Romantic Brahms

2021 BLOSSOM MUSIC FESTIVAL
Week 8

Sunday evening, **August 22**, 2021 at 7 p.m.

The Cleveland Orchestra
Jahja Ling, *conductor*
Sayaka Shoji, *violin*

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Violin Concerto in D major, Opus 77

1. Allegro non troppo
2. Adagio
3. Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 3 in F major, Opus 90

1. Allegro con brio
2. Andante
3. Poco allegretto
4. Allegro — un poco sostenuto

Please turn your phone to silent mode during the performance.

A SPECIAL WELCOME to those attending this evening's **Blossom Summer Soirée** pre-concert event and dinner to raise funds for and celebrate The Cleveland Orchestra's summer home.

Sayaka Shoji's performance is generously supported by **Dr. and Mrs. Hiroyuki Fujita**.

This concert is dedicated to the following donors in recognition for their extraordinary support of The Cleveland Orchestra:
Dr. Robert Brown and Mrs. Janet Gans Brown
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Introducing the Concert

THIS EVENING features the return of conductor Jahja Ling to Blossom to lead a program titled *Romantic Brahms*. While that moniker may call to mind illicit trysts, summer flings, or blossoming love, it is another relationship — a bromance if you will — that is at the heart of this program.

Johannes Brahms was twenty when he met then twenty-two-year-old virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim in Hanover, Germany, in 1853, yet they were at vastly different points in their careers. The fledgling composer was embarking on his first concert tour as a pianist. Meanwhile, Joachim, a protégé of Felix Mendelssohn, had already performed throughout Europe to widespread acclaim — Brahms had even witnessed the violinist perform Beethoven's great Violin Concerto.

The two young men immediately hit it off, sparking one of the great collaborations between composer and performer in the history of music. One inspired the other musically, creatively, and intellectually. Brahms would seek Joachim's opinion on all of his works in progress, and Joachim premiered and performed several of Brahms's compositions as violinist as well as conductor.

It didn't take long after that initial meeting for Joachim to start urging Brahms to write him a concerto. It took nearly sixteen years for the composer to oblige. The Violin Concerto premiered on New Year's Day 1879 and quickly took its place among the best and most-often played. The soloist and orchestra work seamlessly together, providing a model for collaboration in performance. The music is filled with soaring melody and rapturous harmonies, searingly infused with poignant reveries and sunny outbursts, performed this evening by Sayaka Shoji in her Cleveland Orchestra debut.

The second work on this evening's program also begins with Brahms's recollections of that delightful summer of 1853. Thirty years later, the composer returned to the resort town of Wiesbaden, which he had visited around the same time that he met Joachim. This quiet summer retreat was filled with memories from those earlier days, and Brahms embedded them into his Third Symphony. The work even opens with a motif that alludes to Joachim before it swells into Brahmsian melodies and harmonies, as well as surprising choices against symphonic norms (including a memorably soft and beautiful ending).

—Amanda Angel

Violin Concerto in D major, Opus 77

by **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

Composed: 1878

Premiered: January 1, 1879, in Leipzig, Germany,
with Joseph Joachim as soloist and Brahms conducting

Duration: about 40 minutes

JOHANNES BRAHMS was a formidable pianist, but he would never have wanted to be identified with the many piano virtuosos who crisscrossed Europe in the 19th century and composed flashy variations and fantasias on popular tunes (including the greatest hits from Rossini and Verdi operas).

Brahms's two piano concertos — premiered in 1859 and 1881 — are stern and serious works. When it came to writing a violin concerto, his model was unquestionably going to be Beethoven, virtuosic yet meaningful, rather than the egocentrically boastful concertos of Paganini or Vieuxtemps. He made that doubly plain by choosing Beethoven's key, D major, and by following Beethoven's precedent with a long, lyrical first movement in full classical sonata form (a standardized structure of how the musical themes in a movement are introduced, developed, repeated, and then brought to fulfillment in the coda).

In the case of Brahms, perhaps we should be surprised that he composed a violin concerto at all. Joseph Joachim, for whom it was written, was the first important musician he met when he left his Hamburg home at the age of twenty to seek fame and fortune. Joachim, two years older, was already an international star at that time, and the two struck up a firm friendship that lasted across more than four decades.

For nearly twenty of those forty years, Joachim implored Brahms to write him a concerto, yet Brahms hesitated — no doubt prioritizing the challenging task of writing symphonies above attempting a concerto for an instrument he didn't play.

