

16 May 2025

STEPHEN HOUGH

PERFORMS BRAHMS



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

FIRST VIOLINS

Andrew Haveron
Concertmaster
Harry Bennetts
Associate Concertmaster
Alexandra Osborne
Associate Concertmaster
Lerida Delbridge
Assistant Concertmaster
Jennifer Booth
Sophie Cole
Sercan Danis
Claire Herrick
Emily Long
Alexandra Mitchell
Alexander Norton
Léone Ziegler
Ian Chiao^
Natalia Harvey*

SECOND VIOLINS

Kirsty Hilton
Principal
Emma Jezek
Acting Associate Principal
Victoria Bihun
Acting Assistant Principal
Rebecca Gill
Shuti Huang
Wendy Kong
Benjamin Li
Nicole Masters
Robert Smith
Caroline Hopson°
Liam Pilgrim†
Miriam Niessl^

VIOLAS

Richard Waters°
Principal
Sandro Costantino
Rosemary Curtin
Stuart Johnson
Justine Marsden
Felicity Tsai
Amanda Verner
Leonid Volovelsky
Andrew Jezek°
Stephen Wright°
Julian Kwok^

CELLOS

Catherine Hewgill
Principal
Leah Lynn
Assistant Principal
Kristy Conrau
Fenella Gill
Elizabeth Neville
Christopher Pidcock
Adrian Wallis
Erna Lai^

DOUBLE BASSES

Kees Boersma
Principal
Alex Henery
Principal
David Campbell
Richard Lynn
Jaan Pallandi
Benjamin Ward
Alyssa Deacon^

FLUTES

Emma Sholl
Acting Principal
Carolyn Harris
Lily Bryant*

OBOES

Shefali Pryor
Principal
Miriam Cooney°
Alexandre Oguey
Principal Cor Anglais

CLARINETS

Olli Leppäniemi
Principal
Christopher Tingay
Oliver Crofts†

BASSOONS

Matthew Wilkie
Principal Emeritus
Fiona McNamara
Noriko Shimada
Principal Contrabassoon

HORNS

Jan Breer*
Guest Principal
Euan Harvey
Acting Principal
Marnie Sebire
Rachel Silver
Emily Newham°

TRUMPETS

Brent Grapes
Associate Principal
Cécile Glémot
Anthony Heinrichs

TROMBONES

Scott Kinmont
Acting Principal
Nick Byrne
Christopher Harris
Principal Bass Trombone

TUBA

Edwin Diefes*
Guest Principal

TIMPANI

Mark Robinson
Acting Principal

PERCUSSION

Timothy Constable
Joshua Hill°
Acting Associate Principal
Timpani/Section Percussion
Tim Brigden*
Ian Cleworth*
Alison Pratt*

HARP

Louisic Dulbecco
Principal

EXTRAS

Susanne Powell*
Guest Principal Piano
Nicholas Russoniello*
Guest Principal Saxophone

Bold Principal
* Guest Musician
° Contract Musician
† Sydney Symphony Fellow
^ Australian Youth Orchestra Musician

2025 CONCERT SEASON

TEA AND SYMPHONY

Friday 16 May, 11am

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

STEPHEN HOUGH PERFORMS BRAHMS

PASSION AND FIRE

ELIM CHAN conductor
STEPHEN HOUGH piano

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)
Romeo and Juliet (1938)
excerpts from the Suites, Opp.64a and 64b
i. *Montagues and Capulets* (Suite 2, No.1)
ii. *Juliet the Young Girl* (Suite 2, No.2)
iii. *Masks* (Suite 1, No.5)
iv. *Death of Tybalt* (Suite 1, No.7)

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15 (1859)
i. Maestoso
ii. Adagio
iii. Rondo (Allegro non troppo)

Estimated durations

Prokofiev – 15 minutes
Brahms – 49 minutes

The concert will run for
approximately 1 hour and
10 minutes

Cover image

Sir Stephen Hough
Photo by Sim Canetty-Clarke

Principal Partner



NEW SYDNEY SYMPHONY RECORDING

SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE RE-OPENING GALA

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the generations.”

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 emphatic 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 under the famous yellow label in its 127-year history.



