

Mind the Gap: Marsalis, Dawson and the Black American Voice

Thursday, June 18, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Antony Hermus, conductor · Miro Petkov, trumpet · Davóne Tines, bass-baritone

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	NABORS b. 1991 <i>Pulse</i>	12'
2	MARSALIS b. 1961 <i>Trumpet Concerto</i>	35'
3	TRADITIONAL <i>I'm Troubled in Mind (orch. Thomas Beijer)</i>	5'
4	KERN 1885–1945 <i>Ol' Man River (orch. Thomas Beijer)</i>	5'
5	DAWSON 1899–1990 <i>Negro Folk Symphony</i>	35'
TOTAL MUSIC		92'

Brian Raphael Nabors

12 minutes

b. 1991

Pulse

THE COMPOSER

Brian Raphael Nabors (born 1991 in Birmingham, Alabama) is a rising American composer whose music fuses the classical tradition with the gospel, jazz and R&B that surrounded him growing up. After study at Samford University and the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, he writes music ‘immersed in southern culture and inspired by the resilience of the human spirit.’ A 2020 Fulbright Fellow, he has been widely performed by major American orchestras and is admired for the rhythmic vitality, colour and communicative energy of his scores.

ABOUT THE WORK

Pulse, composed in 2017 and expanded for full orchestra in 2019 (when the Nashville Symphony gave the premiere), is a vivid orchestral curtain-raiser by the young American composer Brian Raphael Nabors. As its title suggests, the piece is all about rhythm: Nabors describes it as ‘an episodic rhapsody’ exploring different phases and colourful variants of rhythm, all held together by a single, unwavering pulse that runs through the whole work like a heartbeat. Each episode, he says, is meant to evoke a different scene of life: a buzzing modern city, a teeming wilderness, the endless depths of the ocean.

Nabors’s musical language draws on his roots in gospel, jazz and R&B as much as on the classical tradition, and Pulse crackles with that energy. It makes an ideal, high-octane opening to a programme celebrating Black American composers, announcing the evening’s spirit of vitality and forward motion.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the pulse itself, the steady, driving rhythmic engine that underpins the entire piece and never lets up. Around it, Nabors spins a sequence of contrasting ‘episodes,’ so listen for the changes of scene: bustling, syncopated passages full of urban energy; broader, more atmospheric stretches; and the colourful, jazz- and gospel-tinged harmonies that flavour his orchestral writing. It is bright, kinetic and immediately engaging, music designed to grab the ear and set the body moving.

Wynton Marsalis

35 minutes

b. 1961

Trumpet Concerto

THE COMPOSER

Wynton Marsalis (born 1961 in New Orleans) is one of the towering figures of American music: a virtuoso trumpeter equally celebrated in jazz and classical music, a composer, bandleader and educator. He made history in 1983–84 as the only artist ever to win Grammy Awards in both classical and jazz categories in the same year, and in 1997 became the first jazz musician to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music, for his oratorio *Blood on the Fields*. As artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center he has been a tireless champion of jazz as ‘America’s classical music,’ and as a composer he increasingly bridges the two worlds, writing symphonies, concertos and large-scale works that fuse jazz idioms with the European classical tradition.

ABOUT THE WORK

Wynton Marsalis's Trumpet Concerto is a major recent addition to the repertoire from a musician uniquely placed to write it, one of the supreme trumpeters of our age, equally at home in jazz and classical music. Written for the principal trumpet of the Cleveland Orchestra, Michael Sachs, and co-commissioned by the Cleveland Orchestra, the Verbier Festival and the London Symphony Orchestra, it received its premiere in Cleveland in April 2023. It is a large, ambitious work (six movements, around thirty-five minutes) in which Marsalis pours his whole musical world into the classical concerto form: New Orleans jazz, the blues, bebop, Louis Armstrong and the French trumpet tradition all rub shoulders with symphonic development and virtuoso display.

The concerto is both a showcase for the soloist's complete command of the instrument (its lyricism, agility, range and expressive colour) and a panorama of American music. Tonight the solo part is taken not by a visiting star but by the orchestra's own principal trumpet, Miro Petkov, stepping forward from within the ensemble. It is a substantial, kaleidoscopic centrepiece for a programme celebrating the richness of the Black American musical tradition.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is a big, multi-movement journey, so settle in and follow its changing moods. Listen for the way Marsalis blends idioms: passages of bluesy, vocal lyricism (the trumpet 'singing' or 'crying' in the manner of a great jazz soloist) set against more formal, classically-developed orchestral writing; bright, swinging, syncopated music alongside reflective, soulful slow movements.

