

## **Program Notes for VSO Concert – Brahms Violin Concerto and Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5 – February 13-14, 2026**

**By Jonathan Berkowitz**

The 2024-25 season featured a program with two of the most iconic and beloved pieces in the classical repertoire, Beethoven's Violin Concerto and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 (*Pathétique*). The current program also pairs two magnificent works, Brahms' Violin Concerto and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5. As I noted last year, each is a treat for the ears. Together, the treat is more than doubled!

### **JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833 to 1897)**

**Note: The following biography first appeared in October 2024.**

*"It is not hard to compose but it is wonderfully hard to let the superfluous notes fall under the table. So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them."* ~ Johannes Brahms

Born in Hamburg in 1833 to the son of a double bass player of limited talent, young Johannes augmented the family income playing the piano in dance halls. The first big turning point in his life came in 1853, when he met violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who immediately recognized Brahms' talent. Joachim introduced him to Robert and Clara Schumann, who took Brahms under their wings.

He taught piano and conducted choirs which left him ample time for composing. By 1863 he had settled into a mostly quiet, regular life in Vienna, except for a few musical altercations arising from his quick temper and the rivalry between the traditionalists and the new romantics such as Wagner and Bruckner. His reputation grew steadily. Brahms remained in Vienna and held various musical positions but devoted his life to composition. He still went on concert tours, where he conducted or played piano, but only for his own works.

Brahms was very exacting but had a rather dual nature. While he could be solitary, morose, and withdrawn, he loved humour. Behind a rough exterior he hid a tenderness that revealed itself in his music and in his love of children. He remained a lifelong bachelor but had many musical friends and a few close personal friendships. His life was the antithesis of the flamboyant Liszt.

As a composer, Brahms bridged the gap between the musical past and its future. He preserved the structural rigour and formal discipline of Classical music—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—but incorporated the emotional depth and expressiveness of the Romantic era. A musicologist for *Deutsche Grammophon* wrote, "Brahms blended Beethovenian dynamism, Schubertian lyricism, a love of German folk song and the strict contrapuntal mastery of the Baroque into a synthesis of phenomenal richness. His example was as vital as Wagner's in the creation of the music of the modern era."

His music is characterized by a mastery of rhythm, movement, and orchestration. This distinguished him from his contemporaries and influenced later composers, including Antonín

Dvořák and Gustav Mahler, who greatly admired his work. Brahms's choral works, especially his *German Requiem*, are considered masterpieces and have had a lasting impact on choral music.

Very self-critical, Brahms didn't complete his first symphony until 1876 at the age of 43. Written in the same key as Beethoven's Fifth, Brahms' First was dubbed by some critics as "Beethoven's Tenth". By then he was in full command of the symphonic style and wrote his other three symphonies within a decade. Gradually, Brahms's renown spread through Europe. His contemporaries appreciated the critical significance of his works, and people spoke of the eminence of the "three great Bs" (meaning Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms). Inevitably, a few detractors including Liszt and Wagner thought Brahms' work too old-fashioned and uninteresting.

In addition to his symphonies and monumental concertos, Brahms composed a large body of choral, chamber and piano music, as well as over two hundred songs. He excelled in great virtuoso forms, and in intimate small-scale piano pieces and chamber music. Unlike Wagner, Brahms did not write an opera. In Brahms' works, the music becomes the drama.

The last orchestral concert Brahms attended was a Vienna Philharmonic performance of his own Fourth Symphony a month before he died. An ailing Brahms appeared at the end of the performance and received thunderous applause. Florence May, Brahms' first English language biographer, described the scene, "Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there [...] and through the audience there was a feeling as of a stifled sob, for each knew that he was saying farewell. Another outburst of applause and yet another; one more acknowledgment from the master, and Brahms and his Vienna had parted forever."

## Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77 – Johannes Brahms (1878)

**Orchestration:** 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, and solo violin

What are the top violin concertos of all time? Many rankings list the big five: Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mendelssohn, and Sibelius. Interestingly, each of these composers wrote only a single concerto for violin, perhaps because they didn't want to meddle with perfection. (But each of the first four did write multiple piano concertos.)

Brahms' Violin Concerto is a monumental, technically demanding masterpiece. Not a showpiece in the Paganini tradition, Brahms' model was clearly Beethoven. Their concertos are in the same key, and both have a long, lyrical first movement in classical sonata form.

