Program Notes for VSO Concert – Brahms Violin Concerto and Dvorak Symphony No. 6 – October 9-10, 2026

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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 an untalented double bass player, young Johannes augmented the family income by 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 While he could be solitary, morose, and withdrawn, he loved humour.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 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' choral works, especially his *German Requiem*, are considered masterpieces and have had a lasting impact on the genre.

Very self-critical, Brahms did not 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 "Beethoven's Tenth." By then, Brahms was in full command of the symphonic style and wrote his subsequent three symphonies within a decade. Gradually, Brahms' 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 more than 200 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 could not be bothered with what he considered trivial details. Brahms and Joachim shared musical values: respect for the past, and the belief that music should have meaning and substance, rather than be merely a flashy, unmotivated virtuosic 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' music 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 had 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 but "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 a 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, 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 gives the Concerto its 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 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 because 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 the 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' 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 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 is 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 difficult, and 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 the themes, rhythms, and architecture become. It demands, and exposes, musicianship. You cannot 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' Violin Concerto stands as a great musical pillar near the end of the 19th century, counterbalancing 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' genius."

ANTONIN DVOŘÁK (1841 to 1904)

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

After Russia, the most significant European nation to produce composers was Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic. Notables were Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana. Although Bohemia had a distinguished musical tradition, Smetana was the first to use its folk songs as the basis for Czech art music. However, credit must go to Dvořák for popularizing it. His music has been played worldwide since the late 1870s and has never been out of the repertory.

In his own day, Dvořák was the idol of Prague. Hans von Bülow called him "next to Brahms the most God-gifted composer of the present day." He wrote prolifically in all forms, with a unique voice and great versatility. Some music lovers underestimate him, regarding him as a very good second-rank composer. Perhaps they were misled by the innocence and transparency of his music, which has a strong peasant strain. He respected the classic forms and wrote in primary emotional colours, without subtlety or pretensions of an intellectual or revolutionary nature. Of the late Romantics, he was the happiest and least neurotic; for him, life was wonderful and uncomplicated. Dvořák's pupils loved his sweetness, gentleness, and dedication.

It takes more than simplicity and happiness to produce great music. Dvořák had an inexhaustible supply of melodies, the best of which are patriotic. He was a complete original who excelled at expressing his love for his native land.

Dvořák was a musician and nothing more. Barely literate, not widely read, he did have one passion outside of music: trains! He could be found every day at Prague's main train station, memorizing timetables and befriending locomotive engineers.

Born in a quaint village near Prague in 1841, Dvořák's talent was apparent at a young age. His father, an innkeeper and butcher, recognized and nurtured his son's gift. Serious music lessons began at age 12, financed by an uncle. In his teens he enrolled in the Prague Organ School and began studying composition. Although he composed prolifically, his early attempts passed without critical reception or public performances. Those compositions up through 1870 either had no known premieres or were premiered in 1888 or later.

Dvořák remained almost unknown outside the Prague area until 1873, when he won the Austrian State Prize for Composition. The jury included Johannes Brahms who was deeply moved by Dvořák's mastery and talent. He recommended him to his own publisher, Simrock, with whom Dvořák signed a contract that allowed his music to gain international acclaim and recognition.

In 1878, he published his *Slavonic Dances* for piano duet; they were an immediate and great success. The music critic Louis Ehlert wrote, "Here at last is a hundred per cent talent; and, what is new, a completely natural talent." Five years later, Dvořák's setting of *Stabat Mater*, his first

composition of a religious nature, was performed to great acclaim in London. He was invited to visit Britain, the first of many visits there. In response to a commission from the London Philharmonic Society, Dvořák composed his *Symphony No. 7*.

In 1892, Dvořák was invited to New York by Jeannette Thurber, a wealthy philanthropist, to serve as director of the National Conservatory of Music, which she had helped found. Her hope was that Dvořák could stimulate the development of "American" music on a foundation of African-American and Native American traditions. Dvořák told the *New York Herald* that "America can have her own music, a fine music…the natural voice of a free and great nation." In his three years in the United States, Dvořák produced several works that are known as "American," culminating in his *Symphony No. 9*, subtitled *From the New World*. The Symphony started a controversy fuelled by Dvořák's contradictory remarks about the score. More about this in the analysis that follows.

Brahms and the publisher Simrock continued championing Dvořák's music while he was in America. Brahms even did the tedious job of proofreading the manuscripts! Dvořák said, "I don't believe there is another musician of his stature in the whole world who would do such a thing."

