

Poetry and Pastoral in Taipei

Friday, October 16, 2026 · 19:45 · National Concert Hall
Tugan Sokhiev, conductor · Lang Lang, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58</i>	34'
2	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		76'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, composed largely in 1805 and 1806, belongs to the same astonishing burst of creativity that produced the Fourth Symphony, the Violin Concerto, and the three 'Razumovsky' string quartets. It stands at the heart of what is often called Beethoven's 'heroic' middle period, yet it is anything but heroic in the conventional sense. Where the Third Concerto had been dramatic and stormy, and the later 'Emperor' would be all blazing grandeur, the Fourth is intimate, lyrical, and inward, a work that achieves its effects through poetry rather than force. It is, for many listeners and pianists alike, the most beautiful of the five.

34 minutes

The concerto received its first public performance on 22 December 1808, in one of the most legendarily overstuffed concerts in history. At the Theater an der Wien, in a freezing, under-rehearsed marathon lasting some four hours, Beethoven premiered not only this concerto but also the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, parts of the Mass in C, the concert aria 'Ah! perfido', and the Choral Fantasy. He played the solo part of the concerto himself, in what would prove to be his last appearance as a concerto soloist before deafness forced him from the platform. Contemporary accounts suggest the audience, numbed by cold and length, scarcely registered the concerto's subtleties. It took decades for the work to find its place; Felix Mendelssohn championed it in the 1830s, helping rescue it from neglect, and it has never since left the repertoire.

The most celebrated feature of the concerto announces itself in its opening bars. By long convention, a Classical concerto begins with an orchestral introduction, the soloist entering only after the orchestra has laid out the themes. Beethoven overturns this at a stroke: the piano begins entirely alone, unaccompanied, with a hushed, gentle phrase in G major, marked *dolce*. Only after the soloist has spoken does the orchestra answer, and it answers, remarkably, in the distant key of B major, a soft and luminous surprise. In a single gesture Beethoven redefines the relationship between soloist and ensemble, replacing rivalry with conversation, and confrontation with mutual listening.

The slow movement is one of the supreme achievements in all of Beethoven, and one of the most original in form. It is a stark, almost theatrical dialogue between two opposed forces: the strings alone, playing in gruff, dotted unison, stern and implacable; and the piano, answering with phrases of pleading, song-like tenderness. The two alternate without compromise at first, but gradually the piano's gentleness prevails, and the strings, softening, fall silent and subdued. Since the nineteenth century this movement has been heard as a depiction of Orpheus taming the Furies (the mythological singer soothing the guardians of the underworld with the beauty of his music), and the parallel is irresistible, even if Beethoven left no such programme. The finale, which follows without a pause, breaks the spell with a sparkling, dancing rondo, full of high spirits and rhythmic vitality, bringing the concerto home in radiant good humour.

Throughout, the Fourth Concerto reveals Beethoven thinking less about display than about colour, intimacy, and the persuasive power of a single melodic line. It asks the soloist for refinement rather than thunder: for a singing tone, a sensitivity to silence, and the patience

to let a quiet phrase carry enormous weight. In an age that prized virtuosity, Beethoven wrote a concerto whose deepest virtuosity is one of feeling.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, first, for the very opening. Before any orchestra is heard, the solo piano alone plays a soft, tender phrase: five gentle chords resolving into a quiet melody. This is the work's signature, and it asks you to lean in rather than be swept up. Notice how the orchestra then replies not in the home key but a step away, in a warmer, more distant colour, before the music settles. From this first exchange, the whole first movement unfolds as a dialogue of give and take: the piano rarely dominates, more often it muses, decorates, and converses, weaving filigree around the orchestra's themes. Listen for the cadenza near the movement's end (the soloist's extended solo flight) and for how the music sinks back to quietness afterward rather than ending in a blaze.

The slow movement (*Andante con moto*) is the heart of the concerto, and it works as a piece of wordless drama. Track the two characters carefully. The strings enter alone, playing in harsh, clipped, dotted rhythms: stern, even menacing, all in unison. The piano answers, every time, with soft, flowing, beseeching phrases. Follow this alternation as a contest: the strings stern, the piano gentle. Hear how, little by little, the piano's tenderness wears the strings down. Their phrases grow quieter, shorter, less aggressive, until they are subdued altogether and the movement dissolves into a hushed stillness. This is the Orpheus-taming-the-Furies effect, and once you hear it as a dialogue you will not forget it.