The work was shaped in close consultation with Brahms' lifelong friend, the great violinist Joseph Joachim, who advised on technical aspects of the piece, including bow markings and performance directions. Brahms was notoriously impatient and couldn't be bothered with what he considered trivial details. Brahms and Joachim shared musical values of respect for the past, and belief that music should have meaning and substance, rather than be just a flashy and unmotivated virtuoso display. The collaboration is part of the Concerto's secret: the violin is constantly under pressure. The solo part is tremendously difficult, but not of the "look what I can do" type. Brahms requires strength, endurance, and flexibility. The violin sings, merges, leads, and at times vanishes, as if it were an eloquent inner voice of the orchestra.

When Joachim premiered the work in Leipzig in 1879, Brahms was sparing and unflattering in his praise. He complained that "it was a lot of D major—and not much else on the program." Perhaps Brahms was annoyed that Joachim opened the concert with Beethoven's violin Concerto.

Today Brahms' Concerto is considered one of the greatest works of its kind, but as so often happened in the history of classical music (including, remarkably, to Beethoven's Violin Concerto), critical reaction at the time of the premiere was mixed and often negative. One story described the work as being not "for" the violin as "against" the violin. Another called it a Concerto "*for violin against orchestra* — and the violin wins." Calvin Dotsey comments that the orchestra's role gives the work qualities of a symphony, and it is those qualities—integrity and substance—that helped the composition stand the test of time. Time has proven the critics very wrong and Brahms and Joachim very right.

The Concerto follows standard form, with three movements in the quick–slow–quick pattern. Originally, the work was planned in four movements like a symphony and like his Second Piano Concerto. The middle movements were discarded and replaced with what Brahms called, in his typical self-deprecating style, a "feeble Adagio". Some of the discarded material was reworked for the Second Piano Concerto.

The first movement—***Allegro non troppo***—begins with an orchestral statement that sounds more like the beginning of symphony than a concerto. The opening theme is based on a simple broken

chord, just like Brahms' Second Symphony, completed a year before the Concerto, and which was also in D major. The simple phrase is introduced by the horns, then picked up by the winds, and quickly joined by the full orchestra playing dynamic octaves. The theme gradually develops; then the music fades as if to introduce a lyrical second theme that does not appear. Instead, a dramatic transitional passage in a minor key with dotted rhythms announces the soloist. It is as if the violin steps into a conversation already underway, arguing against the orchestra's dark staccato theme to reinterpret what has already been presented. After that, the violinist is finally ready to present a beautiful, song-like second theme.

Now it's the violinist's turn to play the dark staccato theme which builds to an extended passage for the orchestra, with a stormy version of the opening theme and echoes of the second. The violinist re-enters, and together with the orchestra, continues the development that is the source of the Concerto's reputation for symphonic seriousness. The violin explores darker harmonies but without losing momentum. After a short new passage—a melancholy counterpoint—from the violinist, bits of both of the opening and the staccato themes serve to reprise the main ideas of the movement.

Another statement of the staccato theme by the violin is followed by a powerful orchestral passage that builds to a pause, announcing the cadenza. Just as Beethoven had done, Brahms left the cadenza up to the performer. Perhaps they did so since neither was a violin soloist. This Concerto is among the last to do so. Joachim's cadenza is the most familiar, covering all the movement's main themes except the lyrical second one. Violinist Ruggiero Ricci recorded the Concerto and coupled it with his recordings of sixteen different cadenzas contributed by many other virtuosos. The soloist's final trill leads to a tranquil coda, one of the finest moments of movement. The opening theme soars and seems about to fade away, but the music accelerates to a vibrant and fitting conclusion.

The remarkable accomplishment of this movement is that Brahms managed to reconcile a concerto's charisma with a symphony's integrity. The violin dazzles but the movement could, astonishingly, stand on its own as a symphonic movement with a prominent or obbligato violin line woven through.

The second movement—**Adagio**—is anything but “feeble” as Brahms himself described it. It has some of his richest orchestral writing and begins in an unusual manner. The oboe sings the principal melody before the soloist plays a note. This would seem like a novelty from a lesser composer, but with Brahms it feels like humility. When the violin enters, it does not “take over” but rather moves into the space the oboe has opened. With the help of the strings the harmonies develop, using remote keys. Then before the opening melody returns in the main key, the oboe and violin alternate phrases. The movement feels like chamber music inside a concerto. While it is serene on the surface, it is searching and unsettled underneath. The violin, restrained and eloquent, blends with the winds as one instrument among equals. It acts like a speaker holding the room without raising his voice.

The finale—**Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace; Poco più presto**—arrives like, as one writer put it, a sudden change in weather: rustic energy, dancing rhythms, and a Hungarian-tinged enthusiasm that pays tribute to Joachim's background and to Brahms's long fascination with that

folk style. But the joy is not lightweight. The celebration still carries the seriousness of the earlier movements. Seamless switching from double-time (2/4) to triple-time (3/4) and then an ending in “Turkish” style 6/8 time gives the movement energy and rhythm. The triplets wind down and the Concerto ends with powerful final chords.

