

Henze's Chaconne and Brahms's Second

Wednesday, December 9, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Fabio Luisi, conductor · Julia Fischer, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	MEYER b. 1991 <i>Fleur de verre</i>	10'
2	HENZE 1926–2012 <i>Il Vitalino raddoppiato</i>	28'
3	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		80'

Sophie Søs Meyer

b. 1991

Fleur de verre

10 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Sophie Søs Meyer is a young Danish composer, introduced by the Concertgebouw Orchestra as one of the up-and-coming voices in Scandinavian new music. Her music tends to grow out of vivid extramusical images, and *Fleur de verre*, the piece heard here, is a case in point: it was inspired by the skeleton flower, an Asian plant whose petals turn transparent in the rain, which the orchestra describes as ‘transparent, fragile and proud.’

ABOUT THE WORK

The evening opens with a contemporary voice: *Fleur de verre* (‘glass flower’) by the young Danish composer Sophie Søs Meyer. Meyer belongs to a generation of Scandinavian composers for whom orchestral sound is as much about texture, colour and atmosphere as about theme and development, and this piece begins from a vivid image. Its starting point is the skeleton flower, whose petals turn transparent in the rain: at once delicate and brittle, beautiful and on the edge of vanishing, it is the sort of fragile, ambiguous picture from which her music likes to grow.

Placing a work by a young composer at the head of a programme that ends with Brahms is a characteristic piece of Concertgebouw programming: it asks us to hear the great Romantic symphony with fresh ears, and to set the orchestra's storied sound at the service of music being written right now. Rather than approach *Fleur de verre* with expectations drawn from the classics that follow, it rewards simply listening to its surfaces and colours.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Come to this one with open ears and few preconceptions. With music of this kind, the rewards lie less in following tunes than in attending to texture and atmosphere: the way sounds emerge and dissolve, the play of orchestral colour, the sense of a fragile image (glass, light, a flower) translated into shifting sonority. Listen for how Meyer uses the full resources of the orchestra not to build a traditional argument but to conjure a state, an atmosphere, a single sustained image rendered in sound. It is a brief, concentrated opening, a pane of glass held up to the light before the Baroque-tinged Henze and the warmth of Brahms.

Hans Werner Henze

28 minutes

1926–2012

Il Vitalino raddoppiato

THE COMPOSER

Hans Werner Henze was one of the most significant and prolific composers of the late twentieth century. Born in Gütersloh, Westphalia, in 1926, he came of age in Nazi Germany: enrolled in the Hitler Youth as a boy, conscripted in 1944, and taken prisoner by the British before the war's end. These experiences, combined with his homosexuality (then criminalized in Germany), drove him into permanent exile in Italy from 1953, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Henze's music defies easy categorization. Having studied briefly with the serialists at Darmstadt, he rejected their dogmatism in favor of a freely eclectic style drawing on serialism, tonality, Stravinsky, Italian opera, Arabic music, and jazz. His vast output includes ten symphonies, numerous operas and ballets, concertos, and chamber works. Major successes came at the Salzburg Festival with *Die Bassariden* (1966) and *L'Upupa* (2003).

In the 1960s, Henze became politically radicalized, joining the Italian Communist Party and spending 1969-70 teaching in Cuba. Yet his political convictions never simplified his music, which remained as rich and complex as his own contradictory life. He died in Dresden in 2012, aged eighty-six.

The Berliner Philharmoniker first played his *Barcarola* in 1982 under the composer's own baton.

ABOUT THE WORK

Hans Werner Henze (1926–2012) was one of the towering figures of post-war European music, and *Il Vitalino raddoppiato*, for solo violin and chamber orchestra, written in 1977, is one of his most fascinating works. Its starting point is a famous Baroque relic: the great Chaconne in G minor for violin and continuo long attributed, though not beyond dispute, to the Italian composer-violinist Tomaso Antonio Vitali. Henze takes this haunting old piece and ‘doubles’ it (that is roughly what the punning title means), building from it an elaborate set of variations. It has aptly been called ‘a chaconne on a chaconne.’

The genius of the piece is the way it travels through time. It begins very close to the Baroque original, the solo violin spinning out the chaconne’s grave, descending bass pattern in something like its old style; but as the variations accumulate, Henze gradually pulls the music into the twentieth century, the harmonies clouding and fracturing, the textures growing stranger and more luminous, until, in its final third, it arrives at music of acerbic modernity, including what one writer called a ‘hallucinatory cadenza.’ Critics have praised it as both serious and profound: ‘sometimes acerbic, sometimes achingly beautiful,’ in one description. It is a virtuoso vehicle for the soloist and a remarkable meditation on the past, on what happens when a modern composer takes an old masterpiece and lets it slowly transform under his hands.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The key to this piece is its sense of journey through musical time, so listen for the gradual transformation. At the start, the solo violin presents the old Vitali chaconne theme, a slow, dignified, descending pattern, unmistakably Baroque, and the early variations stay close to that world: ornate, expressive, almost like a period performance.

Then follow how Henze begins to pull the music away from its origins. The harmonies grow more pungent and ambiguous, the orchestral colours stranger, the violin writing increasingly free and virtuosic, until the Baroque frame has dissolved into something thoroughly modern. The high point is the soloist’s extended cadenza late in the work, where the music turns most hallucinatory and intense. Keep one ear on that steady chaconne bass-pattern underneath it all: even as the surface is transformed almost beyond recognition, the old foundation keeps the piece anchored. It is the sound of three centuries collapsing into a single span.

