

From Earth to Heaven: Brahms and Scriabin

Wednesday, January 28, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Kirill Petrenko, conductor · Janine Jansen, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major, Op. 77</i>	40'
2	SCRIABIN 1872–1915 <i>Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 43 "Le divin poème" (The Divine Poem)</i>	50'
TOTAL MUSIC		90'

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major, Op. 77

THE COMPOSER

Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, into a family of modest means. His father, a jobbing musician who played horn and double bass in taverns and dance halls, gave him his first lessons; later, the talented boy studied with the distinguished teacher Eduard Marxsen. Stories that the young Brahms played piano in Hamburg's waterfront bars to help support his family are persistent, but they rest on anecdote, and many modern scholars doubt them.

Brahms's life changed dramatically in 1853 when, at age twenty, he met the violinist Joseph Joachim, who introduced him to Robert and Clara Schumann. Robert, recognizing genius, hailed Brahms in print in his article "Neue Bahnen" (New Paths) as the composer the age had been waiting for. When Robert's mental collapse led to his institutionalization and death, Brahms became devoted to Clara, remaining close to her for the rest of his life, though the exact nature of their relationship remains one of music history's enduring mysteries.

In 1863, Brahms settled in Vienna, which would be his home until his death. A lifelong bachelor, gruff and sometimes tactless but capable of great tenderness, he became the acknowledged master of symphonic and chamber music in the second half of the nineteenth century. His four symphonies, two piano concertos, this violin concerto, and vast quantities of chamber music and

40 minutes

songs represent the culmination of the Classical-Romantic tradition. He died of cancer on April 3, 1897, just weeks after attending a performance of his Fourth Symphony.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Violin Concerto, composed in the summer of 1878, was Brahms's only work for solo violin and orchestra, and it ranks among the supreme achievements of the concerto literature. It was written for Joseph Joachim, his oldest musical friend. The two had known each other for a quarter century by then, and their artistic partnership was one of the most fruitful in musical history.

Brahms wrote it at Pörtschach in Carinthia and sent the solo part to Joachim, asking him, with characteristic understatement, simply to “say a word or write a few words about the part.” What followed was an intensive collaboration by correspondence: Joachim suggested revisions to make passages more idiomatic for the violin, and Brahms weighed them, taking some and setting others aside.

Originally, Brahms planned four movements, but he eventually settled on the traditional three, discarding two middle movements. (The ideas from one of them reportedly resurfaced in his Second Piano Concerto.) The premiere took place on New Year's Day 1879 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, with Joachim as soloist and Brahms conducting.

The concerto's early reception was troubled. A quip attributed both to the conductor Hans von Bülow and to the violinist Joseph Hellmesberger called it a concerto not *for* but *against* the violin. The virtuoso Henryk Wieniawski called it unplayable, and Pablo de Sarasate refused to perform it, protesting that he would not “stand on the rostrum and listen to the oboe playing the only tune in the Adagio.” Yet the work has long since taken its place alongside the Beethoven and Mendelssohn concertos as one of the supreme tests and glories of the violinist's art.

I. Allegro non troppo: A spacious orchestral introduction presents the main themes before the violin enters with a broad, singing melody. The movement unfolds with symphonic grandeur, the solo part woven into the orchestral fabric rather than set against it. The first-movement cadenza is traditionally Joachim's, though many violinists have composed their own.

II. Adagio: An oboe intones one of Brahms's most beautiful melodies, the tune Sarasate refused to sit through. The violin takes up the theme with exquisite tenderness, and the movement unfolds as a reverie of autumnal warmth.

III. Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace: A Hungarian-flavored finale, widely heard as a tribute to the Hungarian-born Joachim. Its vigorous rhythms and folk-like themes bring the concerto to a brilliant close.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The grandeur of the orchestral introduction, establishing the concerto's symphonic character from the start. In the slow movement, the famous oboe melody that so irritated Sarasate, though the violin's elaboration of it is equally beautiful. The finale's Hungarian spirit reflects Brahms's lifelong love of Hungarian popular music and his friendship with Joachim.

Alexander Scriabin

50 minutes

1872–1915

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 43 "Le divin poème" (The Divine Poem)

THE COMPOSER

Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin was born on Christmas Day 1871 (January 6, 1872, by the modern calendar) in Moscow. His mother, a gifted pianist who performed her own compositions, died of tuberculosis when he was an infant; he was raised by his grandmother and aunt, who nurtured his extraordinary musical talent. As a boy he developed a fascination with piano mechanisms and even built instruments himself.

