

6 & 7 March 2025

JAMES EHNES PERFORMS

# BRAHMS' VIOLIN CONCERTO

«SYDNEY»  
«SYMPHONY»  
«ORCHESTRA»

Principal Partner



# SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

**PATRON** Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall. The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

## PERFORMING IN THIS CONCERT

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### FIRST VIOLINS

**Andrew Haveron**

*Concertmaster*

**Harry Bennetts**

*Associate Concertmaster*

**Lerida Delbridge**

*Assistant Concertmaster*

**Fiona Ziegler**

*Assistant Concertmaster*

**Sun Yi**

*Associate Concertmaster*

*Emeritus*

Jennifer Booth

Sophie Cole

Sercan Danis

Claire Herrick

Georges Lentz

Emily Long

Alexandra Mitchell

Alexander Norton

Léone Ziegler

### SECOND VIOLINS

**Kirsty Hilton**

*Principal*

**Marina Marsden**

*Principal*

**Emma Jezek**

*Acting Associate Principal*

**Monique Irik**

*Acting Assistant Principal*

Victoria Bihun

Rebecca Gill

Emma Hayes

Shuti Huang

Wendy Kong

Benjamin Li

Nicole Masters

Robert Smith<sup>o</sup>

### VIOLAS

**Tobias Breider**

*Principal*

**Richard Waters<sup>o</sup>**

*Principal*

**Anne-Louise**

**Comerford**

*Associate Principal Emeritus*

Sandro Costantino

Rosemary Curtin

Stuart Johnson

Justine Marsden

Amanda Verner

Leonid Volovelsky

### GELLOS

**Catherine Hewgill**

*Principal*

**Kaori Yamagami**

*Principal*

**Leah Lynn**

*Assistant Principal*

Kristy Conrau

Fenella Gill

Timothy Nankervis

Elizabeth Neville

Adrian Wallis

### DOUBLE BASSES

**Alex Henery**

*Principal*

David Campbell

Dylan Holly

Steven Larson

Richard Lynn

Benjamin Ward

### FLUTES

**Emma Sholl**

*Acting Principal*

Carolyn Harris

**Lloyd Hudson\***

*Guest Principal Piccolo*

### OBOES

**Shefali Pryor**

*Acting Principal*

Miriam Cooney<sup>o</sup>

**Alexandre Oguey**

*Principal Cor Anglais*

### CLARINETS

**Francesco Celata**

*Acting Principal*

Christopher Tingay

### BASSOONS

**Matthew Wilkie**

*Principal Emeritus*

Fiona McNamara

**Noriko Shimada**

*Principal Contrabassoon*

### HORNS

**Manuel Escarriaza\***

*Guest Principal*

Marnie Sebire

Rachel Silver

Emily Newham<sup>o</sup>

### TRUMPETS

**Brent Grapes**

*Associate Principal*

Cécile Glémot

### TROMBONES

**Scott Kinmont**

*Acting Principal*

Nick Byrne

**Christopher Harris**

*Principal Bass Trombone*

### TUBA

**Edwin Diefes\***

*Guest Principal*

### TIMPANI

**Mark Robinson**

*Acting Principal*

### PERCUSSION

**Rebecca Lagos**

*Principal*

**Joshua Hill<sup>o</sup>**

*Associate Principal*

*Timpani/Section Percussion*

Timothy Constable

Brian Nixon\*

Alison Pratt\*

### HARP

**Louisic Dulbecco**

*Principal*

### KEYBOARDS

**Susanne Powell\***

*Guest Principal Celeste*

**Bold** Principal

\* Guest Musician

<sup>o</sup> Contract Musician

† Sydney Symphony

Fellow

# 2025 CONCERT SEASON

## SYMPHONY HOUR

Thursday 6 March, 7pm

Concert Hall,  
Sydney Opera House

## TEA AND SYMPHONY

Friday 7 March, 11am

# JAMES EHNES PERFORMS BRAHMS' VIOLIN CONCERTO

## EVOCATIVE STORYTELLING

**FINNEGAN DOWNIE DEAR** conductor  
**JAMES EHNES** violin

**MAURICE RAVEL** (1875–1937)

*Mother Goose (Ma Mère l'Oye)* (1911)

