

Hadelich's Tchaikovsky and Brahms's Fourth

Thursday, May 7, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Nathalie Stutzmann, conductor · Augustin Hadelich, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	GLINKA 1804–1857 <i>Overture to 'Ruslan and Lyudmila'</i>	5'
2	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35</i>	35'
3	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98</i>	40'
TOTAL MUSIC		80'

Mikhail Glinka

1804–1857

Overture to 'Ruslan and Lyudmila'

5 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857) is universally regarded as the father of Russian classical music: the first Russian composer to win wide recognition in his own country and the fountainhead of the national school that followed. Born into a wealthy landowning family, he turned to music and, after studies and travels in Italy and Germany, returned home determined to create a genuinely Russian art music. His two operas, *A Life for the Tsar* and *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, and his orchestral works fused Russian folk idioms with Western technique, and their influence on the next generation (Balakirev, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and through them Tchaikovsky) was immense. Inventive, cosmopolitan and harmonically adventurous (he was among the first to use the whole-tone scale), Glinka opened the door through which all of Russian music would pass.

ABOUT THE WORK

The *Overture to Ruslan and Lyudmila* is one of the most exhilarating curtain-raisers in the entire orchestral repertoire: five minutes of pure, breakneck energy. It opens Glinka's second opera, a fairy-tale adventure based on a poem by Pushkin in which the knight Ruslan rescues his bride Lyudmila from an evil sorcerer. The opera as a whole

is sprawling and was only a qualified success at its 1842 premiere, but its overture instantly became, and has remained, a beloved concert showpiece, a favourite season-opener and encore the world over.

It is famous (or notorious) among orchestral musicians for its sheer velocity: the rushing string passages, especially for the cellos and double basses, are a byword for difficulty. The overture also gives a foretaste of the opera's exoticism and magic, including a glimpse of the whole-tone scale Glinka used to characterise the sinister sorcerer, a daring novelty in Russian music. As the opening of Nathalie Stutzmann's Concertgebouw debut, it is a brilliant, high-spirited way to begin.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Hold on tight from the first bar: the overture bursts in at a furious tempo with a whirling, joyful tutti that barely pauses for breath. Listen for the headlong rushing string passages, with the cellos and basses scrubbing away at near-impossible speed, which give the piece its famous momentum and brilliance.

Amid the excitement, listen for the broad, warm second theme, a moment of lyrical breadth before the rush resumes. And listen, towards the end, for a strange, sliding descent built on the whole-tone scale: music with no real 'home' note, conjuring the magic and menace of the sorcerer Chernomor; it would have sounded startlingly novel in 1842. The whole thing rockets to a jubilant close. It is short, dazzling and irresistible: the perfect concert opener.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia's first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphonies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

35 minutes

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto is now one of the best-loved of all concertos, but it was born in crisis and greeted with abuse. He wrote it with astonishing speed in the spring of 1878, by the shores of Lake Geneva at Clarens, where he had fled to recover from the catastrophe of his brief, disastrous marriage. He was helped and inspired by his former pupil, the violinist Iosif Kotek, and by the example of Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole*, and the concerto poured out of him in less than a month, music of irrepressible melodic generosity and high spirits that gives no hint of the misery surrounding its composition.

Then came the setbacks. The great violinist Leopold Auer, to whom it was dedicated, declined to play it, judging passages unsuited to the instrument, and the premiere was delayed for years. When Adolph Brodsky finally gave it in Vienna in 1881, the feared critic Eduard Hanslick savaged it in print, sneering that it showed 'music can exist which stinks to the ear,' and that the violin was 'not played but beaten black and blue.' Tchaikovsky was deeply wounded. Posterity, of course, has utterly reversed the verdict: the concerto is a cornerstone of the repertoire, beloved for its soaring lyricism, its dazzling virtuosity, and its irresistible Russian dance energy.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

After a brief orchestral introduction, listen for the soloist's entrance with the first movement's great main theme, one of Tchaikovsky's most singing, expansive melodies, which the violin then spins into ever more brilliant figuration. The movement is huge and generous, building to a formidable solo cadenza (written by Tchaikovsky himself) before a thrilling close.

The slow movement (*Canzonetta*) is a tender, slightly melancholy song, muted and intimate, framed by gentle woodwind, a moment of Slavic wistfulness. It leads without a break, via a sudden surge, straight into the finale: a wild, foot-stamping rondo on Russian dance themes, full of whirling energy and earthy high spirits (this is the movement Hanslick found vulgar; listen and judge for yourself!). Throughout, savour the combina-

tion Tchaikovsky balances so perfectly: heart-on-sleeve melody, glittering virtuosity, and the irrepressible pulse of Russian dance, driving to an exhilarating finish.