In this movement, Brahms makes a phrase feel both perfectly balanced and asymmetrical at the same time. Although the violin sounds like a fiddle at a dance the orchestra performs sophisticated structural work underneath. All is tightly organized and the result is “folky” but not “kitschy”. The soloist and orchestra toss ideas back and forth between them, creating a buoyant movement that is still strongly harmonic. Brahms has solved a classic concerto problem: how to end brilliantly without becoming shallow. The Concerto ends with joy, virtuosity, and rhythm—music you can feel in your feet. Like a Mozart opera, excitement builds and then subsides for a grand ending.

**Epilogue:** These notes began by placing this Concerto as one of the greatest of all time. Why does it deserve that ranking? It’s a true symphonic concerto. The orchestra is not accompaniment; it is an equal partner, and the soloist must be both leader and collaborator. The violin writing is profound, not merely hard, able to project through thick orchestration. The emotional range conveys maturity without youthful bravura or melodrama. It rewards repeated listening. The better you know the piece, the more compelling are the themes, rhythms, and architecture. It demands, and exposes, musicianship. You can’t bluff Brahms. The Concerto tests rhythm, intonation, tone, ensemble, pacing, and above all integrity. When it lands, it feels less like a performance and more like a truth spoken at full scale. Michael Fink noted that “Brahms’s Violin Concerto stands as a great musical pillar near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, counter-balancing the pillar of Beethoven’s great Violin Concerto from the beginning of that century.” John Horton summed it up this way:

“That Brahms should have ventured upon a Violin Concerto in D with the sound of Beethoven’s ... was in itself an act of faith and courage; that he should have produced one ... worthy to stand beside it, is one of the triumphs of Brahms’s genius.”

## **PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840 to 1893)**

**Note: The following biography first appeared in 2024-2025.**

*I am passionately fond of the national element in all its varied expressions....I am Russian in the fullest sense of the word. —Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky*

Who are the best-known composers in the history of classical music? Bach, Mozart and Beethoven are at or near the top of the list, but Tchaikovsky must be considered for scope of musical forms and breadth of listening audiences. He is widely considered the most popular of the Russian composers. His ballets, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker* attract audiences of all ages. *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor* is among the best-known of all piano concertos, and his *Violin Concerto* is one of the greatest ever composed. Tchaikovsky's symphonies are staples of the orchestral repertoire.

Although Tchaikovsky showed an early passion for music, his parents wanted him to work in the civil service. Accordingly, he entered the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in Saint Petersburg at the age of 10. Nine years later, Tchaikovsky honoured his parents by taking a clerkship with the Ministry of Justice where he stayed for four years.

When he was 21, Tchaikovsky restarted music lessons and enrolled at the newly-founded Saint Petersburg Conservatory. There, he became one of the school's first composition students. He then joined the Moscow Conservatory as a professor of harmony but resigned in 1878 to focus entirely on composing. His prolific body of work constitutes 169 pieces, including symphonies, operas, ballets, concertos, cantatas, and songs.

- *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* were both considered failures at their premieres. But they went on to become two of the most beloved and frequently performed ballets in the world.
- He was heavily influenced by Russian folk melodies, which can be heard in many of his compositions.
- A perfectionist when it came to his compositions, he often revised and rearranged his works multiple times before considering them ready for performance.
- Despite his incredible success as a composer, Tchaikovsky struggled with self-doubt, anxiety, and depression throughout his life. His homosexuality was a significant source of personal struggle, at a time when being openly gay was not accepted.
- Tchaikovsky had a unique relationship with his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, in that they communicated solely through letters and never met in person. Von Meck supported Tchaikovsky financially which allowed him the freedom to focus on his music.
- His works are known for their intense melodies and dramatic flair. Their themes of love, fate, and struggle resonate deeply with audiences all over the world.
- Tchaikovsky's life ended tragically in 1893, at the age of 53. The cause of his death remains a topic of speculation, with theories ranging from cholera to suicide. History has not provided an answer to this mystery.

Tchaikovsky's music continues to be cherished and performed worldwide, solidifying his legacy as one of the greatest composers of all time.

## **Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64 – Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1888)**

**Orchestration:** 3 flutes (3rd=piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings

Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony is often described as a drama of fate and affirmation. But it is not a straightforward victory narrative. It is psychologically complex, arguing with itself and doubting its own conclusions. It circles around the same musical idea trying to figure things out. The result is a symphony built with Classical discipline and Romantic intensity. Although it is not explicitly nationalistic, many of the themes have a distinctively Russian flavour.