- i. Prelude –
- ii. First tableau: *Dance of the Spinning Wheel and Scene* –
- iii. Second tableau: *Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty*
- iv. Interlude –
- v. Third tableau: *The Conversations of Beauty and the Beast* –
- vi. Fourth tableau: *Tom Thumb*
- vii. Interlude –
- viii. Fifth tableau: *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*
- ix. Interlude –
- x. *Apotheosis: The Magical Garden*

**JOHANNES BRAHMS** (1833–1897)

**Violin Concerto in D, Op.77** (1878)

- i. Allegro non troppo
- ii. Adagio
- iii. Allegro giocoso

### Pre-concert talk

By Francis Merson in  
the Northern Foyer at  
6.15pm (Thursday)

### Estimated durations

Ravel – 29 minutes  
Brahms – 38 minutes

The concert will run for  
approximately one hour  
and fifteen minutes

### Cover image

James Ehnes  
Photo by Benjamin Ealovega

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Principal Partner



NEW SYDNEY SYMPHONY RECORDING

# SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE RE-OPENING GALA

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*Sydney Morning Herald*

## RELIVE THE MAGIC OF THIS LANDMARK EVENT IN AUSTRALIAN MUSIC

Simone Young's tenure as Chief Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra began in resounding style in July 2022, with unforgettable performances of Mahler's *Symphony No.2, Resurrection*, and *Song of the Earth* by First Nations composer William Barton.

Broadcast live around the world, this concert also marked the reopening of the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall after two years of extensive renovations.

Now you can relive the magic of that landmark event in your own home, with its release on vinyl, CD and digital via Deutsche Grammophon – the first time an Australian orchestra has been released exclusively on the famous yellow label in its 127-year history.



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## YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

### **MAURICE RAVEL** (1875–1937) ***Mother Goose (Ma Mère l'Oye)*** (1911)

Originally a set of character pieces for two pianos, Ravel's *Mother Goose* became a ballet featuring the stories of the Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and Beast, Tom Thumb, Laideronette (the Princess of the Pagodas), and the fairy garden where Prince Charming wakes the Sleeping Beauty.

The ballet premiered in 1912, the year that saw the end of the Meiji period in Japan, the sinking of the Titanic and Australia's first aircraft crash.

Contemporary music included Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Alban Berg's 'Altenberg' Lieder.



1907 photograph of Maurice Ravel by Pierre Petit.

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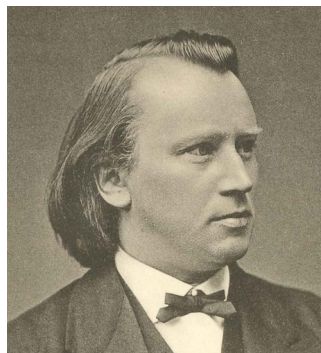
### **JOHANNES BRAHMS** (1833–1897) **Violin Concerto in D, Op.77** (1878)

Written for the great 19th century violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, Brahms' concerto is epic in scale, full of drama, lyricism and irresistible rhythm.

The first of its three movements is huge and expansive, alternating brilliant solo work with serious and well-wrought orchestral sections. The Adagio has one of Brahms' finest and most simple melodies as its theme, while the finale shows the influence of Hungarian music and Brahms' facility with rhythmic variation.

The piece premiered in 1879, the year that saw Thomas Edison's first successful lightbulb, the elevation of John Henry Newman to Cardinal and the establishment of the Royal National Park – now the world's second oldest – south of Sydney.

Contemporary music included Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, César Franck's Piano Quintet and Widor's Fifth Organ Symphony (the one with the Toccata).