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“SYDNEY”
“SYMPHONY”
“ORCHESTRA”

Principal Partner



YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)

Romeo and Juliet (1938)

excerpts from the Suites, Opp.64a and 64b

One of the inducements to persuade Prokofiev to return to the USSR was a major ballet commission for the Kirov Theatre. *Romeo and Juliet* had a difficult gestation owing to various things, but ultimately proved to be one of the great ballet scores of the century, full of highly characterised dances and a strongly-told story.

It premiered in the Czech city of Brno in 1938, the year that saw the Anschluss between Germany and Austria, the invasion of Canton (Guangdong) by the Japanese, and Port Kembla waterside workers refuse to load pig-iron destined for Japan.

Contemporary music included Barber's Adagio, Britten Piano Concerto, and Schoenberg's orchestration of Brahms' Piano Quartet in G minor.



Prokofiev in the late 1930s

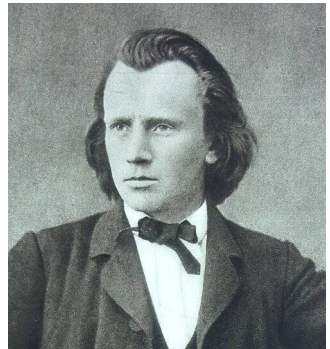
JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor, Op.15 (1859)

Brahms based his first piano concerto on a Sonata for two pianos, but while it falls into the three-movements of the classical design, the piece is symphonic as much as a concerto. The outer movements are fast and powerful, and the central slow movement may be a tribute to Clara Schumann, one of Brahms' greatest mentors.

It first appeared in 1859, the year that saw Big Ben chime for the first time, the French lay siege to Saigon, and the creation of the colony of Queensland.

Contemporary music included Max Bruch's Piano Trio, Liszt's *Totentanz* and Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*.



Brahms in 1866

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

ELIM CHAN conductor

One of the most sought-after artists of her generation, conductor Elim Chan epitomizes modern orchestral leadership through her crystalline precision and zeal. She served as Principal Conductor of the Antwerp Symphony Orchestra between 2019-2024 and Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra between 2018-2023.

Having made her highly acclaimed debut at the BBC Proms with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 2023, Elim Chan returned with the orchestra for the First Night of the Proms 2024. The 2024 summer period also saw her reunite with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for the opening of the Hollywood Bowl's classical summer season and with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra at the Edinburgh International Festival, as well as her debuts with the Mozarteumorchester Salzburg for the opening of the Salzburg Festival and with the Kammerakademie Potsdam for the opening of Beethovenfest Bonn.

Highlights of her 2024/25 season include two tours with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra as well as return engagements with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Wiener Symphoniker, ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and Sydney Symphony Orchestra, to mention a few; she also debuts with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Previous debuts include those with orchestras such as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony, Staatskapelle Berlin, Staatskapelle Dresden, Philharmonia Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris and Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Born in Hong Kong, Elim Chan studied at Smith College in Massachusetts and at the University of Michigan. In 2014, she became the first female winner of the Donatella Flick Conducting Competition and went on to spend her 2015-16 season as Assistant Conductor at the London Symphony Orchestra, where she worked closely with Valery Gergiev. In the following season, Elim Chan joined the Dudamel Fellowship program of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. She also owes much to the support and encouragement of Bernard Haitink, whose masterclasses she attended in Lucerne in 2015.



Photo by Simon Pauly

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

STEPHEN HOUGH piano

Named by *The Economist* as one of Twenty Living Polymaths, Sir Stephen Hough combines a distinguished career of a concert pianist with those of a composer and writer. In recognition of his contribution to cultural life, he became the first classical performer to be given a MacArthur Fellowship, and was awarded a Knighthood for Services to Music in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2022.

In a career spanning over 40 years, Stephen Hough has played regularly with most of the world's leading orchestras, including televised and filmed appearances with the Berlin, London, China, Seoul and New York Philharmonic Orchestras, and the Concertgebouw, Budapest Festival and the NHK Symphony Orchestras. He has been a regular guest of recital series and festivals including Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium, London's Royal Festival Hall, Salzburg, Verbier, La Roque-d'Anthéron, Aspen, Tanglewood, Aldeburgh and Edinburgh.

