans. Their fabulous musicianship, magnificent sounds, and immaculate way they play together served as an abundant source of inspiration.

The secondary influence on this piece arose from the mighty landscape that is the Canadian Rockies. In 2017 I was fortunate enough to spend 3 weeks, in splendid isolation, at the Banff Centre focused solely on the writing of this piece. Each morning I would watch the sun rise behind Rundle Mountain out my studio window, and each evening I would watch Venus appear above Sulphur Mountain as the sun set.

Being in a mountain valley seems to connect us directly to the bones of the Earth as well as to a massive time scale that puts our small lives and egos in radical perspective. The inexorable fathomless forces below and above silently impress upon our psyche. Thoughts become images:

1. Sunrise: the dark stillness melts away, the mountain glows, the valley stirs and our spirits awaken.
2. Rundle: some mountains appear more individual than others and we are drawn to them, what is the timeless, powerful, pressing song they sing to us?
3. Sunset, Night Sky: as the lapis lazuli fades to black, the clear sky gently fills with uncountable points of light, and the mountains become shadows sailing across an ocean of stars.

Fundamentally though, this piece is about Joy: the natural existential joy of being in the mountains; the profound joy of making music together; the heartfelt joy of a deep friendship; and the glorious joyousness that is the rich, resplendent, ringing sound of 2 horns at play.



**Edmonton Symphony Orchestra**  
Brahms & McPherson  
November 20 & 21, 2020

This new chamber version was created with the help of a special Canada Council grant designed to help artists create or adapt works and find new ways to reach audiences in this challenging time.

John McPherson Oct. 14, 2020

Program notes for the Brahms © 2020 by D.T. Baker