Johannes Brahms c. 1875 by German photographer Fritz Luckhardt (1833–1894).

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

### **FINNEGAN DOWNIE DEAR** conductor

Finnegan came to international attention in 2020, when he was awarded first prize at the Bamberger Symphoniker's International Mahler Competition. The jury spoke of his 'rare combination of open heart and brilliant mind', with 'an ability to evoke truly magical moments as if there were nothing more natural to do'.

Recent concert highlights include performances with the Staatskapelle Berlin, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Camerata Salzburg, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Athens State Orchestra, Hallé Orchestra, Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and Sinfonieorchester Basel. Future plans include returns to Berlin, Salzburg, Athens and Poland, as well as making debuts with Staatskapelle Dresden, Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra, Balthazar Neumann Orchestra and Sydney Symphony, with soloists including Gil Shaham, Isabelle Faust, Kirill Gerstein, Veronika Eberle and James Ehnes.

His debut with Staatsoper Berlin (*The Makropulos Case*) resulted in immediate reinventions for numerous opera productions and concert programs; this season includes a concert program of Kurtág and Schubert and performances of *Le nozze di Figaro*. Elsewhere, he has had equally successful debuts at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (Gerald Barry *Alice's Adventures Underground*) and at Hamburg Staatsoper (*Eugene Onegin*); he soon returns to Covent Garden to conduct *Hansel and Gretel* and to Hamburg for *Falstaff*. He will make first appearances at Garsington Opera (*Der Rosenkavalier*), Theater an der Wien (in a world premiere by Miroslav Srnka), Victorian Opera (*Káťa Kabanová*) and at the Aix-en-Provence Festival (*Billy Budd*).

Since 2014 Finnegan has been Music Director of Shadwell – an East London company that works with exceptional young musicians to champion contemporary British repertoire and experiment with new operatic forms. The company's production of Knussen's *Where the Wild Things Are* toured to the Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg in 2019 and to Bamberg in 2022 for performances with the Bamberger Symphoniker. This summer they commissioned and gave the world premiere of Isabella Gellis' chamber opera *The Devil's Den*.

Born in London, Finnegan graduated with distinction from Cambridge University (musicology) and the Royal Academy of Music (piano). He subsequently worked as an assistant to Simone Young, Thomas Adès, Sir Simon Rattle, Daniel Harding and Richard Baker.



Photo by Frank Bloedhorn



## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

### **JAMES EHNES** violin

James Ehnes has established himself as one of the most sought-after musicians on the international stage. Gifted with a rare combination of stunning virtuosity, serene lyricism and an unfaltering musicality, Ehnes is a favourite guest at the world's most celebrated concert halls.

Recent orchestral highlights include the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, London Philharmonic Orchestra, NHK Symphony, Boston Symphony, Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Cleveland Orchestra.

Throughout the 24/25 season, Ehnes will be Artist in Residence with Melbourne Symphony and will tour to Asia, where he will perform the complete Beethoven sonatas at Kioi Hall, Tokyo, as well as performances with Hong Kong Philharmonic and Singapore Symphony Orchestras.

Alongside his concerto work, Ehnes maintains a busy recital schedule. He performs regularly at Wigmore Hall (including a complete cycle of Beethoven Sonatas in 2019/20, and the complete violin/viola works of Brahms and Schumann in 2021/22), Carnegie Hall, Symphony Center Chicago, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Ravinia, Montreux, Verbier Festival, Dresden Music Festival and Festival de Pâques in Aix. A devoted chamber musician, he is the leader of the Ehnes Quartet and the Artistic Director of the Seattle Chamber Music Society.

Ehnes has an extensive discography and has won many awards for his recordings, including two Grammys, three *Gramophone* Awards and twelve Juno Awards. In 2021, Ehnes was announced as the recipient of the coveted Artist of the Year title in the 2021 *Gramophone* Awards, which celebrated his recent contributions to the recording industry – including the launch of a new online recital series entitled *Recitals from Home* which was released in June 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent closure of concert halls. Ehnes recorded the six Bach Sonatas and Partitas and six Sonatas of Ysaÿe from his home with state-of-the-art recording equipment and released six episodes over a period of two months.

