

Jakub Hruša and Yuja Wang: Dvořák, Bartók and Brahms

Thursday, January 7, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Jakub Hruša, conductor · Yuja Wang, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DVORAK 1841–1904 <i>Nocturne in B major, Op. 40</i>	9'
2	BARTÓK 1881–1945 <i>Piano Concerto No. 1, Sz. 83</i>	24'
3	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Serenade No. 1 in D major, Op. 11</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		78'

Antonin Dvorak

1841–1904

Nocturne in B major, Op. 40

THE COMPOSER

Antonin Dvorak was born on September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, a small village north of Prague in Bohemia. The eldest of fourteen children, he was expected to follow his father into the butcher's trade, but his unmistakable musical talent led him on a different path. After studying at the Prague Organ School, Dvorak spent years playing viola in theatre orchestras while composing in his spare time, often in conditions of considerable hardship.

His breakthrough came when Johannes Brahms, serving on a jury for a composition prize, recognized Dvorak's exceptional gifts and recommended him to his own publisher, Simrock. The resulting Slavonic Dances (1878) were an immediate international success. Following in the footsteps of Bedrich Smetana, Dvorak went on to achieve worldwide fame as a Czech composer. His time as director of the National Conservatory in New York (1892-1895) produced some of his most beloved works, including the "New World" Symphony and the Cello Concerto.

9 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

This short piece had two earlier lives before it found a permanent home. It began around 1870 as the slow movement, marked *Andante religioso*, of a String Quartet in E minor that Antonín Dvořák never published. A few years later he reused the music as a slow movement in his String Quintet in G major, then took it out of that work as well. Only in the early 1880s did he rework it as a piece in its own right, giving it the title Nocturne. It was published in 1883 as his Op. 40, and besides the version for string orchestra he prepared one for violin and piano and one for piano four hands.

The decade between the first idea and the finished piece had changed Dvořák's life. In 1870 he was an unknown orchestral player in Prague. By 1883 the Slavonic Dances had carried his name abroad, and a publisher was ready to take even a nine-minute movement salvaged from an abandoned quartet. The sources disagree about where and when the orchestral version was first played, so the premiere is best left open.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Nocturne holds a single mood from beginning to end. After a brief, plain introduction, the upper strings begin a long, winding melody that moves in small steps over a gently pulsing accompaniment. Underneath it the basses hold one deep note, an F sharp, for a very long time. That held note is what gives the first part of the piece its feeling of suspense: the harmony seems to be waiting to resolve and never quite does. The main Czech reference site on the composer describes the effect as almost hypnotic.

Eventually the bass lets go, the music becomes more animated, and the texture opens out. The opening returns at the end, but the tension has gone, and the piece closes in calm.

Béla Bartók

1881–1945

24 minutes

Piano Concerto No. 1, Sz. 83

THE COMPOSER

Béla Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, then in the Kingdom of Hungary (today Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), and grew up to become one of the towering figures of twentieth-century music, and one of its great explorers. Trained as a pianist and composer at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, he was a formidable virtuoso who might have made his career at the keyboard alone. Instead, in the first decade of the century, he turned to

the villages of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, later reaching as far as Algeria, recording peasant songs on wax cylinders and laying, with his friend Zoltán Kodály, the foundations of modern ethnomusicology. That fieldwork was not antiquarianism: the irregular metres, modal scales, and percussive vitality of the music he gathered passed directly into his own language, giving it a flinty rhythmic drive and an earthy modernity unlike anything in the Austro-German tradition he otherwise revered. Bartók loathed fascism: after 1933 he refused to give concerts in Nazi Germany and broke with his publisher there. As Hungary slid toward alliance with Hitler, he emigrated to the United States in 1940, settling in New York. The American years were hard, with failing health, financial anxiety and a sense of exile, yet they produced the radiant Concerto for Orchestra (1943) and the Third Piano Concerto heard tonight. He died of complications of leukaemia in New York on 26 September 1945, his Third Piano Concerto all but finished on his desk.

ABOUT THE WORK

In 1926, after a period in which he had written very little, Béla Bartók produced a run of piano works in quick succession. The largest of them was his First Piano Concerto, composed in the autumn of that year. He wrote it for his own use: he was in demand across Europe as a pianist, and he wanted a concerto of his own to play. He gave the first performance himself on 1 July 1927 in Frankfurt, at the festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting.

The concerto shows a new manner. Bartók had been studying Baroque keyboard music, and the score is full of counterpoint: short motifs are passed around, imitated and stacked on top of one another. He had also been listening to Stravinsky, and the driving, irregular rhythm of the piece owes something to that example. What is entirely his own is the treatment of the piano as a percussion instrument. The soloist hammers out repeated notes and tight clusters of adjacent keys, and the orchestra's drums answer in kind. Bartók wrote into the score that the percussion, including the timpani, must be placed directly beside the piano, so that the two form a single group. His publisher, Universal Edition, notes that the themes of all three movements grow from one small melodic cell, and that the simple, folk-like lines are deliberately set against harsh, chromatic harmony.

The critics at the first performance were hostile. The concerto has never become easy listening, and it remains extremely difficult for soloist and orchestra to hold together.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro moderato. The concerto begins quietly, with low rumbling from timpani, piano and brass. Out of this comes the idea that drives the whole movement: one note, struck again and again by the piano. The main Allegro piles up from there in octaves and syncopated orchestral chords. Listen for how often the piano and the drums seem to be finishing each other's sentences.

