

Two Symphonies in D

Tuesday, November 3, 2026 · 15:00 · Takasaki City Theatre
Riccardo Muti, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 36</i>	33'
2	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		75'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 36

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 Second Symphony is the sunniest of his nine, and it was finished in the darkest months of his life. He began it in 1801 and completed most of it in 1802, much of the work done during a long summer stay in Heiligenstadt, then a village on the edge of Vienna, at a time when his deafness was growing worse and he had begun to fear it could not be cured. On 6 October 1802, at the end of that stay, he wrote a long letter to his brothers Carl and Johann, meant to be read after his death, in which he described the humiliation of standing beside someone who could hear a distant flute when he could hear nothing, and admitted that only his art had held him back from ending his life. The letter was never sent. He kept it among his private papers, where it was found after he died, and it is known today as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*.

33 minutes

Almost none of that despair reaches the symphony. It is in D major, a bright key for strings and trumpets, and its overall mood is energetic, witty and warm. Commentators have long wondered at the gap between the letter and the music; one common answer is that composition was Beethoven's refuge rather than his diary. What the symphony does show is a composer impatient with the models of Haydn and Mozart. The dynamics lurch from very soft to very loud without warning, accents land in the wrong places, and silences cut phrases short. Heard beside the more polished First Symphony, it sounds restless, and heard beside the Eroica, which followed within two years, it sounds like the moment Beethoven started to break the frame.

Beethoven conducted the first performance himself on 5 April 1803 at the Theater an der Wien, in a long concert that also introduced his Third Piano Concerto and his oratorio Christ on the Mount of Olives. Not everyone was ready for it. A reviewer for the Viennese Zeitung für die elegante Welt compared the symphony to a hideously wounded dragon, writhing and refusing to die, still thrashing its tail in the finale. The image stuck because it describes something real: the finale's ending keeps promising to stop and then starting again. Posterity has been far kinder, and the Second is now heard as the bridge between Beethoven's Classical beginnings and the heroic symphonies of his middle years.

Two structural choices point the way forward. The third movement is a scherzo, fast, jokey and rustic, in place of the courtly minuet a Haydn or Mozart symphony would have had. And the finale ends with a coda so long and so eventful that it becomes a climax in its own right, a practice Beethoven kept in the symphonies that followed.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Adagio molto; Allegro con brio. The symphony opens with a long slow introduction. A loud unison is answered by soft woodwind phrases, and the music then wanders through distant keys before a long crescendo launches the fast music. Once the Allegro starts, the main theme is given to violas and cellos rather than violins, and the movement runs on nervous energy: listen for the sudden loud chords, the abrupt silences, and the trumpet and timpani calls that end the exposition. The coda is long and exuberant.

II. Larghetto. One of Beethoven's longest slow movements, and one of his most gentle. The strings play the long, songlike main theme first, and then the woodwinds repeat it, like a serenade. The mood is calm and contented, with only passing shadows when the music moves into minor keys in the middle section.

III. Scherzo: Allegro. Short and full of jokes. Tiny three-note figures leap from instrument to instrument and from soft to loud, as if the orchestra were passing a ball. In the trio section, oboes and bassoons play a simple tune, and the strings keep interrupting with a gruff, loud outburst in the wrong key before backing down.

IV. Allegro molto. The finale opens with its most famous gesture: a quick two-note slur followed by a trill, which sounds like a stumble followed by a burst of laughter. That little figure drives the whole movement. Listen for the lyrical second theme in the woodwinds, and then for the enormous coda, with its false endings, hammered chords and sudden hushes, before trumpets and timpani finally bring the symphony home in blazing D major.

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

42 minutes

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.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision**

Lewis Lockwood, W. W. Norton 2017

Lockwood takes Beethoven's symphonies one by one, and his chapter on the Second shows how much energy and ambition the young composer packed into a D major work.

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

Swafford's Brahms biography tells the story of the Second Symphony, written in D major like Beethoven's Second only a year after Brahms finally finished his First.

DEEPER **Brahms: The Four Symphonies**

Walter Frisch, Yale University Press 2003

A close reading of Brahms's four symphonies that places the Second in the shadow of Beethoven, the very pairing of tonight's programme.

SOURCES

1. Concert in Takasaki City, 3 November 2026, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-takasaki-city/10950/>
2. Concert in Nagoya, 4 November 2026 (same programme), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-nagoya/10951/>
3. Concert in Tokyo, 7 November 2026 (same programme), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-tokyo/10954/>
4. Symphony No. 2 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Beethoven))
5. Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 36 (1802): Beethoven Symphony Basics, Eastman School of Music. <https://www.esm.rochester.edu/beethoven/symphony-no-2/>
6. Beethoven's Symphony No. 2: a sunny work peppered with brutal sforzandos, BBC Music Magazine. <https://classical-music.com/features/works/guide-beethovens-symphony-no-2>
7. Heiligenstadt Testament, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heiligenstadt_Testament
8. Symphony No. 2 (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Brahms))
9. Brahms: Symphony No. 2, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/brahms-symphony-no-2>
10. Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393353853>
11. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
12. Brahms: The Four Symphonies, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300099652>



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