

## **Friday, October 17, 2025**

7:30pm

Beethoven Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

Brahms Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68

Teddy Abrams, conductor

Julia Noone, violin

Our modern ears—attuned to the Romantic concertos of Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius—expect concertos to rival symphonies in scale and expressive power. In contrast, Beethoven's audiences expected concertos that prioritized virtuosic displays and whose musical construction evoked military themes. The association was so strong that critics likened the soloist's bow to a sword, casting the soloist as both general and hero, battling for prominence against a much larger orchestral force.

In a characteristically Beethovenian twist, his Violin Concerto both indulges and subverts these expectations. In the first movement, military signifiers are prominent – most notably in the timpani, an instrument long associated with battle. The four note timpani motive that opens the concerto is revisited throughout; but it isn't confined to the timpani. It is taken up by the other instruments, softening its militaristic connotations and instead contributing to the grandeur and symphonic scope of this movement. Throughout, we hear the violin – spectacularly and dizzyingly – ornament and respond to the orchestra, which presents most of the melodic material.

That relationship is reversed in the second movement, which intensifies the expressivity of the concerto. After an initial section where the violin again embellishes the orchestral line, Beethoven slows the harmonic rhythm, stills the accompaniment, and gives the violin a new, simple melody to introduce alone. In doing so, he shifts the locus of expression from the ensemble to the individual. From this moment on, the violin leads—not through technical display, as was conventional, but through emotional directness and lyrical intimacy. The final movement further upends expectations of the military genre. The violin retains its central role; and while the trumpets and drums of the martial genre do appear, they are reframed within a rustic dance. Their insistent rhythms feel festive, not threatening.

While the militaristic references may be lost to modern ears, modern ears *can* hear the role of the soloist change over the course of the sonata. Individual expression gains as much significance as the ensemble's, and in the work, we can hear a turning point in the genre: it becomes more than a show of virtuosity or a musical battlefield, but a statement of the individual's intimate and expressive power.

## Brahms

An unprecedented shift in musical programming was underway during the twenty years it took Brahms to write his First Symphony. When he began writing it in 1855, about half of the orchestral repertoire performed was by deceased composers. By the time of the symphony's premiere in 1876, that proportion had risen to more than three-quarters. More than ever before, composers were being measured not only against their peers, but also against their predecessors. None loomed larger than Beethoven, whose music Brahms grew up with—and against whom he was frequently compared.

Brahms neither rejected nor replicated this solidifying canon. Instead, he expanded its expressive depth, and used an unexpected device to do so: rhythm. As critic Corinna da Foncesca-Wollheim observes, if Brahms's harmonies were as innovative and ambiguous as his rhythms, he might be regarded as one of the most dissonant composers of the Romantic era. To modern ears, trained on Brahms's innovations, his rhythms may no longer sound radical—but they still feel revelatory because of how powerfully they enhance expressive effect.

Take the dramatic opening movement. Its scale and drama (and in it perhaps also the weight of the tradition against which Brahms knew he would be measured) are apparent from the first bar. The strings ascend while the woodwinds descend, and their opposing lines are further offset by contrasting rhythmic emphases: the winds on the downbeats, the strings on the upbeats. These overlapping rhythms tug at each other in the same way the melodies do, amplifying the tension. Or, take the lyrical second movement, when the peak of the primary melody falls on the weakest beat of a given bar, furthering the improvisatory nature. Try tapping your toe along; you'll be surprised to hear how much the downbeat changes.

Yet these departures from rhythmic regularity make the returns to it all the more emphatic. In the flowing third movement—a lyrical intermezzo in place of the usual scherzo—the ambiguity of the accompaniment blurs the barline, allowing the melody to float freely, almost outside of time. When a more dance-like section emerges, its rhythmic clarity feels invigorating in contrast. Perhaps most memorably, in the fourth movement, a bucolic but rhythmically unsettled horn call introduces a hymn-like melody as warm and reassuring as any in Brahms's output. Its arrival is marked by two of the strongest musical antecedents: a rhythmic upbeat and a harmonic dominant. When underpinned by regular accompaniment that aligns with the melody, it feels as though something on a cosmic level has clicked.

Critics were quick to compare Brahms's First Symphony to Beethoven's Ninth. While the similarities—and even direct references—are undeniable, Brahms's innovative use of rhythm to amplify emotive potency expanded the expressive depth of the genre beyond his predecessors.

Friday, January 9, 2026

7:30pm

Haydn            Symphony No. 92 in G major “Oxford”

Mozart           Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551 “Jupiter”

Teddy Abrams, conductor

Haydn

Much of how we listen to music today is shaped by what came after Beethoven. We tend to approach orchestral music like a film score—something described by theorist Robert Gjerdingen as a “thrill ride,” a “quest,” or a “melodrama.” In stark contrast, the music of Haydn’s time valued “... opportunities for acts of judging, for the making of distinctions, and for the public exercise of discernment and taste.”