He begins his 2024/25 concert season with his 30th appearance at the BBC Proms, performing at Last Night of the Proms to a live audience of 6,000 and televised audience of 3.5 million. Over the course of the following 12 months Hough performs over 80 concerts on four continents, opening Philharmonia Orchestra's season at the Royal Festival Hall, performances with the Cleveland Orchestra, performing a solo recital at Barbican Centre and giving the world premiere of his Willa Cather-inspired Piano Quintet at Lincoln Center's David Geffen Hall. Following the 2024 world premiere of his own Piano Concerto (*The World of Yesterday*), named after Stefan Zweig's memoir, Hough brings the work to Adelaide, Bournemouth, Oregon, Singapore and Vermont Symphony Orchestras.

Hough's discography of 70 recordings has garnered awards including the Diapason d'Or de l'Année, several Grammy nominations, and eight *Gramophone* Awards including Record of the Year and the Gold Disc. For Hyperion he has recorded the complete piano concertos of Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Rachmaninov, Saint-Saëns and Tchaikovsky as well as celebrated solo recordings of the Final Piano Pieces of Brahms, Chopin's complete nocturnes, waltzes, ballades and scherzi, as well as recitals of Schumann, Schubert, Franck, Debussy and Mompou. Upcoming releases

include a Liszt album, a recital of encores, including arrangements made for Lang Lang's Disney project, and Hough's own Piano Concerto.

As a composer, Hough's *Fanfare Toccata* was commissioned for the 2022 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition and performed by all 30 competitors. His 2021 String Quartet No.1, *Les Six Rencontres*, was written for and recorded by the Takács Quartet for Hyperion Records. Hough's body of songs, choral and instrumental works have been commissioned by Musée du Louvre, National Gallery of London, Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, Wigmore Hall, the Genesis Foundation, Gilmore International Keyboard Festival, the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation, BBC Sounds and the Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet. His music is published by Josef Weinberger Ltd.

As an author, Hough's memoir *Enough: Scenes from Childhood*, was published by Faber & Faber in Spring 2023. It follows his 2019 collection of essays *Rough Ideas: Reflections on Music and More* which received a Royal Philharmonic Society Award and was named one of the *Financial Times*' Books of the Year. His novel *The Final Retreat* was published in 2018 (Sylph Editions). He has also written for *The New York Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and the *Evening Standard*. Hough is an Honorary Bencher of the Middle Temple, an Honorary Member of the Royal Philharmonic Society, an Honorary Fellow of Cambridge University's Girton College, the International Chair of Piano Studies and a Companion of the Royal Northern College of Music, and is on the faculty of The Juilliard School in New York.



Photo by Sim Canetty-Clarke

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT PROKOFIEV

In 1953 Sergei Prokofiev died in Moscow on the same day less than an hour before his nemesis, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. The story goes that the streets of Moscow were so packed with citizens wanting to pay their last respects to the Great Leader that Prokofiev's few mourners couldn't make it to the funeral. And they couldn't buy flowers for the composer's grave, because every cut flower in the capital was bought to be placed on Stalin's casket.

The curious thing, though, is why Prokofiev ended his days in Russia at all. Even at first glance he seems the sort of person liable to be suspect under a communist regime. Born to the Russian manager of a Ukrainian estate, and losing two siblings in infancy, Prokofiev grew up as the indulged only child of parents at the top of their local social hierarchy.

He left Russia in 1918, probably not for political reasons and it was not until 1936 that he was back in the USSR permanently, despite being culturally at home in the theatres, clothes-shops and restaurants of New York or Paris.

Prokofiev himself always claimed that he was ultimately homesick for 'the air, the soil' of Russia and, from the outside at least, life seemed good to state-approved composers: orchestras and opera companies and ballet troupes at their disposal.

But Prokofiev didn't do it as hard in the US and Europe as he later made out. He had some work in the US as a pianist and composer, scored a hit with his Third Piano Concerto, and in Chicago received the commission for the opera *The Love of Three Oranges* from which he drew an ever-popular orchestral suite. When he lived in France the Parisian public put Prokofiev on a pedestal only slightly lower than Stravinsky's.



