

A Symphony and a Concerto: All Brahms

Saturday, August 22, 2026 · 11:00 · Großes Festspielhaus
Christian Thielemann, conductor · Augustin Hadelich, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77</i>	38'
2	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68</i>	48'
TOTAL MUSIC		86'

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77

38 minutes

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 composed his only violin concerto in 1878, in the glow of a productive summer at Pörttschach on the Wörthersee, the Carinthian lakeside resort where he spent his summers from 1877 to 1879. He wrote it for one man above all: the violinist Joseph Joachim, the closest musical friend of his life. The two had met in 1853, when Brahms was an unknown twenty-year-old and Joachim already a celebrated virtuoso; it was Joachim who sent the young composer to Schumann with a letter of introduction, setting his whole career in motion. A quarter-century later, Brahms repaid that debt with a concerto written expressly for Joachim's art, and written, crucially, with his help. Brahms knew the piano intimately but was no string player, and he sent Joachim the solo part for advice on its technical detail, accepting some suggestions and stubbornly rejecting others. The collaboration was not always smooth (Joachim found passages awkward, and not all his fixes survived Brahms's editorial obstinacy), but the result is one of the supreme concertos in the literature.

It is also a famously difficult one, though not in the showy manner of a Paganini display piece. Brahms conceived the concerto as a symphonic work with a solo violin woven into its fabric, rather than a vehicle for the soloist to dominate. The orchestra is a full partner; the violin must spin out melodies, weave through dense textures, and battle to be heard against rich orchestral writing, all while negotiating double-stops and stretches that lie ungratefully under the hand. The quip that Brahms had written a concerto not for the violin but against it, attributed both to the conductor Hans von Bülow and to the violinist Joseph Hellmesberger, is a barb that captures the work's uncompromising integration of soloist and ensemble. The great virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate reportedly declined to play it, objecting that he would not stand on the rostrum, violin in hand, listening to the oboe play the only tune in the Adagio.

That jibe points to one of the concerto's most beloved features. The premiere was given on 1 January 1879 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, with Joachim as soloist and Brahms conducting, and although the early reception was respectful rather than rapturous, the concerto steadily took its place beside Beethoven's as one of the two great German violin concertos, works so often paired that they are sometimes called the twin pillars of the repertoire. Both are in D major, both treat the violin as a symphonic voice rather than a circus act, and both reward depth of musicianship over mere brilliance. Joachim provided the cadenza for the first movement that most violinists still play, and his shaping of the solo part remains audible in every performance.

Brahms originally planned the concerto in four movements, with two central movements between the outer ones, but discarded them and substituted what he called a 'feeble Adagio', a characteristically gruff dismissal of music that is in fact serenely beautiful. The finished work is in the standard three movements, scored for the same warm, dark-hued orchestra Brahms favoured, and it balances grandeur, lyric tenderness, and, in its finale, an irrepressible folk-flavoured exuberance.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement (*Allegro non troppo*) is broad and symphonic, opening with a long orchestral exposition before the soloist enters, and when the violin does arrive, it is not with a pretty tune but with a stormy, declamatory flourish, as if seizing the argument by force. Listen to how Brahms treats the solo line throughout as a partner in a symphonic discussion rather than a star above an accompaniment: the violin spins long lyrical paragraphs, then plunges into dense passagework that interweaves with the orchestra. The movement's emotional range is wide, from sweeping grandeur to moments of intimate songfulness, and it builds to a cadenza (traditionally Joachim's) where the soloist alone reflects on the movement's themes before the orchestra returns for the close.

The second movement (*Adagio*) is the concerto's lyrical heart, and its most famous stroke is that the great opening melody is given not to the violin but to a solo oboe, singing a serene, hymn-like tune over gentle winds. This is the very passage Sarasate refused to stand idle through. When the soloist finally enters, it does not simply repeat the oboe's theme but elaborates and embroiders it, decorating the melody with tender filigree and rising to passages of rapt, almost vocal expression. Listen for the dialogue between violin and woodwinds, a conversation of unusual intimacy and warmth.

The finale (*Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace*) bursts in with a swaggering, Hungarian-flavoured main theme, a nod to Joachim's Hungarian birth and to the gypsy idiom both men loved. It is a rondo, the bold, dancing refrain returning between contrasting episodes, full of off-beat accents, fiery double-stops, and rhythmic drive. Listen for the music's earthy, foot-stamping energy and its sudden flashes of brilliance, and for the closing

pages, where Brahms transforms the theme into a brisk, march-like coda that drives the concerto to a high-spirited, triumphant finish.

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

48 minutes

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68

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.

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ABOUT THE WORK

Few symphonies were born of so long a labour, or so heavy a burden of expectation, as Brahms's First. Its earliest sketches date from the mid-1850s, but he did not complete the work until 1876, when he was forty-three; Brahms himself reckoned that it had taken him twenty-one years. The reason was not idleness but awe. Brahms had been hailed in print as early as 1853, when he was barely twenty, by Robert Schumann, who in a famous article anointed the young man as the heir who would carry German music forward. The anointing was a gift and a curse. To write a symphony in the German tradition meant, inescapably, to follow Beethoven, and the weight of that inheritance

very nearly paralysed Brahms. ‘You can’t have any idea,’ he told the conductor Hermann Levi, ‘what it’s like to hear such a giant marching behind you.’