Eventually, in 1878, soon after the successful premiere of his Second Symphony, Brahms devoted a summer holiday in the Austrian Alps to composing the longed-for concerto.

The composer worked closely with Joachim in fashioning the solo part; he clearly intended the concerto to be a test of the player's technique and musician-

ship, but also to be free of any suspicion of unmotivated display. Display itself is, of course, perfectly legitimate, in fact desirable, in a concerto — yet, the serious Brahms believed that the soloist's leaps, arpeggios, double stops, and passage-work should be intrinsic to the work, and not merely added for "interest."

Although Brahms's writing for solo violin strikes us today as a model of good taste and sensitive musicianship, the work's earliest critics were in some doubt, feeling that the composer had, perhaps, in certain places allowed the solo line to overheat the work's focused direction. Others, including the great Spanish violin virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate, felt it had no real tunes. *"Would I stand there,"* he said, *"violin in hand, while the oboe plays the only melody in the whole work?!"*

The concerto was first performed in Leipzig on New Year's Day 1879 by Joachim, the dedicatee, who composed the cadenza that is still normally played today. Never fond of waste, Brahms presents his **first movement**'s main theme as a bare unison at the very start of the work, based on a D-major triad. Eight measures later, the oboe offers something nearer to a scale; eight bars further on, the full orchestra dwells on leaping octaves. Gradually the thematic material finds its place, some presented by the orchestra, more provided by the soloist after flexing his or her muscles (forty-some measures of, yes, display). Eventually, we reach a gloriously lyrical second subject, which seems to express the very soul of the violin. The finest moment is reserved for the coda (after the solo cadenza), when, following a sly reference to the Beethoven concerto, the soloist soars higher and higher in dreamy flight before a final resumption of the main tempo.

The **slow movement**, in F major, opens with a long, beautiful theme for the oboe with wind accompaniment. When the soloist takes it up, the strings accompany — and the textures and harmonies become gradually more adventurous, only brought back to earth for the return of the main theme and the main key.

The **third movement**'s boisterous lilt is a tribute to Joachim's Hungarian birth. But, as in Joachim himself, who never returned to Hungary or sympathized with its nationalist movements, other themes of quite un-Hungarian character intervene, including a dynamic rising scale in octaves and a beautifully lyrical episode where the meter changes briefly from a stamping 2/4 to a gentle 3/4. The final switch to a 6/8 pulse with heavy off-beats is one of Brahms's stranger (yet still beautiful) inventions, and the dying decline of the last few measures is stranger still.

—program note by Hugh Macdonald

SCORED FOR: *2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings, plus solo violin.*

Jahja Ling

Jahja Ling's distinguished career as an internationally renowned conductor has earned him an exceptional reputation for musical integrity and expressivity. Born in Indonesia and now a citizen of the United States, he is conductor laureate of the San Diego Symphony where he was music director for thirteen seasons. He regularly leads orchestral performances with major ensembles around the world.

Mr. Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra have enjoyed a long and productive relationship — as a member of the conducting staff (1984-2005), resident conductor of the Orchestra (1985-2002), and Blossom Festival Director (2000-05).

Mr. Ling's strong commitment to working with and developing young musicians is evidenced by his work as founding music director of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra (1986-93) and the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra (1981-84), as well as efforts with the student orchestras of Curtis, Juilliard, Schleswig-Holstein, Colburn, and Yale. For more information, please visit *jahjaling.com*.

Sayaka Shoji

Japanese violinist Sayaka Shoji is recognized for her warm musicianship and brilliant technique in repertoire from newly commissioned works to masterpieces by Prokofiev, Brahms, Sibelius, and Shostakovich.

She has collaborated with Lorin Maazel, Mariss Jansons, and Colin Davis, and performed with the Israel Philharmonic, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, London Symphony Orchestra, NDR Radiophilharmonie, Wiener Symphoniker, Mariinsky Orchestra, NHK Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, and Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Highlights of this past season included recital tours with pianist Víkingur Ólafsson, as well as collaborations with Saburo Teshigawara on solo works by Bach and Bartók at the Philharmonie de Paris.

Ms. Shoji won first prize at the 1999 Paganini Competition. In 2016, she won the Mainichi Art Award, presented to those who have had a significant influence on the arts in Japan. She plays a Recamier Stradivarius c.1729, loaned to her by Ueno Fine Chemicals Industry Ltd.