These recordings have been met with great critical acclaim by audiences worldwide and Ehnes was described by *Le Devoir* as being 'at the absolute forefront of the streaming evolution'.

Ehnes began violin studies at the age of five, became a protégé of the noted Canadian violinist Francis Chaplin aged nine, and made his orchestra debut with L'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal aged thirteen. He continued his studies with Sally Thomas at the Meadowmount School of Music and The Juilliard School, winning the Peter Mennin Prize for Outstanding Achievement and Leadership in Music upon his graduation in 1997. He is a Member of the Order of Canada and the Order of Manitoba, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and an honorary fellow of the Royal Academy of Music, where he is a Visiting Professor. As of summer 2024, he is a Professor of Violin at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music.

Ehnes plays the 'Marsick' Stradivarius of 1715.



Photo by Benjamin Ealovega



1907 photograph of Maurice Ravel by Pierre Petit.



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT MAURICE RAVEL

In some exasperation Ravel once asked a friend, 'Doesn't it ever occur to those people that I can be "artificial" by nature?' He was responding to the criticism that his music was more interested in technique than expression. There is some truth in the charge: Stravinsky described him – affectionately – as the 'Swiss watchmaker of music', and Ravel's stated aim was indeed 'technical perfection'. In fact, his love of mechanical intricacy led Ravel to collect various automata and other small machines, and he dreamed, as he put it in a 1933 article, of 'Finding Tunes in Factories'.

His passion for precision and order was also in evidence in his fastidious, even dandyish, appearance, but he was a man of great courage. In the First World War, despite being 39 years old, short and underweight, he cared for the wounded and after some months became a military truck driver. With his truck, 'Adelaïde', he faced a number of dangers, and for the rest of his life suffered terrible insomnia. (This experience may also have contributed to the debilitating aphasia of his last years when he could no longer write his own name, let alone the music which still rang in his head). His great Piano Trio, written during the War, puts paid to any idea that Ravel's music lacks an emotional heart.

Also during the war he stood against the chauvinistic Committee of the National League for the Defence of French Music, which proposed to ban performances of German and Austrian music.

Between 1900 and 1905 he had failed several times to secure the Prix de Rome, ostensibly because of musical 'errors' and despite his already having established himself as a major new voice.

In 1909 he helped to found the Société Musicale Indépendante – independent, that is, of the Parisian musical and academic establishment – and its inaugural concert saw the premiere of the first version, for piano duo, of the *Ma Mère l'oye* (Mother Goose) Suite.

Ravel's works are, frequently, exquisite simulacra of existing styles and forms. In his *Tombeau de Couperin*, twentieth century piano music pays a genuine homage to the baroque suite and keyboard style of the earlier French master. In *Gaspard de la nuit* he famously set out to write his version of Lisztian piano music, wryly suggesting that he 'might have overdone it'. His *Shéhérazade* songs evoke a typical early-20th century view of Asia where orchestration and subject matter relate directly to Russian music, especially that of Rimsky-Korsakov. His most famous piano piece, the *Pavane for a dead Infanta*, resurrects a gracious renaissance dance, tinged with his beloved Spanish idiom.

Ravel was born in south-western France to a Basque mother and Swiss father, but spent his entire life in Paris. Like Tchaikovsky, he saw a strong connection between childhood and enchantment. In his opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges* a destructive child learns the value of compassion when furniture, trees and animals in the garden all come magically to life. The evocation of 'the poetry of childhood' in the original piano duo version of *Mother Goose* led Ravel to 'simplify my style and refine my means of expression'.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT *MA MÈRE L'OYE*

The first version of this music, the *Mother Goose Suite* (*Ma Mère l'Oye*, a set of five piano pieces for four hands, subtitled *Cinq pièces enfantines*), expressed Ravel's affection for two young children, to whom he dedicated the music:

...my young friends Mimi and Jean Godebski. My intention of awakening the poetry of childhood in these pieces naturally led me to simplify my style and thin out my writing.'