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

40 minutes

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98

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

Brahms's Fourth is his last symphony and, for many, his greatest, a work of autumnal grandeur and tragic power that crowns the symphonic tradition he had inherited from Beethoven and carried forward. He wrote it in 1884 and 1885 at Mürzzuschlag in the Austrian Alps, and conducted the premiere himself in October 1885 with the famous court orchestra of Meiningen. Beforehand he tried it out on close friends in a two-piano arrangement, unsure whether it was worth an orchestra, but it was warmly received and its stature was soon recognised, and it is now seen as the summit of his art.

What sets the Fourth apart is its combination of deep feeling with extraordinary craftsmanship, nowhere more than in its astonishing finale. There Brahms looked back to the Baroque, building the entire movement as a passacaglia (or chaconne): a set of some thirty variations over a constantly repeating bass theme, adapted from a Bach cantata. It is the only one of his four symphonies to end in the minor, refusing the expected triumphant resolution and instead driving to a close of tragic, inexorable force. The whole symphony has an air of valediction: the work of a master looking back over the tradition and his own life. Yet it is also music of tremendous energy, warmth and beauty.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens with one of Brahms's most beautiful and immediately affecting themes: a gently falling, sighing melody in the violins that seems to begin in mid-thought. Listen for its autumnal lyricism, and for how Brahms builds from it a movement of great sweep and, by the end, tragic power.

The second movement (Andante) opens with a haunting, archaic-sounding horn call and unfolds as a noble, song-like meditation. The third movement is the surprise: a genuine boisterous scherzo (rare for Brahms), brilliant and exuberant, with triangle and piccolo adding sparkle: a burst of almost rowdy energy. Then comes the extraordinary finale: listen for the stern theme stated at the very start by the wind and brass, and then for how Brahms repeats its bass pattern over and over, some thirty times, building an ever-changing set of variations above it. Listen for the desolate central section with its great flute solo, and for the way the music gathers itself and drives, with mounting intensity, to a shattering close in the minor, one of the most powerful and uncompromising endings in all of symphonic music.

Tonight's artists

Augustin Hadelich *violin*

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto asks for everything at once: soaring lyricism, dazzling virtuosity, and the earthy energy of Russian dance, all delivered with a beautiful tone that can ride above a full orchestra. Augustin Hadelich, renowned for the warmth and refinement of his sound as much as for his formidable technique, is an ideal advocate, able to make the concerto sing as well as sparkle, and to give its once-derided finale all its exhilarating drive.

Augustin Hadelich, born in Italy in 1984 to German parents and now an American citizen, is one of the most acclaimed violinists in the world. After a childhood on a Tuscan farm, and recovery from a serious fire injury in his teens, he trained at the Juilliard School and rose to international prominence by winning the gold medal at the 2006 Indianapolis Competition. A Grammy Award winner with a vast repertoire and a celebrated discography, he is admired for the beauty and refinement of his tone, his flawless technique and his deep musical intelligence. He joined the faculty of the Yale School of Music in 2021. His combination of brilliance and lyricism makes him an ideal interpreter of the great Romantic concertos.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music**

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

A single-volume life of Tchaikovsky by a leading scholar, covering the year 1878 when he wrote the Violin Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

A rich, readable life of Brahms that reaches the Fourth Symphony, his last.

DEEPER **Brahms: The Four Symphonies**

Walter Frisch, Yale University Press 2003

A study of Brahms's symphonies, with a close reading of the Fourth and its closing passacaglia.

SOURCES

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Johannes Brahms · Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98

2. Augustin Hadelich plays Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto with the Concertgebouw Orchestra, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/11154811-augustin-hadelich-plays-tchaikovskys-violin-concerto-with-the-concertgebouw-orchestra>
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4. Mikhail Glinka, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Glinka
5. Violin Concerto (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Tchaikovsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Tchaikovsky))
6. Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto in D, Classic FM. <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/tchaikovsky/music/violin-concerto-d/>
7. Symphony No. 4 (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Brahms))
8. Johannes Brahms: Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Classic FM. <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/brahms/music/johannes-brahms-symphony-no4-e-minor/>
9. Nathalie Stutzmann, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathalie_Stutzmann
10. Augustin Hadelich, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustin_Hadelich
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12. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
13. Brahms: The Four Symphonies, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300099652>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-05-07-stutzmann>

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