

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

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

48 minutes

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 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

34 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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