The Beethoven shadow falls across the finished work in ways both general and specific. The symphony’s overall trajectory, a struggle in the dark key of C minor that fights its way through to a blazing C major triumph, is the very arc of Beethoven’s Fifth, and indeed of the whole heroic symphonic idea. More pointedly, the broad, hymn-like main theme of the last movement bears an unmistakable family resemblance to the ‘Ode to Joy’ melody from Beethoven’s Ninth. Brahms knew perfectly well that listeners would notice. When the resemblance was pointed out to him, he is said to have growled, ‘Any ass can see that’, a remark that manages to be both a defiance and an admission. The conductor Hans von Bülow, an early champion, went further and dubbed the work ‘Beethoven’s Tenth,’ a nickname that has stuck to it ever since.

For all its debts, the First Symphony is wholly Brahms’s own in substance and craft. Where Beethoven tends to build from terse, hammered motifs, Brahms thinks in long, intertwining lines and in dense, richly woven textures, the inner voices of the orchestra always alive with counterpoint. The mood, too, is distinctly autumnal and Northern: grave, searching, often tinged with melancholy even at its most affirmative. The premiere took place in Karlsruhe on 4 November 1876, conducted by Felix Otto Dessoff, and the work was quickly taken up across Germany and Austria. It established Brahms at a stroke as the leading symphonist of his generation and silenced any lingering doubt about whether the long-promised heir would deliver. Three more symphonies followed within a decade, but the First retains a special intensity: it is the sound of a great composer wrestling, in public and at last, with the giant at his back, and winning.

Brahms scores the symphony for a Classical orchestra modestly expanded (pairs of woodwinds with added contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones reserved for the finale, timpani, and strings), and the orchestration is notably grave and dark-hued, favouring the lower and middle registers. The whole work is bound together by a few germinal ideas, above all a rising chromatic figure and a falling one that grind against each other from the very first bars, so that the eventual arrival of the great C major chorale feels less like a contrast than a hard-won resolution of everything that came before.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens with one of the most arresting introductions in the repertoire: over a relentless, pounding timpani pulse, the strings strain upward while the winds press downward, two lines pulling in opposite directions in a knot of tension. Listen to that slow introduction closely, because its rising and falling chromatic shapes are the seeds of the entire symphony. When the main Allegro arrives it inherits this agitation directly, restless, contrapuntal and churning, and the movement stays gripped by C minor struggle almost throughout, its energy more anxious than heroic.

The second movement (*Andante sostenuto*) is a balm after the storm: a warm, songful slow movement in E major, with long-spun melodies passed among oboe, clarinet, and strings. Listen near the close for a tender, soaring solo violin, rising above the orchestra in one of Brahms's most intimate touches, a moment of pure lyric repose.

The third movement takes the place of the expected scherzo, but Brahms refuses the boisterous Beethovenian model. Instead he writes a gentle, graceful intermezzo (*Un poco allegretto e grazioso*), led off by a flowing clarinet melody, with a faster, more buoyant central section. It is relaxed and conversational, a deliberate easing of pressure before the great final reckoning.

The finale is the heart of the work and its goal. It begins in shadow, a slow and ominous introduction in C minor full of foreboding, until suddenly the clouds break and a horn rings out with a broad, glowing call. Brahms had jotted this melody on a card to Clara Schumann in 1868 ('Thus blew the shepherd's horn today!'), fitting it to the words 'High on the mountain, deep in the valley, I greet you a thousand times'; here it sounds like a summons to dawn. A solemn trombone chorale answers, and then, out of this radiant threshold, the strings launch the great main theme, the broad, hymn-like tune so often likened to Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy.' From there the movement drives forward with mounting jubilation, and at the very end the trombone chorale returns in blazing C major brass, sealing the symphony's long journey from darkness to triumphant light.

Tonight's artists

Augustin Hadelich *violin*

Violin: Augustin Hadelich takes on Brahms's only violin concerto, a work that demands not virtuoso display but the ability to sing as one symphonic voice among many, from the stormy entry of the first movement, through the rapt elaboration of the oboe's Adagio melody, to the fiery, Hungarian-flavoured dance of the finale.

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 **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

A long, vivid life of Brahms that covers the slow birth of the First Symphony and the friendship with Joachim behind the Violin Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters**

Styra Avins, Oxford University Press 2001

Brahms in his own words, a richly annotated selection of letters from the years of the Violin Concerto and the First Symphony.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Brahms**

Michael Musgrave, Cambridge University Press 1998

Scholarly essays on Brahms's music by genre, including chapters on the symphonies and the concertos.

SOURCES

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2. Concert Thielemann, Salzburg Festival 2026, 23 August 2026 (same programme), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-thielemann/10851/>

3. Salzburg Festival 2026: Hadelich, Thielemann and the Wiener Philharmoniker (Brahms Cycle), C Major Entertainment. <https://www.cmajor-entertainment.com/programs/salzburg-festival-2026-hadelich-thielemann-and-the-wiener-philharmoniker-brahms-cycle-a045503810000/>
4. Violin Concerto (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Brahms))
5. Brahms: Violin Concerto, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/brahms-violin-concerto>
6. Pörtschach am Wörthersee, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C3%B6rtschach_am_W%C3%B6rthersee
7. Symphony No. 1 (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_(Brahms))
8. Brahms: Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywood-bowl.com/musicdb/pieces/3903/symphony-no-1-in-c-minor-op-68>
9. Brahms' Symphony No. 1, The Orchestra Now (Bard College). <https://ton.bard.edu/brahms-symphony-no-1/>
10. Christian Thielemann, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Thielemann
11. Christian Thielemann, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/christian-thielemann>
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13. Augustin Hadelich, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/augustin-hadelich>
14. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
15. Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199247738>
16. The Cambridge Companion to Brahms, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521485814>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-08-22-thielemann>

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