

Storm and Sunrise: Brahms's First Concerto and Also sprach Zarathustra

Thursday, October 1, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Kirill Petrenko, conductor · Víkingur Ólafsson, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15</i>	48'
2	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30</i>	34'
TOTAL MUSIC		82'

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

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

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

48 minutes

concertos, this violin concerto, and vast quantities of chamber music and 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

Few concertos have had so painful a birth. Brahms's First Piano Concerto did not begin life as a concerto at all. In the spring of 1854 the twenty-one-year-old composer started a sonata for two pianos; within months he was trying to turn it into a symphony; and only after that attempt stalled did the material find its final shape as a concerto for piano and orchestra, completed in 1858. The backdrop to those years was the great crisis of Brahms's early life. In February 1854 Robert Schumann, the older composer who had hailed Brahms in print only months before as the coming genius of German music, threw himself into the Rhine. He was rescued and committed to an asylum at Endenich, where he died in July 1856. Brahms moved to Düsseldorf to support Clara Schumann and her children, and the turbulent first movement has long been heard as a response to that catastrophe, though Brahms himself never said so.

What he did say concerned the slow movement. In a letter to Clara he wrote that he was "painting a gentle portrait" of her, and that it was to be the Adagio. In the manuscript that movement is headed with the words of the Mass, *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini* ("Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"), which many have taken as a private reference to Robert Schumann.

The premiere, on 22 January 1859 in Hanover, with Brahms as soloist and his friend Joseph Joachim conducting, was respectable. Five days later in Leipzig, the citadel of German musical taste, it was hissed. Audiences expected a concerto to be a vehicle for pianistic display; Brahms had written something closer to a symphony with piano obbligato, in which the soloist does not even enter until the orchestra has spent several minutes on its own. Brahms reported to Joachim, with rueful wit, that the concerto had been "a brilliant and decisive failure". It took decades for the work to be recognised for what it is: one of the grandest and most searching piano concertos of the nineteenth century, in which the symphonic ambition that Brahms would not realise on its own terms until his First Symphony in 1876 is already fully present.

The three movements are laid out on a huge scale. The opening Maestoso, in D minor, is about as long as the other two combined. The Adagio is a hymn-like meditation in D major. The finale is a Rondo whose Allegro non troppo drive owes something to the finale of

Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, but whose fugal episode and exultant close in D major are pure Brahms. It makes a formidable opening for this programme, and the work that Petrenko and the orchestra have chosen to carry to Carnegie Hall and South America in the weeks that follow.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement (Maestoso). Listen to the very opening: a long trill rumbles in the timpani and double basses on a low D while the violins and cellos hurl out a jagged theme full of wide leaps and wrenching trills. The harmony is deliberately unstable; the music seems to start in the wrong key. After this storm, a gentle, almost consoling second idea emerges in the strings. The piano, when it finally enters, does not compete with the orchestra; it slips in quietly with a tender, reflective phrase, as though it had been listening. Notice how often the soloist plays in heavy double octaves and thick chords, doubling or opposing the full orchestra rather than decorating it: this is the symphony-concerto that confused its first audiences. Listen, too, for the radiant F major theme that the piano introduces alone, a moment of calm at the heart of the storm, before the trills and leaps return for a coda of real ferocity.

Second movement (Adagio). The “gentle portrait” of Clara. Muted strings and bassoons open a slow, chorale-like melody; the piano answers with a meditative line that seems to think aloud. Listen for the long passages where the soloist plays almost alone, very softly, and for the moment near the end when the piano spins out a quiet cadenza-like reflection before the orchestra returns. It is music of hushed devotion, and Brahms asks the pianist for restraint rather than display.

Third movement (Rondo: Allegro non troppo). The piano launches the finale alone with a vigorous, stamping theme in D minor, which the orchestra takes up. Listen for the contrasting episodes (one lyrical and warm, one a busy, closely argued fugato in the strings) and for the short cadenza in which the soloist seems to test the main theme from new angles. In the closing pages the music turns from D minor to D major, and the horns lead a triumphant, pastoral coda: the struggle of the first movement is finally resolved.

