

BRAHMS' FIRST PIANO CONCERTO

January 19 & 21, 2023

Thursday Classics presented by Quikcard

Featuring:

Yaniv Dinur, conductor

Katherine Chi, piano

PROKOFIEV

Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op.25 "Classical"

(15')*

Allegro

Larghetto

Gavotte: Non troppo allegro

Finale: Molto vivace

TCHAIKOVSKY

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy - Overture

(19')*

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op.15

(48')*

Maestoso

Adagio

Rondo: Allegro non troppo

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op.25 “Classical”

Sergei Prokofiev

(b. Sontsovka, Ekaterinoslav, 1891 / d. Moscow, 1953)

First performed: April 21, 1918, in St. Petersburg

Last ESO performance: January 2016

One hears from the very opening measures of this work the cheerfulness of it all, and the cheeky nod to the works of composers such as Haydn and Mozart. But underneath the wit and good humour of Prokofiev’s *First Symphony* are the seeds of harmony and architecture that can be found even in the composer’s most serious and mature works. It should be noted this was no student work – Prokofiev turned 27 less than a week after the work premiered in 1918.

“It seemed to me that had Haydn lived to our day he would have retained his own style while accepting something of the new at the same time,” Prokofiev wrote. “That was the kind of symphony I wanted to write.” And in four brief movements (the entire work lasts scarcely more than 15 minutes), that’s what he does. The opening movement has the lines of a classical work, with quirky and unexpected harmonies and punctuations. The slow movement is a gentle, almost romantic Larghetto. The short gavotte in the third movement is one, in the words of music scholar David Fanning, “whereby harmony side-slips only to be picked up by the scruff of the neck and put back on the right track.” Like the first movement, the finale is also in sonata form, though this one much more effervescent and convivial.

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(b. Kamsko-Votkinsk, 1840 / d. St. Petersburg, 1893)

First performed: March 28, 1870, in Moscow

Last ESO performance: November 2016

While the tragic story of the Veronese lovers Romeo and Juliet seems a natural fit to the particular artistic temperament of Tchaikovsky, it was in fact the composer’s friend and fellow composer Mili Balakirev who was the main driving force behind the work. Yet Balakirev proved one of the work’s harshest critics, at least in its early guises. And while Tchaikovsky typically proved stubborn in the face of his colleagues’ criticisms, after the work was first performed to a lacklustre reception, he actually took many of Balakirev’s comments to heart, and embarked on an extensive revision of the piece, presented in its final version 10 years later, changed from an overture to what was now called a “fantasy overture.”

The work does not follow any specific program or sequence of events. Instead, Tchaikovsky, with that sense of mood and gift for melody that was so uniquely his, perfectly captures all the emotions of Shakespeare’s first tragedy – and does so within the strictures of classical sonata form. The opening theme, suggesting Friar Laurence with its hymn-like nature, is the slow introduction. This is followed by the exposition of the two main subjects of the overture. There is the fiery conflict of the two feuding families, and the theme of the lovers themselves – one of the most heart-tuggingly romantic themes in all of music. There is a short recapitulation, concluding with a brief funeral march, before the epic now world-famous theme of the lovers returns in a glorious climax.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op.15

Johannes Brahms

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

First performed: January 22, 1859, in Hanover

Last ESO performance: June 2012

“There are asses in Vienna who are calling me a second Beethoven,” Johannes Brahms complained in a letter. “You have no idea what it is like to hear behind you the tramp of a giant.” With that kind of pressure, it’s no wonder that Brahms had such a hard time writing a symphony – the form that Beethoven made his own. Many early attempts by Brahms to write a symphony either came to naught or became other works entirely. Such was the early gestation of the *First Piano Concerto*. Brahms grappled with the work for three years before its premiere on January 22, 1859. It took him 20 years, by the way, to finally produce a symphony.

Scrapping the outline of a symphony, the 21-year-old Brahms thought first of recasting his work into a piano duo. He ended up splitting the difference, in a way, and wrote a work for one piano and orchestra. Still, it was a struggle, one made more difficult when Brahms’ friend and mentor, Robert Schumann, attempted suicide in 1854 and was committed to an asylum, where he died in 1856. This may well explain the anguished passion with which the concerto begins – pitched drama in the strings and timpani – “dramatic flashes and grim fatalism,” wrote Paolo Petazzi of the opening. While there are moments of pastoral calm, the movement is dominated by a sense of resignation, balanced against the tempests of the opening. The piano is not heard until almost four minutes into the work – establishing the orchestra as an equal partner in the concerto. The solo instrument’s music is somewhat more soothing but rouses up to present the opening material halfway through its first grand statement. The piano part is technically very difficult but offers little in the way of ostentatious display. This may explain why the work took some time before it was regarded as the masterpiece it is – its premiere in Hanover was to a largely indifferent audience, unused to a work which opaquely refused to provide a dazzling display for its soloist.

The slow movement of the concerto bears an inscription by Brahms: “Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini” (“Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord”), which Max Kalbeck, Brahms’ first biographer, claimed was another reference to Robert Schumann. However, a letter of Brahms to Schumann’s widow, the great pianist Clara Schumann, would seem to indicate that the movement is a portrait of her. Whichever may be the case, it begins with a sense of loneliness, though it becomes a lovely and haunting song – and the piano writing is rich and detailed. The finale is a rondo (a form in which the main theme returns after other musical subjects are presented), in an ABACADA format. The principal music is a rough dance, heard first in the piano. Here, at last, the piano is given a few moments to dazzle, and while the movement is still in a minor key, the sense of verve and energy do much to dispel the preceding moods of sadness and loss.

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