Keep your ear on the solo trumpet's astonishing range of expression, from brilliant, high-flying virtuosity to muted, intimate, almost speech-like phrases, and the bent notes and growls of the jazz tradition. Marsalis asks the soloist to be both a classical virtuoso and a jazz storyteller. Listen, too, for echoes of New Orleans, of the blues and of Louis Armstrong woven into the symphonic fabric. It is a concerto that celebrates the trumpet in all its guises, and the deep common roots of America's classical and vernacular music.

Traditional

I'm Troubled in Mind (orch. Thomas Beijer)

THE COMPOSER

The African American spiritual is one of the great bodies of folk music: sacred songs created by enslaved people in the American South, fusing African musical roots with Christian texts, and carrying coded messages of faith, endurance and the longing for freedom. Passed down orally and later collected, arranged and brought to the concert stage (notably by composers such as Harry Burleigh and William L. Dawson), the spirituals are foundational to American music, feeding into gospel, blues and jazz. They are credited simply to 'Traditional,' their individual authors lost to history.

ABOUT THE WORK

'I'm Troubled in Mind' is an African American spiritual, one of the sacred folk songs born among enslaved people in the American South, whose simple, profound melodies and texts of suffering and hope are among the deepest roots of American music. Like all spirituals it is credited to 'Traditional': its original creators are unknown, the song handed down through generations before being written down and arranged for the concert platform.

Here it is heard in an orchestral arrangement by the Dutch pianist-composer Thomas Beijer, sung by the bass-baritone Davóne Tines, a singer who has made the spiritual and the legacy of Paul Robeson central to his art. Placed within this festival programme, it connects the symphonic works around it to the living wellspring of the folk tradition from which so much Black American music flows.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is a short, deeply felt song, so simply let the melody and the voice carry you. Listen for the plain, aching beauty of the spiritual's tune, and for the weight of feeling the bass-baritone brings to its words of trouble and faith. Beijer's orchestration will frame the voice in warm instrumental colour; the art here is in restraint and sincerity rather than display: a moment of intimate, sorrowing song amid the larger orchestral canvases of the evening.

Jerome Kern

1885–1945

Ol' Man River (orch. Thomas Beijer)

THE COMPOSER

Jerome Kern (1885–1945) was one of the founding fathers of the American musical and a master melodist of the Great American Songbook. Across a prolific career he helped transform the Broadway musical from a loose revue into an integrated drama, above all with *Show Boat* (1927, with lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II), a landmark that tackled serious themes of race and hardship. His songs, among them ‘Ol’ Man River,’ ‘Smoke Gets in Your Eyes’ and the Academy Award-winning ‘The Way You Look Tonight,’ have become standards beloved by singers and jazz musicians alike. His gift for long, sweeping, deeply expressive melody influenced generations of American songwriters.

ABOUT THE WORK

‘Ol’ Man River’ is the great anthem of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s groundbreaking 1927 musical *Show Boat*, and one of the most famous songs in the American theatre. Sung in the show by a Black dockworker, it contrasts the unending, indifferent flow of the Mississippi (‘he just keeps rollin’ along’) with the suffering and toil of the people who labour on its banks. With its hymn-like melody and its undertow of weariness and quiet protest, it transcended its origins to become a song of endurance and dignity, indelibly associated with the great bass-baritone Paul Robeson, who made it his own.

Heard tonight in an orchestral arrangement by Thomas Beijer and sung by Davóne Tines, whose acclaimed album *Robeson* pays tribute to that legacy, it sits perfectly in a programme exploring the Black American voice in music, a Broadway classic with the weight of a spiritual.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the broad, rolling melody, which seems to flow like the great river it describes, in long, sweeping phrases that build to the famous climactic line. The power of ‘Ol’ Man River’ lies in its combination of nobility and sorrow: a tune of hymn-like grandeur carrying words of hardship and endurance. In the hands of a great bass-baritone like Davóne Tines, heir to the Robeson tradition, listen for the dignity, depth and quiet defiance he brings to it: a show tune that, sung this way, becomes something close to a sacred song.

William L. Dawson

1899–1990

Negro Folk Symphony

THE COMPOSER

William Levi Dawson (1899–1990) was a pioneering African American composer, conductor and educator. Born in Anniston, Alabama, he ran away from home at thirteen to study at the Tuskegee Institute, the historically Black college to which he later returned to build a celebrated music programme, making the Tuskegee Choir internationally famous through his masterful arrangements of spirituals. His major orchestral work, the *Negro Folk Symphony*, made him one of the first African American composers to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra. Dawson devoted much of his life to preserving and elevating the African American spiritual, and his choral arrangements remain staples of the repertoire. He was a foundational figure in the recognition of Black American concert music.