Richard Strauss

1864–1949

Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30

THE COMPOSER

Richard Strauss was the heir to Wagner and Liszt, the composer who carried the late Romantic tradition into the twentieth century. Born in Munich in 1864, the son of the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, he received a conservative musical education before an encounter with Alexander Ritter, a violinist married to one of Wagner's nieces, converted him to the "music of the future."

Between 1889 and 1898, Strauss composed a series of tone poems that made him the most famous composer in Germany: *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. Each pushed the orchestra to new extremes of virtuosity and expression. Then he turned to opera, creating the scandalous *Salome* (1905), the shattering *Elektra* (1909), and the nostalgic masterpiece *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Strauss lived long: through two world wars, the Nazi era, and the destruction of the German musical culture he had embodied. His late works, including the *Metamorphosen* for strings and the *Four Last Songs*, are elegies for a lost world. He died in 1949, shortly after completing those final songs.

ABOUT THE WORK

Richard Strauss was thirty-two when he wrote *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and already the most talked-about composer in Germany. His earlier tone poems, *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration* and *Till Eulenspiegel*, had made his name as a master of the modern orchestra. With *Zarathustra*, completed in 1896 and first performed in Frankfurt on 27 November of that year under the composer's own direction, he took on something far more ambitious: Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical prose-poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), in which the ancient Persian prophet comes down from his mountain to preach the coming of the *Übermensch*, the "superman" who will go beyond the old morality.

Strauss was careful to say that he had not set out to write philosophy in music. The title page reads "tone poem, freely after Friedrich Nietzsche", and he later explained that he had meant "to convey in music an idea of the evolution of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of development, religious as well as scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the Superman". The score is divided into nine sections, most of them headed with chapter titles from Nietzsche's

book: “Of the Backworldsmen”, “Of the Great Longing”, “Of Joys and Passions”, “The Song of the Grave”, “Of Science”, “The Convalescent”, “The Dance Song” and “The Night Wanderer’s Song”.

The work is built on a basic conflict between two keys. C major, the key of the famous opening sunrise, represents nature, the elemental world; B major and B minor, a semitone away and about as remote as keys can be from C, represent humanity and its striving. The whole piece plays out the tension between them, and Strauss refuses to resolve it: the last bars famously leave the two keys hanging side by side.

The orchestra is enormous, with quadruple woodwind, six horns, four trumpets, organ, two harps and bells, and Strauss uses it with extraordinary imagination, from the thunderous unisons of the sunrise to the thin, eerie fugue of “Of Science”, to the Viennese waltz that erupts in “The Dance Song”, led by a solo violin. That opening, of course, became one of the most recognisable pieces of music in the world after Stanley Kubrick used it in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The remaining half hour is less well known and much stranger, and hearing it after the Brahms, a work that also wrestles with the heaviest questions, is the best way to understand why *Zarathustra* is far more than its first ninety seconds.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Introduction (Sunrise). It begins almost below hearing: a low C held by the organ pedal, contrabassoon and double basses, with a faint rumble on the bass drum. Then four trumpets rise through C–G–C, the “nature” motif, answered by a major and then a minor chord from the full orchestra and pounding timpani. Listen for the third statement, which reaches a blazing C major, crowned by the organ.

Of the Backworldsmen / Of the Great Longing. The mood changes completely. Muted cellos and basses murmur in B minor, and horns intone a fragment of plainchant (*Credo in unum Deum*): these are the “backworldsmen”, people who seek consolation in another world. The divided strings then spread out into a warm, lush hymn in A-flat. In “The Great Longing” listen for the orchestra pulling against that religious calm: the organ sounds a *Magnificat*, but the strings surge away from it.

Of Joys and Passions / The Song of the Grave. Passionate, restless music with a vehement trombone figure (sometimes called the “disgust” motif), which then dissolves into the funereal “Song of the Grave”, led by oboe and a solo violin.

Of Science. One of the most remarkable passages Strauss ever wrote: a slow fugue begun by the low strings, whose subject uses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. It is dry, grey, deliberately learned music, science as cold reason. Listen for how it gradually breaks down.