Two ten-year-old girls gave the first public performance of the piano duet version at the Salle Gaveau in 1910. Afterwards Ravel wrote to one of them, Jeanne Leleu:

Mademoiselle,

When you are a great virtuoso and I an old fogey, covered with honours or else completely forgotten, you will perhaps have pleasant memories of having given an artist the rare satisfaction of hearing a work of his, of a rather unusual nature, interpreted exactly as it should be. Thank you a thousand times for your child-like and sensitive performance of *Ma Mère l'Oye*.

In 1911 Ravel orchestrated the suite, and created the ballet for a production in 1912 at Jacques Rouché's Théâtre des Arts, adding a prelude, a new opening scene and interludes connecting the individual numbers. (He also altered the sequence of the original movements.) In either of these later forms, Ravel's orchestration brings an even greater sophistication to the music, and in places a certain opulence.

The title *Mother Goose* and most of the stories were taken by Ravel from Perrault's *Contes de Ma Mère l'Oye*, published in 1697. Ravel included some quotations from the stories at the relevant points in the music.

The *Prelude* sets the fairytale atmosphere with a key motif, tiny fanfares and a stirring of bird-song in the woodwinds, anticipates some of the music to come, then leads straight into the vivid *Dance of the Spinning Wheel*, which depicts the princess who pricks her finger and is plunged into a seemingly endless sleep.

*Pavane de la Belle au Bois dormant* (Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty) is only 20 bars long. Ravel had already composed a pavane for another princess, and this courtly dance of a slow, stately character, with its modal music, suggests the 'once-upon-a-time' character of the stories.

In the slow waltz music of *The Conversations of Beauty and the Beast*, the voice of Beauty is represented by the clarinet and that of the Beast by the contrabassoon. The conversations inscribed in the score are taken from the story by Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1757):

'When I think how good-natured you are, you do not seem so ugly.'

'Yes, I have indeed a kind heart, but I am a monster.'

'There are many men more monstrous than you.'

'If I had wit, I would invent a fine compliment to thank you, but I am only a beast.'

'Beauty, will you be my wife?'

'No, Beast!'

'I die content since I have had the pleasure of seeing you one more time.'

'No, my dearest Beast, you shall not die; you shall live to be my husband.'

The Beast had disappeared and she saw at her feet a Prince more handsome than the God of Love, thanking her for having ended his enchantment.

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

*Tom Thumb (Petit Poucet)* is prefaced with this quotation from Perrault's tale:

He believed that he would easily find his path by means of his bread crumbs which he had scattered wherever he passed, but he was very surprised when he could not find a single crumb – the birds had come and eaten everything up.

The changes in direction of the accompaniment, joined by solo oboe, depict Tom Thumb's lost wandering, and the chirruping of the birds is suggested not only by the woodwind, but by a solo violin playing harmonics – a similarity of sound likely to trick the listener who is not watching the players. (Ravel loved this kind of deception.)



Costume design for *Laideronnette* by Jacques Drésa for the premiere season of the ballet.

The story *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas* is from a collection by the Comtesse d'Aulnoy, contemporary and imitator of Perrault. A former princess has been made ugly by a wicked witch – hence her name, which means 'Ugly Little Girl'. With a Green Serpent who had once been a handsome prince, she has voyaged by sea to the land of the Pagodas, tiny people like articulated figurines, with bodies made of

jewels and porcelain. Here the two travellers were restored to their former appearance and married. The scene described is the Empress' bath, accompanied by the Pagodas and Pagodines singing and playing on miniature instruments, brilliantly evoked by the music, whose Oriental features include the pentatonic scale and the gong. The slithering Green Serpent is there, too.