After completing his *Cello Concerto in B minor*, homesickness and his partially unpaid salary spurred his decision to return to Prague in 1895. There he spent his final years composing—especially opera and chamber music—and teaching at the Prague Conservatory.

In 1904, the first Czech Musical Festival featured a program almost entirely of Dvořák's music. According to reports, thousands of singers sang his oratorio *Saint Ludmila*, and thousands of listeners celebrated his *New World Symphony*. Sadly, Dvořák was ill and unable to attend. He died a month later, leaving many unfinished works.

Dvořák composed in nearly every musical form. He wrote nine symphonies, five symphonic poems, major choral works, an oratorio and a cantata, and three concertos for solo instrument and orchestra—one each for piano, violin, and cello. The latter is widely believed to be the greatest of all cello concertos. He also wrote operas, song cycles, a great deal of chamber music—notably string quartets, string quintets, and piano trios—as well as piano music.

During Dvořák's lifetime, only five of his symphonies were widely known. The sixth was the first one published. After his death, four unpublished symphonies were discovered, which led to huge problems regarding how to number them. The *New World Symphony* has successively been called the 5th, 8th, and 9th. Further complicating things, the opus numbers were not given in writing or publication order. Some composers and publishers gave higher opus numbers to Dvořák's early works to improve sales. Eventually, all of his compositions were catalogued chronologically by Jarmil Burghauser, and scholars today often refer to Dvořák's works by their B numbers (for Burghauser).

English conductor Julius Harrison commented that lukewarm performances of any orchestral piece by Dvořák are rare because "each instrumental part is instinct with life. Nothing stagnates, for Dvořák's ear was fully alive to every voice in the harmony." Dvořák's style combined a national idiom with symphonic tradition, absorbing folk influences and using them effectively. Ultimately, his legacy transcended national boundaries. His timeless melodies and lush harmonies made an indelible mark on the world of classical music.

Symphony No. 6 in D Major, Op. 60, B. 112 – Antonín Dvořák (1880)

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

Unlike some composers whose masterpieces arrive in a sudden blaze of inspiration, Antonín Dvořák was a composer whose greatest works emerged gradually as experience, confidence, and craftsmanship converged. The Sixth Symphony was pivotal in Dvořák's development. Earlier symphonies reveal immense promise. The Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth would become internationally celebrated masterpieces. The Sixth stands between them, combining Classical balance, Brahmsian craftsmanship, Czech folk vitality, unforgettable melody, and masterful orchestration. It is a work of complete symphonic maturity, characterized by his unmistakable melodic gift, love of Czech folk music, and command of orchestral colour.

By 1880, Dvořák was no longer an obscure provincial composer. The publication of the *Slavonic Dances* transformed Dvořák into an international figure almost overnight. The Sixth Symphony followed shortly afterward. It was commissioned by the Vienna Philharmonic and dedicated to its conductor, Hans Richter. Political tensions within Vienna, however, complicated the premiere. Anti-Czech sentiment and institutional rivalries delayed the performance, and the Vienna Philharmonic never gave the first performance it had originally intended. Instead, the premiere took place in Prague in 1881 under the direction of Adolf Čech.

Although disappointing personally, the delayed Viennese recognition ultimately mattered little. The Symphony quickly established itself internationally and confirmed Dvořák as one of Europe's leading symphonists. Even Czech critics admitted that the new Symphony was outstanding. But it was not until its 1882 London premiere that Dvořák's world fame truly began to skyrocket. The Vienna Philharmonic did not perform this Symphony until 1942.

Listeners often notice the unmistakable influence of Brahms. In fact, this Symphony and Brahms' Second are in the same D major key. Both composers favoured warm orchestral colours, rich harmonic writing, and carefully constructed symphonic forms. Yet Dvořák never sounds derivative. His music possesses qualities entirely his own. One critic famously remarked that Dvořák seemed incapable of writing an unattractive tune. The Sixth Symphony fully justifies that observation.

The opening of the first movement—***Allegro non tanto***—immediately establishes the Symphony's sunny character and confident mood. Dvořák presents a broad, pastoral melody that seems to arise naturally from the orchestra. The atmosphere recalls Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, yet the melodic language is unmistakably Bohemian. The movement follows Classical sonata form. After the expansive first theme, filled with grand brass and woodwinds, comes a graceful second subject, introduced by woodwinds before blossoming throughout the orchestra. Unlike Brahms' often dense motivic development, Dvořák allows melodies to unfold while maintaining firm structural control.