The finale follows immediately, without a break, and the change of mood is delicious. A bright, bouncing rondo theme springs up in the strings, soon caught by the piano, and the music turns playful, dancing, full of rhythmic spring. Listen for trumpets and timpani entering here for the first time in the concerto, adding a festive sparkle the earlier movements deliberately withheld. Enjoy the wit of the exchanges between piano and orchestra, the surprising harmonic side-steps, and the gathering energy toward a brilliant, high-spirited close that crowns the whole work with joy.

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 had cost him more than two decades of struggle (haunted by the shadow of Beethoven, it was famously not completed until 1876), his Second came almost as a release. He wrote it in the summer of 1877, with extraordinary speed, during a holiday at Pörschach am Wörthersee, a lakeside village in southern Austria whose Alpine beauty he adored. 'So many melodies fly about here,' he wrote to a friend, 'that one must be careful not to tread on them.' Where the First had been a hard-won victory, the Second seemed to flow from the landscape itself, and it has been loved ever since as Brahms's sunniest, most genial symphony, the one most often, and not unjustly, called his 'pastoral.'

The comparison to Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony is apt in spirit if not in detail. Brahms wrote no birdsong or babbling brook, no programme of country scenes; his is an abstract symphony in the great Classical tradition. But the warmth of the key of D major, the lilting

dance rhythms, the long-breathed song of its melodies, and the unhurried ease of its outer movements all conjure an atmosphere of open air, light, and contentment. The premiere, given by the Vienna Philharmonic under Hans Richter on 30 December 1877, was a triumph; the third movement had to be encored, and the symphony was at once recognised as a more immediately appealing work than its formidable predecessor.

Yet to hear the Second as merely sunny is to miss its depth, and Brahms knew it. With his characteristic dry humour, he warned his publisher that the new symphony was ‘so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it,’ and instructed that the score be printed ‘with a black border.’ The joke conceals a truth. From its very first bars, a darker undertow runs beneath the music’s smiling surface. The opening combines a gentle, rocking figure in the cellos and basses with a soft, ominous motto in the timpani and trombones, and those trombones, instruments Brahms reserved for moments of weight and solemnity, cast a shadow across the otherwise serene landscape. This interplay of light and shade, of pastoral ease shot through with sudden gravity, gives the symphony its peculiar richness. The contentment is real, but it is the contentment of a mature artist who knows what lies beneath.

The symphony is laid out in four movements. The expansive first movement (*Allegro non troppo*) unfolds with the spaciousness of a summer afternoon, growing from its rocking opening into broad, lyrical paragraphs, including, as its second theme, a melody clearly cousin to the beloved ‘Brahms’s Lullaby.’ The slow movement (*Adagio non troppo*) is the symphony’s most searching, a grave and complex meditation that is the closest the work comes to genuine melancholy. The third movement replaces the expected scherzo with a graceful, intermezzo-like *Allegretto*, built on a charming oboe tune and twice interrupted by faster, playful episodes; it was this movement the first audience demanded to hear again. The finale (*Allegro con spirito*) begins almost in a whisper, gathering its energies stealthily before bursting into exuberant motion, and drives toward one of the most thrilling conclusions Brahms ever wrote: a blazing coda in which the trombones, so shadowy at the symphony’s start, ring out in radiant, jubilant D major, transforming the music’s early darkness into pure light.

The Second Symphony has remained, with good reason, among the best-loved of all Brahms’s works. It offers the listener the rare combination of immediate warmth and lasting substance: music that charms on first hearing and deepens on every return.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

From the opening, listen for the three-note figure low in the cellos and basses, a small, rocking motif that Brahms will turn into the seed of the entire first movement. Almost at once, notice the soft, dark intrusion of the timpani roll and the low trombones beneath the gentle horn melody: this is the ‘black border’ Brahms joked about, a shadow slipping across an otherwise sunlit scene. Listen, too, for the second main theme, a warm, swaying tune in the cellos and violas; many listeners recognise in it the contours of Brahms’s famous Lullaby. The whole movement breathes with an unhurried, expansive ease; let it stretch out rather than waiting for drama, and savour the long-spanned melodies and the gentle, dancing triple-time pulse beneath them.