In the scenario of the ballet, the final movement forms an apotheosis: Prince Charming finds the Princess asleep in *The Magical Garden*. As the sun rises, she awakens; there is a joyous fanfare as the other characters gather around her and the Good Fairy blesses them all.

Ravel's *Mother Goose (Ma mère l'Oye)* is scored for 2 flutes (second doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (second doubling cor anglais), 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon); 2 horns; timpani, percussion, harp, celeste and strings.



Johannes Brahms c. 1875 by German photographer Fritz Luckhardt (1833–1894).

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT BRAHMS

Brahms died neither young, nor insane; he was never a liveried servant, nor dependent on aristocratic or royal patronage; he held several music directorships, but never for long, and, while a performer of distinction, became increasingly able to support himself on composition. He grew relatively wealthy on the sale and performances of his music, but in Vienna he lived with his piano and collection of music manuscripts and books in a three-room flat for 25 years. He never married.

He was born in 1833 in Hamburg, in modest circumstances to a mismatched couple: Christiane and Johann Jakob Brahms, a local session-musician. His early promise as a pianist was used to augment the family finances; the 15-year old played dance music in the dockside taverns (read: brothels) of his home town at night while studying by day.

Violinist Joseph Joachim encouraged Brahms, in September 1853, to meet two of the most important influences on his life: Robert and Clara Schumann. Robert hailed the appearance of a major talent, and as Schumann slipped into madness, Brahms grew closer to Clara.

Brahms settled in Vienna around 1869, where the conservative critic Eduard Hanslick felt he had found in Brahms the embodiment of the classical tradition of abstract music. Brahms never taught, but was instrumental in the state stipend given to Antonín Dvořák in the latter's early maturity.

His earliest works are for piano, some for public performance (though with an eye firmly on his posterity, Brahms destroyed a great many pieces in all genres) and some as studies.

The period around the end of the 1850s and into the new decade see Brahms' first 'official' attempts at orchestral music, notably the First Concerto and the First Serenade. In the 1860s, Brahms focused on chamber music, though his mother's death catalysed a major choral orchestral piece: *A German Requiem*.

He suffered stage fright when it came to the symphony, and it is only in 1876 that the First, a work that had been gestating for many, many years, appeared. His symphonies, Second Piano Concerto and the two string concertos all date from the period 1876-1887 as do his three Violin Sonatas.

The String Quintet, Op.111, dating from 1890, was to have been his last chamber work, but fortunately he made the acquaintance of clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld soon after, inspiring the Clarinet Trio and Quintet. His final works were Bachian chorale preludes, including two based on the chorale, 'O world, I must leave thee'. He died of liver cancer on 3 April 1897.



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT THE VIOLIN CONCERTO

Brahms spent the summers of 1877-9 in the lakeside village of Pörschach in Carinthia, producing his first Motet, Op.74, the Ballades for piano, Op.75, Symphony No.2 and his Violin Sonata in G, Op.78 – all works which share an atmosphere of pastoral beauty shot through with nostalgia. But as Brahms scholar Karl Geiringer notes, the ‘crowning masterpiece’ of this time is the Violin Concerto.



Violinist Joseph Joachim in 1890. From The Cabinet Portrait Gallery, Cassell and Company Limited.

The Concerto, like the G major Sonata, was composed for the great virtuoso Joseph Joachim, whom an ecstatic fifteen-year old Brahms had heard play the Beethoven Concerto. In 1853 their friendship began in earnest, with Joachim writing to Brahms’ parents of how ‘Johannes had stimulated my work as an artist to an extent beyond my hopes...my friendship is always at his disposal’. Brahms similarly admired Joachim – significantly as a composer rather than performer, saying that ‘there is more in Joachim than in all the other young composers put together.’