Prokofiev in the late 1930s

His works from the 'Soviet period', *Peter and the Wolf*, *Romeo and Juliet* or the Second Violin Concerto have artistic integrity while genuinely striving for a language which the new, and vast, Soviet audience for classical music could understand. During World War II he composed some of his greatest piano sonatas and a symphonic masterpiece, the Fifth. But none of that would last. By 1948 it was time for a new set of denunciations and purges. Prokofiev, along with the usual suspects like Shostakovich, was denounced. Already in ill-health, Prokofiev thanked the Union of Composers for its reprimand and acknowledged his error in a public letter. Many of his works written before 1932 were banned, and Prokofiev spent his last years in financial hardship and illness.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT ROMEO AND JULIET

As an inducement to return permanently to the Soviet Union, Prokofiev was offered a large number of very attractive commissions, one of which was to make a ballet of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Romeo and Juliet had a difficult and protracted birth. Leningrad's Kirov Theatre rejected the initial proposal because of the story's tragic ending but Prokofiev's friend, theatre director Sergei Radlov, suggested a happy conclusion in which the lovers avoid death. This, he argued, would make it 'a play about the struggle for the right to love by young, strong progressive people battling against feudal traditions and feudal outlooks on marriage' and thus a perfect piece optimistic Socialist Realism. In Radlov's version, Friar Laurence intervenes at the crucial moment to prevent the grief-stricken Romeo committed suicide over what he takes to be the dead body of Juliet. There is general, though restrained, rejoicing. As Simon Morrison has shown, the happy ending was also attractive to Prokofiev as he had begun practicing Christian Science in the 1920s, and accepted that Good 'will necessarily triumph over the finite and temporary phenomenon of evil'; there remained people to convince, however.

Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre had taken over the commission for the work but play-throughs of the score in Moscow had failed to enthuse bureaucrats, dancers or audiences. According to Prokofiev, it was one comment, 'your music doesn't express any real joy at the end', that led him to reconsider the tragic ending and find a way to express it in music that could be choreographed. In the meantime, however, the artistic directorate of the Bolshoi fell foul of Stalin's purges, and both the artistic director and the proposed conductor for *Romeo and Juliet* were arrested and shot. The ballet was, as they say, quietly shelved.



Romeo and Juliet (1884) by Frank Dicksee (1853-1928).

The premiere of *Romeo and Juliet*, eventually but successfully, was given in Brno, in the then Czechoslovakia in 1938. The Kirov Theatre in Leningrad offered, after a memo from Stalin, to give the Russian premiere in January 1940. There was what Morrison calls a considerable amount of 'vandalism' by the Kirov people – unbeknown to the composer until the actual Leningrad performance. Choreographer, Leonid Lavrovsky, made some unauthorised wholesale changes to the scenario and score, and then bullied Prokofiev into making further cuts and additions. Then there were the dancers, who were, as Galina Ulanova, who danced Juliet, later observed, 'a little afraid' of the music; its strangeness meant that they could 'couldn't hear that love [of Romeo and Juliet] in his music then.' The composer was actually very accommodating, subtly changing orchestrations to be heard more clearly by the dancers on stage, for instance, and he reported to a friend that 'after 15 curtain calls' at the Leningrad premiere, some of the dancers felt the work 'might be acceptable after all'. Fortunately, the regime felt that the work was acceptable after all, too, and it ushered in the period of favour and popularity, producing works like the Flute (or Violin) Sonata in D and the Fifth Symphony.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The dancers' initial bafflement seems odd now. Musicologist Stephen Walsh calls the ballet a 'brilliant fusion of post-Imperial romanticism and scuttling, unpredictable Prokofievism'. The score is notable for its clarity of orchestration – not that this precludes moments of great opulence, such as the pile up of sonority which opens Act III and presages the tragic events about to unfold, or the multi divisi strings which give the young lovers a halo of rich sound. But quite simply, the score offers clear contrasts between the implacable march of tragic fate in those passages built on repeated ostinato figures and the more rhapsodic soaring passages associated with love, and the worlds of public life and private intimacy.

Prokofiev's characterisation is masterful, where he depicts the arrogance of the Capulets at their ball, the tenderness of Juliet herself or the otherworldly music which accompanies Friar Lawrence as he awaits the lovers in his cell, and his theme for each character is immediately recognisable when it appears in a new context. There are numerous set-pieces that provide a sometimes bustling, sometimes menacing backdrop to the unfolding love story. The parting of the young lovers is given a full and opulent treatment which features themed associated with each.