Although the score includes a repeat of the exposition, it is not usually played because Dvořák later decided to eliminate it. The development section, which begins mysteriously, is imaginative and expertly constructed. Musicologist Max Derrickson notes, "The first movement progresses, lyrical and resplendent with an indefatigable confidence, but Dvořák could never resist the shadows cast

on a sunny summer's day, either." The use of hemiolas (three beats versus two beats), heard again in the third movement, creates positive tension. The movement ends with a coda that reviews the previous themes. It builds to an exciting fortissimo and dies down to a tender pianissimo for what appears to be a peaceful conclusion. One last fortissimo proclamation closes the movement.

Listen for the warm horns, singing woodwinds, flowing strings, and Dvořák's seamless transitions between lyrical and energetic passages. Particularly striking is the transparency of the orchestration, where every instrumental colour remains distinct. Marc Mandel, writing for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, commented, "If I were permitted just one Dvořák movement for future hearings, this would be it."

The second movement—***Adagio***—offers one of Dvořák's loveliest inspirations, a calm, slow nocturne (night song) that expresses serenity and quiet contemplation. The composer's biographer described it as praise for the magic of a summer night. Many listeners hear echoes of church hymns or evening landscapes. Whether intentional or not, the music possesses unmistakable spiritual warmth. The movement is in rondo form, containing variations within the sections. A brief introduction by the winds is followed by the strings presenting the main, song-like, gentle melody. About two-thirds of the way through, the flute plays a cadenza-like solo, followed by gentle tapping on the timpani, and the winds and strings join in. It is as if the orchestra is lost in thought. A charming, simple, and sweet passage brings the movement to an end.

Listen especially for the beautiful dialogue between woodwinds and strings, rich harmonic colouring, gentle horn chorales, and Dvořák's extraordinary ability to sustain long melodic lines. Unlike many Romantic adagios, the movement never becomes sentimental. Its beauty lies in its simplicity.

The third movement—***Scherzo (Furiant): Presto***—is full of fast, fiery dance rhythms in the style of a *furiant,* a traditional Czech dance with wild, changing rhythms characterized by shifting accents that constantly blur the distinction between duple (2/4 time) and triple metre (3/4 time). These cross-rhythms create exhilarating instability. For many listeners, this movement represents the Symphony's unmistakably Czech identity. The middle section is a gentler and more pastoral trio that may remind listeners of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*. It is also the only time the piccolo is heard. Following the lyrical relaxation of the trio, the exuberant dance returns. At the premiere, the Czech audience was so excited by the furiant that they demanded the movement be played a second time.

Listen for rhythmic ambiguity, brilliant string articulation, lively woodwind interjections, and the infectious energy that never loses elegance. The movement is simultaneously sophisticated and rustic, and the only overtly folk-like music in the work.

The fourth movement—***Finale: Allegro con spirito***—combines festive exuberance with symphonic discipline. Written in conventional sonata form, the finale is reminiscent of the finale of Brahms' Second Symphony. Its theme is dramatically transformed and then races to a powerful, exciting, and life-affirming finish. A lively main theme launches the movement. Groups of instruments gather strength—quiet strings, bassoons, upper woodwinds—until the whole orchestra is fully engaged. In classic Dvořák style, episodes alternate between energetic momentum and lyrical reflection. Earlier moods return transformed. The conclusion is full of festival-like fanfares, leading to a glorious and uplifting end.

Listen, above all, for the brilliance of the brass and the energy of the strings, and for how Dvořák drives, with increasing excitement, toward the final pages. Watch for smiles on the faces of the conductor, the musicians, and fellow listeners.

Unlike Mahler or Strauss, Dvořák uses relatively modest orchestral forces, but he achieves astonishing richness through imaginative combinations of instrumental colours. Woodwinds often carry melodies. Horns provide warmth rather than sheer power. Strings sing with almost vocal expressiveness. The Sixth Symphony sounds simultaneously familiar and fresh—firmly rooted in the Austro-German symphonic tradition yet unmistakably Czech. It demonstrates that nationalism need not narrow artistic vision; in Dvořák's hands, it enriches it. While it may lack the international fame of the *New World* Symphony, many regard it as the first fully realized masterpiece of one of the 19th-century's greatest symphonists.