ABOUT THE WORK

William L. Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* is a landmark of American music, and its rediscovery in recent years has been one of the happier stories in the concert hall. Composed in 1934, it was given a triumphant premiere that year by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, with a performance at Carnegie Hall soon after. Audiences broke with convention to applaud after the second movement and gave standing ovations at the end, and the work made Dawson one of the very first African American composers (after William Grant Still and Florence Price) to have a symphony championed by a major orchestra. Yet it then fell into neglect for decades, and is only now reclaiming its place.

Dawson's aim was to create a symphony that was both fully symphonic and authentically rooted in the African American folk tradition. He built the work around spirituals he had cherished since childhood, weaving their melodies into a large three-movement structure of real power and lyrical beauty. After travelling in West Africa in 1952–53, he revised the score, deepening its rhythmic life with what he had heard there. The symphony's three movements bear evocative titles ('The Bond of Africa,' 'Hope in the Night' and 'O, Le' Me Shine, Shine Like a Morning Star!'), tracing an arc from the trauma of enslavement and the severed 'bond' with Africa toward endurance and, finally, triumphant affirmation. It is a fitting, powerful culmination to this festival programme.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, throughout, for the spirituals at the symphony's heart, folk melodies that surface in the orchestra, sometimes plainly, sometimes grandly developed. Dawson described a motif representing the link 'taken out of a human chain when the first African was taken from the shores of his native land'; listen for it in the horn at the very start of the first movement.

The first movement, 'The Bond of Africa,' moves from darkness and longing to surging energy. The slow movement, 'Hope in the Night,' is the emotional core, brooding and sorrowful, evoking the suffering of the enslaved, with a long, aching central song. The finale bursts out in jubilation, driving the symphony to an exuberant, life-affirming close; listen for the African-inspired rhythmic vitality Dawson added after his travels. It is music of great sweep and heart, and a moving end to an evening celebrating the Black American voice.

Tonight's artists

Miro Petkov *trumpet*

There is a special pleasure in hearing a concerto soloist drawn from within the orchestra's own ranks. Miro Petkov, the Concertgebouw Orchestra's principal trumpet, takes on Wynton Marsalis's hugely demanding concerto, a work that asks for classical polish and jazz-inflected expressiveness in equal measure, bringing an insider's blend with the orchestra to a piece written to show off everything the trumpet can do.

Miro Petkov is the principal trumpet of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, one of the most coveted brass chairs in the world. As principal he leads the orchestra's trumpet section and takes its most exposed solo lines; here he steps forward from the ranks of the orchestra to take the demanding solo part in Wynton Marsalis's Trumpet Concerto.

Davóne Tines *bass-baritone*

Davóne Tines is the ideal voice for the heart of this programme. A bass-baritone who has made the spiritual and the legacy of Paul Robeson central to his artistry (his album Robeson is a direct homage), he brings depth, dignity and dramatic power to 'I'm Troubled in Mind' and to 'Ol' Man River,' the song Robeson made immortal. In his hands these become not period pieces but living statements, connecting the festival's symphonic works to the human voice at the source of the tradition.

Davóne Tines, born in 1986, is an American bass-baritone celebrated as one of the most compelling and original artists of his generation: a singer, creator and curator who has redefined what a recital and an opera role can be. A Harvard and Juilliard graduate, he has created roles in new operas by composers including John Adams, Terence Blanchard and Matthew Aucoin, and has worked closely with the director Peter Sellars. His acclaimed 2024 album Robeson pays tribute to the pioneering bass-baritone and activist Paul Robeson, and his work consistently engages with Black history, spirituals and social justice. He was awarded the Chanel Next Prize in 2024.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE Dvořák's Prophecy: And the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music

Joseph Horowitz, W. W. Norton 2021

Horowitz traces Dvořák's call for an American music built on Black spirituals and follows it to composers such as William Levi Dawson, whose Negro Folk Symphony closes this programme.

ACCESSIBLE Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life

Wynton Marsalis, Random House 2009

Wynton Marsalis in his own words on jazz, the blues and what they teach, a way into the musical world behind his Trumpet Concerto.

DEEPER The Music of Black Americans: A History

Eileen Southern, W. W. Norton 1997

A broad history of Black American music from spirituals to the concert hall, giving the background to I'm Troubled in Mind and to Dawson's symphony.

SOURCES

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<https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/festival-mind-the-gap-wynton-marsalis-trumpet-concerto-2026-06-18/>

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15. Ol' Man River, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ol%27_Man_River
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17. Negro Folk Symphony, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negro_Folk_Symphony
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-06-18-hermus>

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