In contrast to music of such heartbreaking intensity, this selection concludes with the uncompromisingly brutal music which accompanies Romeo's furious killing of Tybalt in revenge for the death of his friend Mercutio.

Gordon Kerry © 2005/10

Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, cornet, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celeste, tenor saxophone and strings.

The full ballet premiered in the Mahen Theatre, Brno (now in the Czech Republic), on 30 December 1938.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra has performed selections from Prokofiev's ballet many times. Eugene Goossens led the first Australian performance of Prokofiev's second suite in May 1953, with other notable performances including those conducted by Charles Mackerras (1960, 1995), Lorin Maazel (1961), Moshe Atzmon (1971), Louis Frémaux (1981), Stuart Challender (1989), Jiří Bělohlávek (1992), Tugan Sokhiev (2007) and James Gaffigan (2011).

We also performed a selection from the suites as part of our 2009 Prokofiev Festival under Principal Conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy, subsequently recording the entire ballet for release on CD.

Our most recent performances of this music was in 2022, under Eduardo Strausser.

Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson



Ballet dancers performing a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* at the State Academic Bolshoi Theatre of the USSR in March 1954.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT BRAHMS

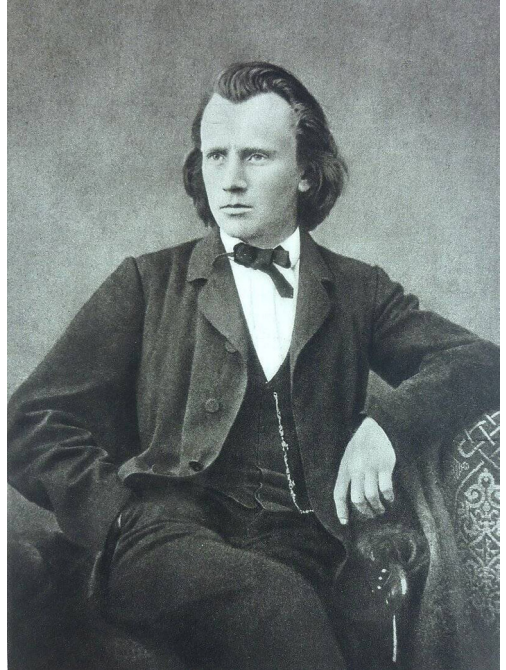
Brahms died neither young, nor insane; he was never a liveried servant, nor dependent on aristocratic or royal patronage; he held several music directorships, but never for long, and, while a performer of distinction, became increasingly able to support himself on composition. He grew relatively wealthy 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. He 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.



Brahms in 1866

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 FIRST PIANO CONCERTO

Robert Schumann had been the Romantic composer par excellence, cultivating the fragmentary, the poetic and the allusive while also contributing to those genres established by composers in the classical tradition. After his death in 1856 two roads diverged in German music: the 'New German' composers, led by Franz Liszt and in turn by Richard Wagner, composed the 'music of the future', avoiding or at least subverting the conventions of symphony and sonata with narrative or philosophical 'programs'; in due course Brahms would come to occupy the position of antipope, breathing new life into the forms and genres of abstract music.

When Brahms' First Piano Concerto appeared in January 1859 it shocked traditionalists in its scale and ferocity, but also because it blurs the distinction between symphony and concerto, and because of suspicions that it contained a program. The premiere in Hanover was received with polite confusion, one critic finding it 'dry and difficult to understand', but the performance in Leipzig a day or two later engendered frank hostility, and it is fair to say that Brahms was still less than confident in handling orchestration.