Another key difference between familiar orchestral music and that of the Enlightenment lies in its intended audience. It was not until Beethoven that composers wrote (and made a living composing) orchestral music primarily for the general public. In Haydn’s era, composers were employed by aristocratic courts, writing music for professional musicians in those courts and for an audience of musically literate elites. Music was written not to express the composer’s inner world, but to appeal to the trained ears of its listeners, with a premium placed on structure—particularly balance and response.

Equally important to understanding this music is dispelling the Romantic notion of the “genius” composer. In Haydn’s time, artistic inspiration came from reason rather than the divine. Greatness was understood not as mystical, but as a practiced skill.

And Haydn was indeed a great composer. What makes his work masterful is not just its admirable clarity and opportunities for discernment, but for the composer’s ability to find creativity within a defined craft. The “Oxford” Symphony exemplifies this: it is a piece that is both structurally refined and immediately engaging.

Listeners of Haydn’s time would have been delighted by the wit and cleverness of the first movement. They would have noticed, for instance, that the opening theme begins on the dominant—the harmonic point where themes typically end—and would have been amused by moments where Haydn includes “wrong” notes (like ending a scale on a pitch from a different key) only to resolve them with satisfying, “correct” ones.

The second and third movements both follow balanced ternary forms (with contrasting central sections framed by symmetrical outer ones). Modern ears can easily perceive the contrast in the second movement, where lyrical melodies in the strings and winds are interrupted by a more aggressive section featuring brass and percussion, going as far as to treat the strings as a percussive instrument. In the third movement, contrast is achieved more through association than structure: as in most minuets and trios, the outer sections evoke a stylized courtly dance, though here, the trio—driven by bold, triadic horn calls—suggests a rustic, pastoral atmosphere.

Haydn extends this sense of balance even further. The final movement mirrors the form of the first, though it is more compact and briskly paced. For his most attentive listeners, the symphony as a whole forms a kind of formal palindrome.

Haydn's "Oxford" Symphony is a time capsule of Enlightenment ideals: clarity, balance, and reasoned creativity. Unlike the emotionally charged, composer-centered works of the Romantic era, Haydn's music was crafted for an audience who expected to comment on and appreciate formal ingenuity. Through subtle surprises, playful contrasts, and symmetrical design, Haydn's work embodies the era's belief that musical greatness lies not in divine inspiration, but in skilled craftsmanship and the active engagement of the listener.

## Mozart

Mozart's Symphony No. 41—his longest and final—elevated the symphony to a level of seriousness and spiritual depth it had never reached before. While Mozart's audiences were likely unfamiliar with the music of J. S. Bach, they would have had some exposure to Bach's contemporaries and their musical styles through church services (though, importantly, not through orchestral concerts, which typically featured only works by living composers). They could readily distinguish between music written in 1788 and music written fifty years earlier.

For most of his career, Mozart composed instrumental works largely in the dominant style of his day: monody, a texture featuring a single melody with accompaniment. Think of most pop songs, which feature a clear vocal line supported by instruments. In many ways, Mozart's writing in the first three movements of the symphony follows this (albeit much more elaborate) formula.

Of course, there are exceptions—otherwise the music would be dull! The opening movement begins with a bold, unified call to action, with all voices sharing the melody for maximum impact. Elsewhere, the melody is submerged in stormy accompaniment, emphasizing drama, or passes gracefully between treble instruments in more lyrical moments. In the second movement, the boundaries blur even further: the accompaniment punctuates the melody, a second melody joins the first, and the interplay becomes more layered. These movements are models of elegant construction, embodying the clarity and directness prized in Mozart's era.

It is in the fourth movement, however, that Mozart transcends the stylistic norms of his time. Instead of a single dominant melody, he introduces four brief melodic ideas, woven together in near-constant dialogue. Mozart's listeners may have recognized these as references to different species of counterpoint, the rigorous compositional technique most associated with the Baroque era of J. S. Bach. To not only invoke but masterfully wield such a technique in a musical culture focused on novelty was nothing short of revolutionary. What makes this movement—and the symphony as a whole—a masterwork is that modern listeners don't need to know a thing about species counterpoint to be swept away by its dazzling momentum. Even the bass line, traditionally the music's foundation, carries one of the four themes, leaving our ears with no fixed point of reference but the music itself.

In this single movement, Mozart compresses centuries of musical tradition. And because the contrapuntal style was so closely associated with sacred music—almost exclusively heard in church—its presence here lends the symphony a sense of spiritual gravity.

## **Friday, February 6, 2026**

7:30pm

Bruch Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26

Bruckner Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major, WAB 104

Teddy Abrams, conductor

James McFadden-Talbot, violin

### **Bruch**

Like the next work on tonight's program, Bruch's Violin Concerto was many years in the making. He received guidance from the era's most celebrated violinist, Joseph Joachim, who was more famous than many composers of the time. Joachim's involvement was so deep—or Bruch's gratitude so great—that he revised the composer's dedication himself. Originally inscribed "Dedicated to Joseph Joachim in veneration," Joachim crossed out the final word and replaced it with "in friendship."