While Joachim was intimately involved with the creation of early works of Brahms’ chamber music, it was not, strangely enough, until those summers by the lake at Pörschach in the 1870s that Brahms wrote solo music for his friend. Geiringer notes that, in the case of both Concerto and Sonata, Brahms ‘conscientiously asked his friend’s advice on all technical questions – and then hardly ever followed it’, but in fact at crucial points Joachim’s advice on technical matters was invaluable. This consists mainly of tinkering with certain figurations to make them more gratifying to play. But Joachim was also a profoundly serious artist – like Brahms – and out of their collaboration came works in which the element of virtuosity never overshadows the musical argument, despite the work’s many technical challenges. Joachim also wrote a cadenza for the concerto, which is still frequently heard today.

The Concerto has some of the expansive dimensions of Brahms’ first Piano Concerto. This is especially true of the spacious first movement which, like that of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, takes up more than half the work’s playing time, and which begins with a long, symphonic exposition of its main themes. Like its companion Second Symphony, the Concerto is in D, a key which composers like Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius used for violin concertos as it makes use of the instrument’s natural resonance; like the Symphony it has something of a visionary Romantic tone.

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

Brahms originally thought to write the piece in four movements, making the central pair a scherzo and contrasting slow movement. But he wrote to Joachim that the 'middle movements – naturally the best ones – have fallen through. So I have substituted a feeble adagio.' Feeble is of course hardly the word for this piece: derived from the simplest of musical figures – the falling broken chord with which the violin begins – it evolves into one of Brahms' most soulful but restrained movements. As such it provides a wonderful contrast to the gypsy style finale, with its pyrotechnic solo line and exciting use of displaced accents.

Joachim premiered the piece in Leipzig in 1879, but the response was tepid, and only through Joachim's persistence did it gradually gain its rightful place in the standard repertoire. Brahms and Joachim fell out over the violinist's divorce in 1884, the rift lasting until Brahms wrote the Concerto for Violin and Cello in 1887. But that's another story.



Brahms and Joseph Joachim in 1855

Brahms' Violin Concerto is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 4 horns and 2 trumpets; timpani, strings and violin soloist.

It was first performed in Leipzig on 1 January 1879, conducted by Brahms with Joseph Joachim as soloist.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra first performed the concerto in 1939, with Jeanne Gautier as soloist conducted by Malcolm Sargent.

Notable performances by include Yehudi Menuhin conducted by Georg Schnéevoigt (1940), Ginette Neveu/Bernard Heinze (1948), Ernest Llewellyn/Eugene Goossens (1949), Wolfgang Schneiderhan/Goossens (1953), Christian Ferras/Heinze (1956), Ruggiero Ricci/Kurt Woess (1957), David Oistrakh/Nikolai Malko (1958), Isaac Stern/Malko (1961), Leonid Kogan/Joseph Post (1962), Henryk Szeryng/Georges Tzipine (1964), Ferras/Dean Dixon (1965), Ricci/Joseph Post (1969), Pinchas Zukerman/Moshe Atzmon (1972), Itzhak Perlman/Willem van Otterloo (1973), Szeryng/Otterloo (1976), Szeryng/Charles Mackerras (1983), Frank Peter Zimmermann/ Yan Pascal Tortelier (1997), Gil Shaham/Paavo Järvi (2001), Arabella Steinbacher/Will Humburg (2005), Viktoria Mullova/Sir Donald Runnicles (2009), Ray Chen/Peter Oundjian (2011), Lisa Batiashvili/Vladimir Ashkenazy (2012), Janine Jansen/Daniel Blandford-Jones (2015) and Maxim Vengerov/David Robertson (2017).

Our most recent performance was in 2022, with Augustin Hadelich conducted by Sir Donald Runnicles.

**Notes by Gordon Kerry (composer overviews © 2025, Brahms Concerto © 2006); Symphony Australia (Ravel © 2001).**

**Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson**

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Conductor in Residence



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Concertmaster



**Fiona Ziegler**  
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