The work grew out of the Sonata for two pianos that Brahms worked on in the mid-1850s, which the Schumanns had encouraged him to orchestrate. Not surprisingly Brahms, still in his early twenties, was influenced by the prevailing currents of Romanticism and his music from this time contains more than its share of *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress), which was carried over into the Concerto. Thanks partly to Joachim, though, a story grew up that the first movement of the Concerto enacted, and registered Brahms' reaction, Robert Schumann's attempt to commit suicide by flinging himself into the Rhine at Düsseldorf. Be that as may, the work

has one of the excoriating openings of any – by Brahms or anyone else – with its powerful pedal note D that only just supports a massive superstructure of unstable harmony and arresting rhetorical motifs. This provides an introduction of some minutes' duration – as in Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, there is the danger that listeners will forget that they are to hear a piano concerto – before the appearance of the soloist who, as Karl Geiringer has noted, is repeatedly given music 'only remotely, if at all, connected to the material of the orchestral part'. Geiringer goes on to point out how this may derive from Brahms' study of Baroque music, but the effect here is of titanic, and arch-Romantic, struggle and fight between *Angst* and brilliance.

The original two-piano sonata followed the first movement with a minor-key scherzo that Brahms omitted from the Concerto, though he did, some years later, use it as the basis for the sombre dance-like second movement of his *German Requiem*, 'Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras' (for all flesh is as grass). The remainder of the Concerto is all new material, and the manuscript of the *Adagio* originally bore the inscription *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini* (Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord); as Charles Rosen has noted, 'the juncture of religion and music' affects 'even the piano concertos of Brahms'. The inscription was not included in the published score, but, writing to Clara Schumann about it in 1856, Brahms said, 'I am also painting a lovely portrait of you; it is to be the *adagio*'. This suggests that the 'blessed person' is Clara, and the 'Lord' is Robert (whom Brahms occasionally referred to jokingly as 'Mynheer Domine') and his legacy. This is no less 'Romantic' than the opening movement, though of a quite different tenor and mood. The piano, perhaps representing Clara, has a more conventionally prominent role, though the movement is by no means a vehicle for bravura display.

ABOUT THE MUSIC



Clara Schumann in 1853

If there is an accidental similarity to Beethoven's Third Concerto at the outset, there is a more conscious one in the third movement, where Brahms seems to have used the form and proportions, and even, according to Jan Swafford, certain phrase structures of Beethoven's finale to shape his own.

Brahms was wounded by the negative response to the piece, though aware of the role his orchestral inexperience played in its reception. It would be another 15 years before the next try.

Notes by Gordon Kerry © 2005/10 and 2015

Brahms' First Piano Concerto is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; 4 horns and 2 trumpets; timpani, strings and piano soloist.

It was premiered in Hanover on 22 January 1859, with Brahms himself at the piano.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra first performed the concerto in July 1939, with Artur Schnabel as soloist and Georg Szell conducting.

Other notable performances include those by Ignaz Friedman conducted by Edgar Bainton (1940), Hepzibah Menuhin/Bernard Heinze (1946), Walter Gieseking/Eugene Goossens (1952), Julius Katchen/Heinze (1957), Claudio Arrau/Jascha Horenstein (1962), Roger Woodward/Charles Mackerras (1973), Radu Lupu/Willem van Otterloo (1974), Idil Biret/Louis Frémaux (1980), Stephen Kovacevich/Stuart Challender (1988), András Schiff/George Cleve (1993), Peter Sekin/Gilbert Varga (1994), Kovacevich/Edo de Waart (1997), Barry Douglas/Simone Young (2004), Nicholas Angelich/Jakub Hruša (2012), Yefim Bronfman/Donald Runnicles (2014) and Alexander Gavrylyuk/David Robertson (2018).

Our most recent performance was in 2022, with Simon Trpčeski conducted by Miguel Harth-Bedoya.

Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson



Sir Stephen Hough. Photo by Jiyang Chen.

‘BRAHMS STOPS US FROM BEING COMPLETELY TAKEN OVER BY THE MACHINES.’

British pianist Sir Stephen Hough returns to Sydney in 2025 for two concerts, performing the first piano concertos by Brahms and Mendelssohn a couple of weeks apart. Here he discusses the similarities between the two men, the magic in their music, and why the flesh and blood of music like this is our best defense against the soulless void of AI.

By Hugh Robertson

You have all seen it, I’m sure, clogging your social media: torrents of soulless slop churned out by AI. Whether infringing the copyright of authors on an industrial scale or directly copying the art style of beloved filmmakers, our tech autocrats glibly assert that ‘this is progress’ as they squeeze all of the joy and humanity out of art.