Composed after a period of creative self-doubt and ten years after his Fourth Symphony, the Fifth has Tchaikovsky returning to symphonic form with renewed purpose. While the Fourth's theme was triumph over fate—imitating Beethoven's Fifth—his Fifth was a journey from resignation to faith. Tchaikovsky's compositional struggle between the demands of formal tradition and his preference for emotional expression mirror his personal psychological struggle. As Tchaikovsky had done with his two previous symphonies, he wrote notes about a programmatic approach to the work but then dropped the idea.

At the centre of the work is a recurring motto theme, known as the "Fate" motif. First heard at the very beginning, it then interrupts the second movement's love song and third movement's dance, and finally, transforms in a blazing and triumphant finale. Whether we hear it as fate, obsession, memory, or inner voice, it binds the Symphony into a single psychological arc.

The first movement—**Andante – Allegro con anima**—opens with low clarinets and bassoons playing the motto theme in a dark, processional tempo. It feels guarded, as if the music is gathering the courage to begin. When the Allegro arrives, the movement unfolds as a struggle between motion and drag. The lyrical second theme, introduced by the strings, offers warmth and hope, but quickly becomes unstable. More themes are presented, even in the turbulent development section. Throughout is a sense of striving, with repeated figures pushing forward, being met with strong rhythmic resistance that pulls back to the opening motto. The movement ends with a coda that feels tense and suspended, like an unanswered question. And so, we are pulled into the Symphony's inner conflict.

The second movement—**Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza**—is one of Tchaikovsky's most famous inspirations: a long, arching horn melody that is the Symphony's emotional heart. But even here the motto theme intrudes. The movement becomes a dialogue between intimacy and interruption, between hope for beauty and the fear that it cannot last. The phrase *con alcuna licenza* indicates that the movement is to breathe freely, with flexible tempo and phrasing. In lesser hands that theme could have sounded sentimental, but Tchaikovsky's skillful orchestration lifts the mood to high Romanticism. Near the end of the movement, the music becomes introspective. Whether the comfort of the movement is real or just imagined has not yet been decided.

The third movement—**Valse: Allegro moderato**—is the most distinctive, a graceful waltz rather than a traditional scherzo. Tchaikovsky uses a wide range of instrumental colours to produce a

dance that is elegant, flowing, and light on the surface, but unsettling underneath. The instability is accomplished with subtle variations in the triple time (3/4) rhythm. When the motto theme appears, it is disguised and less ominous, as if fate has learned to dance. And then the movement ends by quietly slipping away.

The closing movement— **Finale: Andante maestoso – Allegro vivace**—brings the drama of the Symphony to a climax. It opens with the motto theme transformed into a grand, major-key proclamation. The darkness of the Symphony’s opening seems to have been conquered. What follows is a high-energy movement that alternates between celebration and ferocity. Yet the triumph is only achieved with an effort that forms part of its meaning. A new and upbeat version of the “fate” motif explodes in the electrifying final moments. [Whenever I hear the blazing brass with the march-like theme, I think that it would have been a great choice for the triumphal final scenes in *Star Wars*. I wonder whether that thought will now occur to other listeners, too.]

Some critics considered the ending to be rather crude. Tchaikovsky himself concluded that the Symphony was a failure and wondered whether he was done as a composer. He wasn’t. *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*, and *Pathétique* Symphony were still to come. The Symphony has gone on to become one of his most popular works. The second movement is classic Tchaikovsky, and the finale certainly appeals to modern listeners.

The Fifth Symphony was performed many times during World War II; perhaps the work’s popularity was because of the idea of “ultimate victory through strife”. One notable performance was by the Leningrad Radio Orchestra on October 20, 1941, during the Siege of Leningrad. The performance was also broadcast live in London. As the second movement began, bombs started to fall nearby, but the orchestra continued playing until the final note.

Listeners are encouraged to track how the motto theme transforms across the Symphony, from dark and tentative to lyrical, grotesque, and finally monumental. Notice also Tchaikovsky’s gift for orchestral colour, and how he assigns emotional meaning to timbre: clarinet for inwardness, horn for vulnerability, strings for longing, brass for assertion. And listen for abrupt shifts in mood that feel like changes in thought rather than smooth transitions.

Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony is tightly constructed yet feels as though it’s being invented in real time. The music resists simple moral resolution. Even when triumph is proclaimed, it arrives with tension. Belief vs. anxiety and affirmation vs. fear make this Symphony remarkably human.

**Pop culture postscript:** The lush main theme was adapted into pop songs *Moon Love* and *Love Is All that Matters*. And the first horn theme in the second movement is almost identical to the beginning of *Annie’s Song* by John Denver, an unintentional tribute that Denver did not notice until his producer pointed it out.