Symphony No. 3 in F major, Opus 90

by **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

Composed: 1883

Premiered: December 2, 1883, by Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Hans Richte

Duration: about 35 minutes

DURING THE VERY HOT summer of 1853, when Brahms was twenty years old, he fulfilled a childhood dream by walking down the river Rhine from Mainz to Bonn. This is a spectacular hike of about a hundred miles, filled with reminders of German history and legend. One of the first places he stopped at was Wiesbaden and the little town of Rüdesheim close by, famous for the Rheingau wines that are made there.

Memories of those days were behind Brahms's decision, thirty years later, to spend the summer of 1883 in Wiesbaden. He was a man of regular habits, one of which was to escape from Vienna in the summer months to find a suitably tranquil holiday spot where he could compose in peace.

He usually went to the Austrian or Swiss Alps, but in 1883 he had an invitation from his friends Rudolf and Laura von Beckerath, who lived in Wiesbaden. Rudolf was a winemaker and violinist, Laura was a pianist, and they had houses in both Wiesbaden and Rüdesheim. Brahms took rooms for himself in Wiesbaden's Geisbergstrasse for the summer.

A further enticement was the presence in Wiesbaden of a young singer, Hermine Spies, who Brahms had heard for the first time that January. Her lovely contralto voice and bright personality enchanted him to the point where Brahms's sister assumed an engagement was in the air. Even though he remained a committed bachelor, the company of this "pretty Rhineland girl," as he described her, undoubtedly brightened those summer months and even perhaps pervaded the great work that took shape on his desk — the Third Symphony.

It had been six years since he had written the Second Symphony, and in the interval Brahms had composed two concertos — the Violin Concerto we are hearing tonight and his Second Piano Concerto — as well as two overtures. He was no longer nervous about engaging the most challenging of forms; the First Symphony had taken him years to write. But now he was quite secure in his mature command of musical expression and technique.

Each new work by Brahms was guaranteed an enthusiastic reception. With Wagner's death in February 1883, Brahms, at fifty, was regarded as Germany's leading musician. A new symphony from his pen would be a major event.

The Czech composer Antonín Dvořák was in Vienna that October when Brahms returned from Wiesbaden, and the two spent some time together. Dvořák wrote to Simrock, publisher for both composers: "I've never seen him in better spirit. You know how reluctant he is to talk even to his closest friends about his creative work, yet he was not like that with me. I asked to hear something of his new symphony and he played me the first and last movements. I can say without exaggeration that this symphony surpasses the two previous ones. Not perhaps in size and force, but in beauty."

THE MUSIC

The Third Symphony differs from Brahms's other three in being shorter and milder in tone, without the heroic passages that the others, particularly the First and Fourth, display. It is the only one in which material from one movement reappears in another, and the only one to end quietly in a soft pianissimo — a rather radical departure from symphonic tradition. For these reasons, it is less often played today. But many connoisseurs prize it above the other Brahms symphonies for the delicacy of its scoring and its ravishing, melodic richness.

The cyclic procedure of recalling, at the end of a multi-movement work, the gesture of the opening is rare in Brahms — despite the popularity of thematic recall in Liszt, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, and most other composers of that era.

In the Third Symphony, Brahms employs this in a way that suggests a deep nostalgia. The **first movement**'s opening gesture is an upward motif (F – A-flat – F) very similar to the F – A – F motto associated with the violinist Joseph Joachim, for whom he wrote the Violin Concerto. Joachim and Brahms had developed a great friendship, one of the deepest of Brahms's life. And it had all begun that same summer thirty years before, in 1853, the very reason that Brahms had found his return to Wiesbaden so filled with memories. By substituting in the A-flat, Brahms introduces the ambiguity of major-minor tonality that so strikingly holds the listener's attention throughout this new symphony. The ambiguity is not fully resolved until we reach those luminous, soft chords at the very end of the last movement, pianissimo, and solidly in the major key.

The two central movements are exceptionally touching. The **second movement** feels like a set of variations on the clarinet's elegant theme, but is not so systematic, and some strange and solemn chords in the lower strings provide an enigmatic interlude. The restrained writing for trombones is masterly.