The Convalescent. The fugue gathers into a furious climax and a shattering return of the nature motif, followed by a long general pause. Zarathustra recovers slowly; listen for the chattering woodwinds, trumpets and a kind of laughter in the orchestra as he regains strength.

The Dance Song. A solo violin leads off a lilting, slightly tipsy Viennese waltz, Strauss’s image of the liberated “dancing” spirit that Nietzsche celebrates. It grows into a whirling orgy of sound.

The Night Wanderer’s Song. At the height of the dance a single bell starts to strike midnight: twelve strokes, as the music collapses. What follows is a quiet, glowing epilogue in B major, with high violins and woodwinds floating ever upward. But listen to the very end: while the high instruments hold a soft B major chord, the cellos and basses pluck a low C, three times. Nature and humanity are left unreconciled. It is one of the most famous question marks in music.

Tonight's artists

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*

Víkingur Ólafsson steps in for Daniil Trifonov, who withdrew from these concerts through injury; the programme remains unchanged. Brahms's First Concerto is the opposite of a showcase: the piano spends much of the work as a partner in a symphonic argument rather than a star in front of the orchestra, and that suits a pianist known above all for clarity of line and structural intelligence. Listen for how Ólafsson shapes the soloist's hushed first entry, and for the long, inward solo passages of the Adagio, where the whole movement depends on the pianist's control of soft playing.

Víkingur Ólafsson, born in Reykjavík in 1984, is one of the most sought-after pianists of his generation. He had his first lessons from his mother, a piano teacher, and studied at the Juilliard School in New York before returning to Iceland, where he founded his own record label, Dirrindí, and the Reykjavík Midsummer Music festival. Since signing with Deutsche Grammophon he has released a series of thoughtfully conceived albums (Philip Glass, Johann Sebastian Bach, Debussy and Rameau, Mozart and his contemporaries) which have won him a wide international following. His recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations, which he performed around the world throughout the 2023/24 season, won the Grammy Award for Best Classical Instrumental Solo in 2025. Admired for the clarity, rhythmic precision and imaginative programming of his playing, he joins the Berliner Philharmoniker this season.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

Swafford tells how the D minor Piano Concerto grew out of an abandoned symphony in the dark years after Schumann's collapse in 1854.

ACCESSIBLE **I Am Dynamite!: A Life of Nietzsche**

Sue Prideaux, Tim Duggan Books 2018

A lively life of Nietzsche, whose *Also sprach Zarathustra* gave Strauss both the title and the starting point for his tone poem.

DEEPER **Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition: The Philosophical Roots of Musical Modernism**

Charles Youmans, Indiana University Press 2005

A scholarly study of how Strauss read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, with a close look at *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

SOURCES

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2. Daniil Trifonov Cancels Berlin Philharmonic Concerts Due to Injury, The Violin Channel. <https://theviolinchannel.com/daniil-trifonov-cancels-berlin-philharmonic-concerts-due-to-injury/>
3. Berliner Philharmoniker, 9 October 2026, Carnegie Hall. <https://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2026/10/09/Berliner-Philharmoniker-0800PM>
4. Piano Concerto No. 1 (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_(Brahms))
5. Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1, Houston Symphony. <https://houstonsymphony.org/brahms-piano-concerto-1/>
6. Programme Note: *Also sprach Zarathustra*, op. 30, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/richard-strauss-also-sprach-zarathustra-thus-spoke-zarathustra-op-30/>
7. *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Also_sprach_Zarathustra
8. Strauss: *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.indianapolissymphony.org/backstage/program-notes/strauss-also-sprach-zarathustra/>
9. Kirill Petrenko, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirill_Petrenko
10. Kirill Petrenko, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/kirill-petrenko>
11. Víkingur Ólafsson: Biography, Deutsche Grammophon. <https://www.deutschegrammophon.com/en/artists/vikingur-olafsson/biography>
12. Víkingur Ólafsson, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V%C3%ADkingur_%C3%93lafsson
13. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
14. *I Am Dynamite!: A Life of Nietzsche*, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781524760830>
15. *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition: The Philosophical Roots of Musical Modernism*, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780253345738>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-10-01-petrenko>

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