Joachim's influence—and that of other virtuosos—helps explain the concerto's expanded role for the soloist. But, the expanded role was part of a longer trend: since the early 1700s, the center of expression in the concerto had been shifting from orchestra to soloist. In Vivaldi's concertos, the solo part often doubled the orchestral line, serving as an ornamented extension of the ensemble; the soloist was fully independent by Mozart's time. Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 (1805) advanced this further by having the piano enter before the orchestra, and Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto (1845) gave the soloist structural significance, with the violin introducing the opening theme and shaping the movement's form in close partnership with the orchestra.

Bruch's Violin Concerto, completed in 1867, goes further still. The violin introduces all major themes, initiates new sections, and remains the primary vehicle for expression. This reflects both the historical migration of expressive focus and the Romantic era's fascination with the virtuoso—less a trend than a cultural phenomenon. Performers like Joachim were the first musical celebrities, celebrated for their dazzling technique. Bruch's concerto offers ample opportunities for such display, especially in the first movement. The orchestra predominately serves to punctuate, respond to, and support the violin; with only one notable exception: when the orchestral violins briefly take over the solo line. Even here, that the orchestra takes the violin's theme affirms its preeminence.

The second movement opens with a breathtaking song-like theme: its movement by step and its repeated notes make it imminently singable. The evocation of the voice makes for an even more intimate statement. Individualism and the individual's expression were highly

valued in the era (an 1844 poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson “The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.”). Sparse orchestra allows for this “other half” to take center stage, affording the soloist far more leeway with their tone (in the use of vibrato) and in their use of time (tempo). The third movement reengages the orchestra with a dramatic opening. As the movement unfolds, the ensemble becomes a more active partner, and at one point seizes the soloist’s theme—as if the melody is too vital to remain in a single voice. This shared energy creates both contrast and closure, ending the concerto with brilliance and unity.

Bruch’s Violin Concerto marks a peak in the evolution of the soloist’s role, placing the violin at the center of both form and feeling. Shaped by Romantic ideals and the input of virtuosos like Joachim, the work blends technical brilliance with expressive depth, capturing a moment when the concerto became a vehicle for personal and poetic expression.

## Bruckner

Thematic transformation was very much in vogue during Bruckner’s time. Wagner’s use of leitmotifs—recurring themes that evolved with the drama and acted almost as characters themselves—was well known and well loved by audiences. Bruckner’s Fourth Symphony similarly abounds in drama, though of a different kind. He described the work not as a narrative but as a series of images: the first movement depicting daybreak after a restful night, complete with bird calls; the second, a song-like prayer or serenade; and the third, a hunt, complete with a barrel organ playing during a midday meal (Bruckner did not provide a program for the dramatic concluding movement).

These are not programmatic in the traditional sense—they suggest scenes, not story. To animate these static images, Bruckner employs two powerful techniques: motivic transformation, in which recurring musical ideas are slightly altered, and melodic juxtaposition, in which themes are layered over one another. The individual motifs—a horn call, a bird, a hymn—are charming in isolation. But it is their treatment and development that create drama and momentum. The simplicity of the program and the relatively small number of themes (especially compared to the melody-dense works of Haydn or Mozart) allow Bruckner to draw remarkable variety and emotional range from just a few ideas.

In the first movement (“daybreak”), two major themes emerge early on: one that leaps upward by a fifth (as the opening of the alphabet song), and another, a descending scale (like “g” through “p” of the alphabet song). As the movement unfolds, Bruckner stretches that opening leap to heighten tension and build toward a radiant sunrise, led by a



resplendent horn call. At another moment, he lowers just a few notes in the descending scale, darkening the mood. By the end, he layers the two ideas to create a rich climax. Because the themes change as the movement progresses, we feel as if we've journeyed through the morning alongside them.

In the second movement, contrast becomes the engine of drama. First comes a lyrical serenade, played with plucked strings; then a solemn prayer; and finally, a weaving together of the two. What begins as a contrast of musical styles gradually builds into something larger and more transcendent. The movement's emotional range outgrows the stillness typical of its *Allegro* marking, gaining momentum through variation and layering.

Even the third movement, typically defined by sharply bounded musical sections, sees its themes bleed into each other, layered to great effect. The hunt, the midday rest, and the barrel organ are treated not as stand-alone episodes, but as interacting textures. The Finale returns to the dramatic transformations of the first movement: listen for a descending three note motif whose alteration (including inversion) super charges the drama.

In the many ways Bruckner transforms his themes—and in how he reveals different facets of each—we hear not only a composer of great craft, but one who spent decades thinking about how a simple musical idea might become something monumental.