II. Andante. The strings are silent throughout this movement. The piano is joined only by woodwinds, brass and percussion, which gives the music a bare, nocturnal colour. It opens as a quiet exchange between piano and drums; the winds enter one by one in the middle and build, over a repeating figure in the piano, to a harsh climax before the opening returns.

III. Allegro molto. The finale follows without a break, launched by drums and sliding trombones. It is a fast, stamping dance dominated by piano and percussion, with the brass punctuating. A short, angry fugal passage interrupts near the end, and the concerto stops abruptly, at full speed.

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

45 minutes

Serenade No. 1 in D major, Op. 11

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 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

In the autumn of 1857 the 24-year-old Johannes Brahms took up a post at the small court of Detmold, obtained on the recommendation of Clara Schumann. He taught the piano to a princess, conducted the choir and, most usefully, had the run of a court orchestra. It was his first regular contact with one. The ensemble played Haydn and Mozart as well as newer music, and Brahms used his time to study their symphonies, serenades and divertimenti closely.

The Serenade in D major came out of that study. Brahms began it in 1858 as a piece for nine players, a mixed group of winds and strings in the spirit of an eighteenth-century divertimento. It then grew: first he enlarged it for chamber orchestra, and finally, with advice from his friend the violinist Joseph Joachim, he rescored it for full orchestra, finishing in December 1859. Joachim conducted the first performance of that version in Hanover on 3 March 1860. By Brahms's own account the large audience applauded warmly, a happier reception than the First Piano Concerto, written in the same years, had met at its first hearings.

Brahms would not complete a symphony until 1876, when he was 43, weighed down as he felt by the example of Beethoven. The two serenades were his way of learning to write for orchestra without yet claiming that title. The First is nevertheless a large piece: six movements lasting about three quarters of an hour, with a first movement in full sonata form and a long slow movement that would not be out of place in a symphony. Around them Brahms keeps the older serenade tradition alive with two scherzos and a pair of minuets.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro molto. Low strings set up a drone, like a bagpipe, and a horn plays a cheerful, rustic tune over it. The opening closely resembles the finale of Haydn's last symphony, No. 104, which is in the same key and begins over the same kind of drone. The movement is broad and sunny, and the horns stay prominent throughout.

II. Scherzo: Allegro non troppo. A shadowy movement in D minor, quiet and restless, with a warmer middle section in B flat major.

III. Adagio non troppo. The longest movement and the centre of the work, in B flat major. It unfolds slowly, with long melodies for the woodwinds and horn over murmuring strings.

IV. Menuetto I and II. Two tiny minuets, the first in G major and the second in G minor, scored for only a few instruments. This is the movement where the serenade's origin as chamber music is easiest to hear.

V. Scherzo: Allegro. A short, boisterous movement led by the horns.

VI. Rondo: Allegro. The finale is built on a bouncing, dotted rhythm that keeps returning between contrasting episodes, and it ends the work in high spirits.

Tonight's artists

Yuja Wang *piano*

Yuja Wang is the soloist in Bartók's First Piano Concerto, a work in which, the orchestra quotes her as saying, the composer "created a unique sound world". The programme is given on 7, 8 and 9 January.

Yuja Wang, born in Beijing in 1987, is one of the most dazzling and charismatic pianists in the world. Trained at the Central Conservatory in Beijing and the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, she had her breakthrough in 2007 when, aged twenty, she stepped in for Martha Argerich with the Boston Symphony, and she has been a star of the concert platform ever since. An exclusive Deutsche Grammophon artist and a Grammy winner, she is celebrated for a phenomenal, seemingly effortless technique, electrifying stage presence and fearless musicianship across a vast repertoire, with the great virtuoso Russian concertos among her specialities.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

Swafford's life of Brahms is vivid on the Detmold years and on the young composer's long, cautious approach to the orchestra, of which the First Serenade is the earliest result.

ACCESSIBLE **Béla Bartók**

David Cooper, Yale University Press 2018

A full modern biography that follows Bartók through 1926, the year of the First Piano Concerto, and explains the percussive piano style he developed for his own concert tours.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Bartók**

Amanda Bayley, Cambridge University Press 2001

Essays by Bartók scholars on the folk-music research, the piano writing and the concertos, for readers who want to go further into how the First Concerto is put together.

SOURCES

1. Jakub Hrůša and Yuja Wang, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/57083/>
2. Nocturne in B major (Dvořák), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne_in_B_major_\(Dvořák\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne_in_B_major_(Dvořák))
3. Nocturne in B major, Op. 40, B47, antonin-dvorak.cz. <https://www.antonin-dvorak.cz/en/work/nocturne-in-b-major/>
4. Piano Concerto No. 1 (Bartók), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_\(Bartók\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_(Bartók))
5. Piano Concerto No. 1, Béla Bartók, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/2724/piano-concerto-no-1>
6. Bartók: Concerto No. 1 (1926) for piano and orchestra, Universal Edition. <https://www.universaledition.com/en/Works/1.-Konzert/P0042821>
7. Serenades (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenades_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenades_(Brahms))
8. Serenade No. 1 in D major, Op. 11, Hungarian National Philharmonic. <https://www.filharmonikusok.hu/en/?p=91378>
9. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
10. Béla Bartók, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300234374>
11. The Cambridge Companion to Bartók, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521669580>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-01-07-hrusa>

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