

Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Brahms' Symphony No. 1

Vladimir Kulenovic, *Conductor*
George Li, *Piano*

Friday, Nov 17, 2023, Straz Center - Ferguson at 8:00 pm

Saturday, Nov 18, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm

Sunday, Nov 19, 2023, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

Richard Wagner
(1813-1883)

Frederic Chopin
(1810-1849)

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

Overture: *Flying Dutchman*

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op.21

I. Maestoso

II. Larghetto

III. Allegro vivace

George, Li piano

Intermission

Symphony No. 1, Op. 68 in C minor

I. Un poco sostenuto; Allegro

II. Andante sostenuto

III. Un poco allegretto e grazioso

IV. Adagio; Più andante; Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

George Li plays the Steinway Piano from the Music Gallery, exclusive agents for Steinway & Sons.

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Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Overture to *The Flying Dutchman* (1841)

Duration: ca. 9 minutes

When considering the radical creations of Richard Wagner and how they changed the course of music – *Ring of the Niebelungen*, *Tristan*, *Parsifal* – his early operas seem quaint by comparison. Composed when he was 28, *The Flying Dutchman* might sound dated to modern ears, but it was considered innovative for its time, particularly the nuance of the titular character and the creation of a new technique known as the leitmotif, a recurring musical theme linked to a specific person or thing.

Inspiration for this otherwise myth-heavy opera came from actual experience. While crossing the Baltic Sea on a merchant ship, Wagner and his wife, Minna, encountered a violent storm that nearly cost their lives. The nightmarish trip found an artistic outlet in the overture to *Dutchman*, as it captures the turmoil of a roiling ocean and the fear of the travelers.

The overture, notes the *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini, evokes “the shouts of the crew echoing off the stony bluffs of a Norwegian fjord, the heaving hulk of the ship as it sways, the demonic intensity of the accursed Dutchman – it’s all there.”

The story comes from the legend of a blasphemous sea captain condemned to sail for eternity, his only respite being cast ashore every seven years to seek a woman’s love. Dramatic calls from the horns suggest a chaotic ocean, a plaintive English horn represents Senta’s love, and a flurry of string tremolos adds a binding tension to the whole.

The details of the opera are irrelevant here, as the visceral music squeezed into the overture – arguably the first great musical depiction of the sea – are enough to send any listener below the main deck.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

The two most celebrated pianists of the 19th century could not have been more dissimilar. Franz Liszt was the matinee idol, whose good looks and powerful, full-bodied playing style swooned audiences and broke piano strings during recitals. Chopin, by contrast, was frail and sickly – weighing less than 90 pounds – and as a result developed a technique nearly void of movement beyond the fingers.

Yet with these ten digits Chopin created a magnificent and original repertoire for the keyboard, one that forged technique and emotion into a unique expressiveness, delicacy and refinement. His pianistic colors and textures elevated the etude, mazurka and nocturne to a new status in the concert hall, and he singlehandedly invented the concept of the instrumental ballade. The virtuosity of so much of his music speaks for itself.

Compared to the lush orchestrations of Brahms and Tchaikovsky, Chopin’s two piano concertos sound almost transparent, like arias from a Bellini opera. The *Second Piano Concerto in F Minor* is the superior work, although it was composed a year before the *Concerto in E Minor*.

In the opening movement, marked *maestoso*, the orchestra spends 2-1/2 minutes developing themes before the piano enters, and from there, the keyboard dominates the rest of the section. In fact, the ensemble almost evaporates until its rousing return at the end, making this seem less like a traditional concerto than a piano sonata accompanied by an orchestra.

The *largo* is the heart of the work, a reserved, elegant treatise on the keys that hints of Mozart. This songlike movement, rich in embellishment, offers one of Chopin’s most heartfelt melodies, a reason both Schumann and Liszt viewed it as an example of the Romantic ideal in music. In contrast, the closing *allegro* is a lively dance that juggles both mazurka and waltz rhythms as they escort soloist and orchestra to a rousing finish.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68

Duration: ca. 45 minutes

“Composing a symphony,” Johannes Brahms once said, “is no laughing matter.” Apparently not, considering he worked for at least 14 years on his *First Symphony*, which after its premiere was dubbed the “Tenth” to announce a successor to Beethoven’s nine masterpieces in the form. “You can’t have any idea what it’s like,” Brahms declared, “always to hear such a giant marching behind you.”

But the long gestation of the symphony had less to do with Beethoven than Brahms’s self-critical nature, which resulted in tossing many a flawed or unfinished score into the fire. Second-rate music had no place in his world, and mediocrity won’t be found in anything he published.

Brahms was 43 when he delivered his *C Minor Symphony*, and the wait was worth it. By then confident in his command of orchestral forms, the work was a hit at its premiere in 1876 and today remains the most popular “first” in the repertoire – although Mahlerians most certainly will disagree. Every detail is vital to the whole, noted the English composer and conductor Julius Harrison: “Nothing is left to chance; each movement has its course determined from the very first note.”

Certainly, the composer’s admiration for Beethoven rings clear in this music, and not just by sharing the same key as the famed *Fifth Symphony* or its comparable shift from C-minor darkness to C-major light. He goes so far as to indirectly quote Beethoven midway through the finale, specifically the *Ode to Joy* theme from the *Ninth Symphony*.

The work opens ominously through an anguished series of timpani strokes against rising strings and woodwinds – one of the most memorable intros in the repertoire. Brahms introduces new themes and invigorates them in an imaginative display of contrapuntal skill worthy of Bach. A sustained, eloquent second movement offers relief from the earlier battle, the music falling over listeners like a warm blanket of sound. A tranquil theme by the woodwinds opens the third movement, and the orchestra builds its lush textures in softly rolling climaxes.

This leads without a break into the finale, an epic battle in which moments of quiet give way to displays of drama, done with an ingenious suspension of meter. Brahms begins the movement as an adagio, and increases the tension as more and more members of the orchestra take up their weapons and join in.

Then Brahms shifts gears by introducing his inverted quote of the *Ode to Joy* theme, so obvious a tip of the hat to Beethoven that Brahms once exclaimed, “Any jackass can see that.” From there, the music dives back into the darkness of the minor key and struggles to shake it off, then reintroduces Beethoven’s tune. A rousing trombone chorale declares the arrival of C major, and the symphony ends in triumph.

“The *C Minor* is one of the most innovative symphonies that the later 19th century produced,” notes Jan Swafford in his 1997 biography on the composer. “Brahms achieved a paradoxical resolution of conservative and progressive elements, and did it with a magisterial finality that no symphonist of stature would ever match again.”

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.