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73

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

If Brahms's First Symphony cost him more than two decades of labour, weighed down by the shadow of Beethoven, his Second came as if on a holiday. He wrote it in the summer of 1877 during a stay at Pörttschach, a beautiful village on the Wörthersee in the Austrian Alps, and the contrast with the stormy, hard-won C-minor First could hardly be greater. Sunny, songful and pastoral, the D-major Symphony has often been likened to Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Sixth, and is sometimes nicknamed Brahms's own 'Pastoral.' He wrote it quickly and happily, in surroundings he found idyllic, and it shows.

True to character, Brahms could not resist undercutting all this warmth with a joke. He wrote to his publisher that the new symphony was 'so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it,' and that 'the score must come out in mourning,' edged in black. It was pure Brahmsian irony: the work is among the most genial and life-affirming he ever wrote. Yet the quip is not entirely empty: beneath the sunlit sur-

face there runs a thread of autumnal shadow, a wistfulness that gives the symphony its depth and keeps the brightness from ever turning saccharine.

The premiere was given by the Vienna Philharmonic under Hans Richter on 30 December 1877 (postponed from 9 December because the players were busy learning Wagner's *Das Rheingold*), and it was an immediate and lasting success, quickly becoming one of the best-loved of all symphonies.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony grows from a tiny seed planted in its very first bars: a three-note turn in the cellos and basses (down–up) that recurs, transformed, throughout the work. Listen for it at the warm, flowing opening, and for the gentle horn calls that follow; this first movement is broad and lyrical, but notice the sudden shadow cast early on by soft, solemn trombones, the ‘mourning’ Brahms half-joked about.

The slow movement (*Adagio non troppo*) is the symphony's most serious music: deeply felt, harmonically rich, with long-spun cello melody and a searching, complex argument. The third movement is a delight: not a driving scherzo but a graceful, gently rocking intermezzo led by the oboe, twice interrupted by quicker, skipping episodes that grow from the same tune. Then comes the finale, which begins hushed and conspiratorial before bursting into exuberant high spirits; listen for how Brahms builds the momentum and saves his trump card for the very end, where the trombones ring out a blazing D-major peroration to close the symphony in pure jubilation.

Tonight's artists

Julia Fischer *violin*

Henze's *Il Vitalino raddoppiato* is a formidable showcase, demanding a soloist who can move convincingly from Baroque poise to acerbic modernist intensity across a single span, and sustain a long, hallucinatory cadenza at its heart. Julia Fischer, with her flawless technique and searching musicianship, is ideally equipped for that journey through musical time. The Concertgebouw notes this as her first appearance with the orchestra, making the encounter doubly worth hearing: a great violinist and a great orchestra meeting for the first time, in a work that asks everything of the soloist.

Julia Fischer, born in Munich in 1983, is one of the most admired violinists in the world and, remarkably, an accomplished concert pianist as well. A prodigious talent, she came to international attention as a child, winning the junior category of the Yehudi Menuhin Competition in 1995, and has since built a career of the highest distinction, appearing with the leading orchestras and conductors and amassing a celebrated discography. Her playing is prized for its flawless technique, purity of tone and probing musical intelligence, qualities that have made her as compelling in the great Romantic concertos as in Bach, Mozart and contemporary repertoire. A dedicated teacher and chamber musician, she is admired not only for her artistry but for the seriousness and integrity she brings to musical life.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

A full, readable life of Brahms, with the summer of 1877 at Pörttschach on the Wörthersee, where he wrote the sunny Second Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **Bohemian Fifths: An Autobiography**

Hans Werner Henze, Princeton University Press 2015

Henze's own account of his life, which shows the love of Italy and its older music behind a work like *Il Vitalino raddoppiato*.

DEEPER **Brahms: The Four Symphonies**

Walter Frisch, Yale University Press 2003

Frisch examines each of Brahms's symphonies in turn, with a detailed chapter on the Second and how it answers the weight of the First.

SOURCES

1. Brahms's Second Symphony with Fabio Luisi, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwamsterdam.nl/en/calendar/bramhss-second-symphony-with-fabio-luisi-2026-12-09/>
2. Fabio Luisi and the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Brahms's Symphony No. 2, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/45889149-fabio-luisi-and-the-concertgebouw-orchestra-in-bramhss-symphony-no.-2>
3. Concert listing: Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Luisi, Julia Fischer, Bachtrack. <https://bachtrack.com/22/291/view/439582>
4. Fabio Luisi, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fabio_Luisi
5. Chaconne in G minor, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaconne_in_G_minor
6. List of compositions by Hans Werner Henze, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Hans_Werner_Henze
7. Symphony No. 2 (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Brahms))
8. Deep listen: Brahms's Second Symphony, ABC Classic. <https://www.abc.net.au/classic/features/deep-listen-brahms-second-symphony/9710648>
9. Julia Fischer, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julia_Fischer
10. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
11. Bohemian Fiftys: An Autobiography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780691607092>
12. Brahms: The Four Symphonies, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300099652>



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Version 3, 30 September 2026