How do we combat this rising tide of computer-hallucinated garbage? If you ask Sir Stephen Hough, the answer could be Johannes Brahms.

‘I played Brahms in Seattle a year or so ago,’ recalls Hough, ‘and I had dinner with someone who was one of the heads of AI at Microsoft. And he said, “AI will never touch what Brahms did in that piano concerto because that is

flesh and blood. That is sinew and muscle and a heartbeat and a brain. And we can of course get close in many areas of life, but Brahms stops us from being completely taken over by the machines.”

‘I’m an optimist in almost everything in life. And I wonder if we might actually begin to rediscover more how important those areas of life are which AI can’t help us with – whether it’s relationships, whether it’s art, and so on. And I think this could be a very exciting era in human life.

‘The youngest person playing Brahms, Chopin or Beethoven now is completely connected with what was going on 200 years ago. And we realize we’re the same human beings for all of our developments. And this connection.’

BACKSTAGE NEWS

If anyone knows how to make a connection through music, it's Hough. Over a professional career spanning 45-odd years and counting he has established himself as one of the world's great pianists – 'a keyboard colossus', says *The Guardian*. He needs little introduction in Sydney: a frequent visitor since his debut with the Orchestra in 1992, his performances are always heavily-subscribed and highly-praised.

In 2025 we get to hear him twice in quick succession: first, performing Brahms' Piano Concerto No.1 with conductor Elim Chan, then three weeks later tackling Felix Mendelssohn's First led by Principal Guest Conductor Sir Donald Runnicles. It's a great opportunity to hear him in two works that have a lot in common in many ways, but are worlds apart in others.

'I like the contrast of the Mendelssohn and the Brahms,' says Hough with his typical enthusiasm. 'They're both of course Germans, from the 19th century. The Mendelssohn is perhaps the shortest piano concerto in the regular repertoire, and the Brahms First is perhaps the longest. So you get two sides of the same coin.'

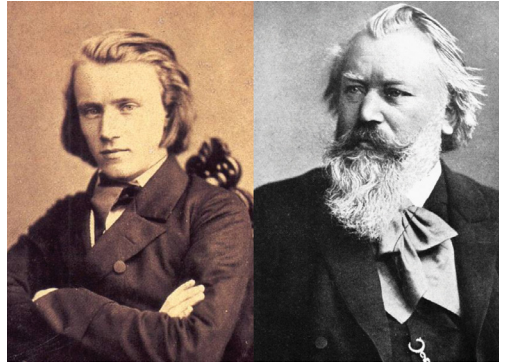
'The Mendelssohn, structurally, is really sort of in one movement – or at least the three movements go into each other. The Brahms is very much three separate statements, but all of them monumental and deeply felt.'

Both concertos have been core works in Hough's repertoire for many years, and he has recorded both to rave reviews. The Brahms in particular is very close to his heart.

'It's a piece that I never get tired of,' he says. 'There is always something more to find there, and it's a work that makes a huge impact on me emotionally every time. I remember one performance when I really couldn't speak afterwards, I was tearing up. I just felt this darkness to light – which all of us look for in our lives in various ways – so overwhelming and such a deep human experience.'

The popular image of Brahms is of him as a taciturn old man with a long grey beard, a respected elder statesman, one of the most significant figures in music in the second half of the 19th century. But of course he was young once – he wrote this first piano concerto when he was just 25 – as Hough is quick to point out.

'He was an Adonis when he was in his twenties,' says Hough. 'And this piece is part of that time of his life. I think what's interesting is the emotions are much more open here than they are [later in his life]. This is a piece where the whole audience, collectively, can get what Brahms is about.'



Left: Brahms aged 20 in 1853, five years before his First Piano Concerto. Right: a photo taken by C. Brasch in 1889: Brahms, 56, is now considered one of the great composers.

We sadly don't get to experience a similar life-long engagement with Felix Mendelssohn, who died at the age of 38. But he had been a prodigious performer and composer from an early age, performing alongside his equally-talented sister Fanny before they had even turned ten and writing a significant number of works before he was 15.

Hough is no less enthusiastic about Mendelssohn's concerto, written in 1830 when he was just 21 and displaying all of his prodigious talents.