In the slow movement (Adagio), shift your attention to weight and seriousness. This is the symphony’s gravest music: a noble, song-like theme launched by the cellos that develops in long, complex lines. The texture is dense and the harmony restless; this is Brahms at his most inward and searching, and it provides the necessary counterweight to the warmth around it. Don’t expect easy tunes here; follow instead the rich, conversational unfolding of the strings and winds.

The third movement is the easiest to love, and was encored at the premiere. Listen for the graceful, slightly wistful oboe melody that opens it, supported by gently plucked cellos, a relaxed, almost rustic dance. Then notice how Brahms twice quickens the pace into faster, scampering episodes (in duple and triple time) before the oboe tune returns, each time subtly transformed. It is a movement of charm and wit, light on its feet throughout.

Save your full attention for the finale. It begins, surprisingly, almost in secret: a hushed, hurrying theme murmured low in the strings, holding its energy in reserve. Then comes the release: the orchestra erupts into bright, surging motion, and from here the music drives forward with mounting exhilaration. Track the build toward the coda, and listen for the trombones, the very instruments that cast the symphony’s opening shadow. Here, at the close, they blaze out triumphantly, crowning the work with a brilliant, joyous fanfare in D major. The shadow of the beginning is answered, and dispelled, in a final burst of light.

Tonight's artists

Lang Lang *piano*

Lang Lang is best known for virtuoso fireworks, but Beethoven's Fourth Concerto asks for something else entirely. It is the most inward of Beethoven's concertos: the piano begins alone, quietly, before the orchestra has spoken, and in the slow movement the soloist must calm the orchestra's stern unison strings with nothing but soft, singing phrases. Hearing a pianist of such outsize brilliance in a work that rewards restraint, tonal beauty and a feeling for silence is the interest of this Taipei evening, which also opens the orchestra's Asian tour with Tugan Sokhiev. Later on the tour the same programme returns with a different soloist: in Seoul on 25 October and Busan on 26 October, Seong-Jin Cho takes the solo part.

Lang Lang, born in Shenyang, China, in 1982, is one of the most widely known classical musicians in the world. He began piano lessons at the age of three, studied at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and in 1997 moved to the United States to study with Gary Graffman at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. His breakthrough came in 1999 at the Ravinia Festival, when, still a teenager, he stepped in at the last moment for the ailing André Watts to play Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a performance that made him famous almost overnight. He has since appeared with the world's leading orchestras, including the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, and recorded widely for Deutsche Grammophon and Sony Classical. A committed advocate of music education, he launched the Lang Lang International Music Foundation in 2008 to bring music to children, and in 2013 was designated a United Nations Messenger of Peace with a special focus on global education.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

A warm, readable life of Brahms that covers the sunny summer at Pörttschach where he wrote the Second Symphony, the heart of to-night's second half.

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

Swafford's Beethoven biography sets the Fourth Piano Concerto in the crowded, productive years around 1806 and the famous 1808 concert where Beethoven played it himself.

DEEPER **Brahms: The Four Symphonies**

Walter Frisch, Yale University Press 2003

A close study of Brahms's four symphonies, with a chapter on the Second that explains how its pastoral surface hides a tightly built argument.

SOURCES

1. Concert in Taipei, 16 October 2026, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-taipei/10970/>
2. Concert in Seoul, 25 October 2026 (same programme, Seong-Jin Cho), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-seoul/10959/>
3. Concert in Busan, 26 October 2026 (same programme, Seong-Jin Cho), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-busan/10974/>
4. Piano Concerto No. 4 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._4_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._4_(Beethoven))
5. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 in G, Opus 58, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/piano-concerto-no-4>
6. Symphony No. 2 (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Brahms))
7. Brahms: Symphony No. 2, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/brahms-symphony-no-2>
8. Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Symphony-No-2-in-D-Major>
9. Lang Lang, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lang_Lang
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12. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
13. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
14. Brahms: The Four Symphonies, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300099652>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-10-16-sokhiev>

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