At the Moscow Conservatory, where Sergei Rachmaninoff was a fellow student, Scriabin proved a brilliant pianist and graduated in 1892 with the Small Gold Medal, though an injury from overpracticing Liszt and Balakirev left him with a weakened right hand. His early compositions, mainly for piano, show the influence of Chopin. But as his career progressed, Scriabin developed an increasingly personal harmonic language that pushed toward the boundaries of tonality.

After 1900, Scriabin became consumed by mystical philosophy, believing that music could serve as a portal to cosmic consciousness. He planned a grandiose work called *Mysterium*, a week-long multimedia spectacle to be performed in the Himalayas, after which the world would dissolve in bliss. This work remained unfinished at his death from septicemia on April 27, 1915, caused by an infected sore on his lip. He was forty-three.

Scriabin's reputation faded after his death. In later decades, however, his music has been increasingly championed, and his importance as a pioneer of early modernism is now recognized.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Third Symphony, composed between 1902 and 1904, marks a turning point for Scriabin. It is the first major work in which he explicitly incorporated his philosophical and mystical ideas, and those ideas would dominate the rest of his creative life.

The symphony's programme describes the ascent of the human spirit from darkness to enlightenment. In less abstract terms, the work traces the soul's journey from struggle and bondage through sensual pleasure to spiritual liberation.

For Scriabin, music now represented a reaching toward experiences beyond the ordinary, and the abstract symphony became a "poem."

The premiere took place in Paris on May 29, 1905, conducted by the legendary Arthur Nikisch at the Théâtre du Châtelet. Over time, "The Divine Poem" has taken its place as one of Scriabin's major achievements, a bridge between late Romanticism and the radical experiments that would follow.

The symphony is cast in three continuous movements, played without pause:

Introduction and "Luttes" (Struggles): A slow introduction presents the work's motto themes: a portentous phrase in the bass followed by a rising trumpet figure. These motifs will return throughout the symphony in various guises. The main body of the movement depicts the conflict between humanity and the divine, between bondage and freedom.

"Voluptés" (Sensual Delights): A languid, perfumed movement that explores the seductions of earthly pleasure. The orchestration is rich and sensuous, the harmonies luxuriant.

"Jeu divin" (Divine Play): The spirit, having passed through struggle and temptation, attains freedom. The movement begins playfully, even skittishly, but builds to a blazing affirmation: the triumph of the liberated soul.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The motto themes in the introduction, which bind the entire symphony together. The contrast between the turbulent "Struggles" and the languorous "Sensual Delights." In the finale, notice how the music grows increasingly ecstatic, building to a peroration of almost unbearable intensity. The symphony's concluding pages are among the most overwhelming in all of late-Romantic music.

Tonight's artists

Janine Jansen *violin*

Janine Jansen, born in Soest in 1978, is one of the most charismatic and admired violinists in the world. From a musical Dutch family, she studied with Coosje Wijzenbeek, Philippe Hirschhorn and Boris Belkin, and has built a career of the highest distinction as soloist and chamber musician, recording widely and founding the International Chamber Music Festival in Utrecht. She is the LSO's Portrait Artist this season. Renowned for the intensity, communicative warmth and fearless commitment of her playing, she also has a long creative partnership with the composer Richard Dubugnon, who has written several works for her, which makes her the natural soloist for tonight's premiere.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

A rich, readable life of Brahms that tells the story of the Violin Concerto and his friendship with Joseph Joachim, for whom he wrote it.

ACCESSIBLE **Scriabin: A Biography**

Faubion Bowers, Dover Publications 1996

A detailed, colourful life of Scriabin that explains the mystical and philosophical ideas behind "The Divine Poem" and his ever larger ambitions for music.

DEEPER **Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters**

Styra Avins, Oxford University Press 2001

Brahms's letters, selected and annotated with a connecting biography, including his exchanges with Joachim while they shaped the solo part of the Violin Concerto.

SOURCES

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2. Kirill Petrenko and Janine Jansen with Brahms's Violin Concerto, Digital Concert Hall. <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/56390>
3. From Brahms to Scriabin, from the epic to the sublime by Jansen and Petrenko, Wanderer. <https://wanderersite.com/en/article/from-brahms-to-scriabin-from-the-epic-to-the-sublime-by-jansen-and-petrenko>
4. Violin Concerto (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Brahms))
5. Johannes Brahms, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Brahms
6. Symphony No. 3 (Scriabin), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_\(Scriabin\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(Scriabin))
7. Alexander Scriabin, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Scriabin

Alexander Scriabin · Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 43 "Le divin poème" (The Divine Poem)

8. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>

9. Scriabin: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780486288970>

10. Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199247738>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-01-28-petrenko>

Version 3, 30 September 2026