'I think Mendelssohn is absolutely wonderful,' he says. 'This is a fairly early piece... [but] there's a lot of depth in Mendelssohn. It's an earlier period. He's coming out of the Classical period in that wonderful era when you have these other composers who were expanding the piano and working with diatonic harmony, but making it vehement and passionate – and in fact fiery.'

'When I recorded all the Mendelssohn music I counted the number of times he'd written *con fuoco*, "with fire" in the score, and I think it was something like 14, and there's a good three or four in this concerto.'

'And you certainly hear that very much in the first movement of this piece. It's a piece that

BACKSTAGE NEWS

begins with a massive crescendo, from the softest the orchestra can play to the loudest the orchestra can play in about five seconds. He really gives you a kick in the backside as you begin this piece – it's a firecracker going off.

‘Then we have the second movement or the second section, which is one of his most beautiful songs about words; Mendelssohn wrote gorgeous melodies, they poured out of him. And then the last movement, yes, it begins with some of the *fuoco* of the first movement, but then we suddenly find ourselves in this marvellous world of froth and champagne and lightness. And, you know, let's not forget that that's human life too. Let's hope it is in all of our lives. And maybe a sense of humour is also something that AI can't do. And this last movement certainly has that. It has a smile in every bar and it's a very joyful piece to play. The audience always has this wonderful reaction at the end because it's an irresistible popping of a cork.

One of the things that connects Mendelssohn and Brahms is that they were both pianists, as well as composers – something that Hough has in common with them, too. He has just released a recording of his own piano concerto, titled *The World of Yesterday*, adding his name to the long list of composer-pianists.

‘It began with Mozart, who was the great virtuoso of his time, and it became a vehicle for virtuoso pianists. Composers always wrote their own piano concertos until the second half of the 20th century – this goes right up to Shostakovich and Benjamin Britten. It was the calling card for composers to show people who they were.’

‘I think what's interesting is you actually do get a glimpse of how they played from how they wrote. With Brahms there's a lot of chords, it's very rich and thick – he obviously loved the piano full of resonance. And then with Mendelssohn, he must have had the fastest fingers in town because he loved to write these very gossamer-like, *leggiero*, finger figuration all over the keyboard. So you do get that little sense there.’

Hough's concerto received its world premiere in January 2024, performed by the Utah Symphony under Sir Donald Runnicles, and Hough is excited to be reuniting with old friends for his performances in Sydney.

‘I just love working with him – he's such a great musician,’ says Hough with a smile. ‘He has an individual voice, and it's kind of rare. Of course there are wonderful conductors around, but some of them just make the orchestra sound like nobody else. And Donald is one of those. So I'm very excited to be working with him.

‘And then the Brahms with [conductor] Elim [Chan], who's a friend and absolutely fantastic, I'm excited very much to work with her. We last worked together literally the week before the pandemic began, and I'm so excited to be doing the Brahms with her.’

Returning to Sydney is also an exciting prospect for Hough, and it's easy to see why he has accepted so many invitations over the years – not least because of his own Australian heritage: his father was born in Australia, and Hough became a dual British/Australian citizen in 2005.

‘What a joy it always is,’ he says with the biggest smile of our interview. ‘I'm often asked what are my favourite places to play, and I always have to say Sydney, for all kinds of reasons. I absolutely love coming back to play and to visit. And of course, the last time I was there, it was in the refurbished Sydney Opera House Concert Hall. So now I can say that I *also* love the acoustics!’

‘How marvellous it is that they've made a success of that [renewal] without doing anything to the building itself. And I think it's a great, great joy. You really felt like you could hear other players and make a connection musically with them. Because it's one thing hearing a clarinet play something, but it's another thing hearing it in a way that it's actually enveloping you so that you can dance with it, you can put your arms around that sound and actually make movements with it and shape it. And that's something that you only get in the best concert halls. And I feel now that that's possible in Sydney. So that's very exciting, I think, for one of the great cities of the world. And I can't wait to be back there.’

Don't miss Sir Stephen Hough performing with the Sydney Symphony in 2025.

- **Brahms: Piano Concerto No.1**
16–18 May
- **Mendelssohn: Piano Concerto No.1**
4–7 June

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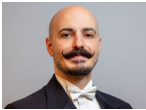
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