The melody of the **third movement**, heard at the start in the cellos, is one to cherish long after the performance is over. For shapely elegance, it has no ri-

val, and its effect is even more penetrating when it passes first to the winds, then to the first horn on its own. Neither of these two middle movements ever rises in volume to forte for more than a passing moment.

Energetic music is plentiful in both the opening movement and in the **finale fourth movement**, along with musical argument (re-shaping themes and figures, and moving through the keys) in Brahms's sure-handed manner. But they both come to rest with the same dream-like reminiscence of the rising motto and its balanced descending theme. Brahms seems to be perfectly at peace with the world.

The symphony's first performance took place in Vienna in December 1883 in a concert which featured Dvořák's Violin Concerto, also new to the Viennese. Although Vienna was his home, where he had many friends and supporters, there was usually an element of the press determined to cut Brahms down to size. Yet those sour voices were silent in this instance, and the symphony was acclaimed by all, going on to successfully and successively welcomed performances all over Germany and beyond.

—program note by Hugh Macdonald © 2021

SCORED FOR: *2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings.*

CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA TIMELINE: *The Orchestra first performed Brahms's Symphony No. 3 in March 1923 under Nikolai Sokoloff's direction (at subscription concerts featuring Sergei Rachmaninoff as the soloist in his own Second Piano Concerto). The work was heard most recently in November 2019, in performances at Severance Hall conducted by Alan Gilbert.*

The Cleveland Orchestra recorded Brahms's Third Symphony with George Szell in 1964, with Lorin Maazel in 1976, with Christoph von Dohnányi in 1988, with Vladimir Ashkenazy in 1991, and with Franz Welser-Möst in 2014.

THE CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA

FRANZ WELSER-MÖST

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LIsting as of July 2021.

This roster lists the fulltime members of The Cleveland Orchestra. The number and seating of musicians onstage varies depending on the piece being performed.

BY THE NUMBERS

BLOSSOM MUSIC CENTER

1968

Blossom Music Center **opened on July 19, 1968**, with a concert that featured Beethoven's Ninth Symphony under the direction of George

SEATS 5470

Blossom's Pavilion, designed by Cleveland architect Peter van Dijk, can seat 5,470 people, including positions for wheelchair seating. (Another 13,500 can sit on the Lawn.) The Pavilion is famed for the clarity of its acoustics and for its distinctive design.

OVER 20%
25 and under

The portion of young people at Cleveland Orchestra concerts at Blossom has increased to 20% over the past half-dozen years, via an array of programs funded through the Orchestra's Center for Future Audiences for students and families.

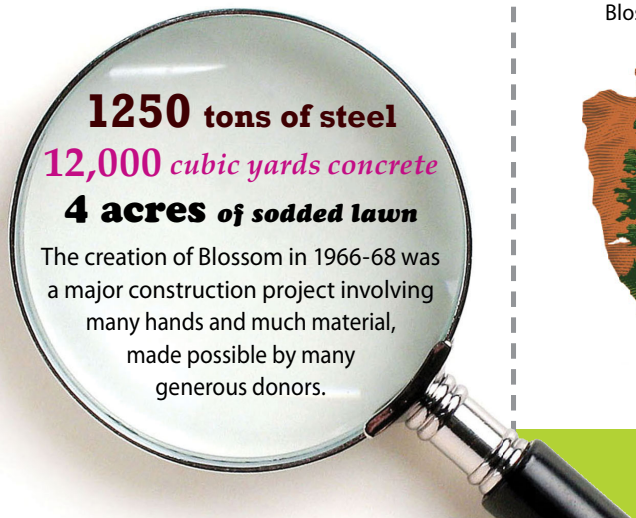
ADMISSIONS
21 million

Blossom Music Center has welcomed more than 21,500,000 people to concerts and events since 1968 — including the Orchestra's annual Festival concerts, plus special attractions featuring rock, country, jazz, and other popular acts.

1,000+

The Cleveland Orchestra has performed over 1,000 concerts at Blossom since 1968. The 1,000th performance took place during the summer of 2014.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park was created in 2000, upgrading the national recreational preserve, which had been established in 1974. Today, CVNP includes 33,000 acres of preserved prairieland and forest adjoining Blossom Music Center.



THE CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA

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Blossom Music Festival season
possible each year
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commitment of thousands of individuals,
corporations, foundations,
and government grants.

YOU *make Blossom possible.*
You help us turn summer nights
to magic through music.

THANK YOU.