

**AFTERSILENCE**

**In Focus Season 2 Episode No. 1**

*broadcast premiere: February 4, 2022 on Adella*

**THE CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA**

**Franz Welser-Möst**, conductor

**Igor Levit**, piano

**HANS ABRAHAMSEN** (B. 1952)

**Vers le silence (Toward Silence)**

- I Fast with passion, impetus ("schwung") with fire
- II Fast and gloriously
- III With utmost force, storming
- IV Very slow, darkly flowing

World Premiere

*Co-commissioned by The Cleveland Orchestra, Bavarian  
Radio Symphony Orchestra, The Royal Danish Orchestra,  
and NTR ZaterdagMatinee at the Concertgebouw.*

**JOHANNES BRAHMS** (1833-1897)

**Piano Concerto No. 2** in B-flat major, Opus 83

- I Allegro non troppo
- II Allegro appassionato
- III Andante
- IV Allegretto grazioso

## CONCERT OVERVIEW

**EMERGING FROM** a collective period of silence and reflection, Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra launch the second *In Focus* season with a fitting program: one exploring the experience of silence, whether before a composer sketches the first bars of a new work or the expectant moments before a performance. Episode 1: *Aftersilence* features the world premiere of Hans Abrahamsen's *Vers Le Silence* and Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 2 featuring soloist Igor Levit.

The episode also includes interviews with Welser-Möst, principal horn Nathaniel Silberschlag and Abrahamsen, from his composing base in Denmark through the first performance in Cleveland.

*In Focus* is made possible by a generous grant from the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation.

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## ABOUT THE MUSIC

### VERS LE SILENCE

by **Hans Abrahamsen** (B. 1952)

*Composed: 2021, for full orchestra*

*World Premiere: January 6, 2022, at Severance Music Center*

*Scored for: 2 flutes, 2 piccolos (second doubling flute), 3 oboes, 1 english horn, 2 B-flat clarinets (second doubling A clarinet), 2 basset horns (first doubling A clarinet, second doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), 1 contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 cornets (both doubling trumpets), 3 trombones (first and second doubling tenor trombone; third doubling bass trombone), tuba, timpani, percussion (glockenspiel, vibraphone, tubular bells, xylophone, marimba, triangles, cymbals, tam-tam, tambourine, tom-toms, snare drum, and bass drum), 2 harps, piano, celesta, and strings.*

*Duration: about 30 minutes*

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**VERS LE SILENCE** was written during the Covid-19 lockdown, and is a new milestone among Hans Abrahamsen's orchestral works. For the first time since *Nacht und Trompeten* (1981), Abrahamsen has composed a brand-new purely orchestral work — neither a concerto for one or more soloists, nor an orchestral work based on previous compositions from the Classical canon. It is dedicated to Abrahamsen's friend, the composer George Benjamin.

*Vers le silence* is the final work in a series of three, following *Left, alone* for left-handed piano and orchestra (2015) and *Concerto for Horn and Orchestra* (2019). Despite evident differences, the three works are built on the same foundation. The time, rhythm, and harmony in all three works are based on the first nine prime numbers (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23), which together add up to the beautifully round number 100. By using these prime numbers with their superb nature and irregular relationship to each other, Abrahamsen manages to create an original architecture for his music, both in the larger form and in smaller sections of the music that are proportional to each other.

With four movements, this new work is longer and broader in format than the two previous ones of the series. *Vers le silence* also marks a change in perspective for Abrahamsen — from composing for solo instruments to focusing on the impressive scope of the symphony orchestra, from grand statement to chamber-like delicacy.

Upon looking closer at the music, we see, according to Abrahamsen, how it arises from five elements: "Fire, earth, wind, water, and the fifth, which could be wood, growth, or maybe humans." Whereas the first four elements are more tangible, signifying observable elements in nature, the fifth element is of a transcendent nature. It is associated with the ancient philosophers' idea of quintessence, being the element from which heaven and stars are formed.

At the beginning of the first movement, marked "Fast with passion, impetus ("schwung") with fire," the five elements are presented in concentrated form. In the succeeding movements, they unfold in a sort of 'flash-forward' motion. In between the interplay of the five elements, Abrahamsen has composed "silence music," which returns throughout *Vers le silence* with growing inner force. The title is, in part, a reference to Alexander Scriabin's *Vers la flamme*, where the music builds heat, driving toward a fiery end. In contrast, *Vers le silence* nurtures a quietness that

gradually takes over. This silence is a catalyst for a musical journey which, after the emotionally torn fire music of the beginning, moves toward a more transpersonal and metaphysical world.

— *Esben Tange*

*Esben Tange is the editor of DR P2, Denmark National Radio's classical music station.*

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**PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2**, in B-flat major, Opus 83  
by **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

*Composed: 1878-81*

*Premiered: November 9, 1881, with the composer and soloist and the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra*

*Scored for: 2 flutes (one doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, and piano soloist.*

*Duration: about 50 minutes*

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**IF ONE COULD CHOOSE** a handful of works to exemplify why Brahms has captivated listeners over the years, those works would include the four-movement Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, completed in 1881 at the height of his maturity. Here all the elements of Brahms's art come together. There is the joining of the grandly Olympian with the intimately songful. There is the virtuoso command of large-scale musical architecture, for a composer, one of the rarest gifts in the world. More subtly, in the Second Piano Concerto one finds on display the singular mysteriousness of Brahms — music at once powerfully communicative and elusive.

For soloists proposing to master this gigantic concerto, it lives up to one of Brahms's puckish nicknames for it: "the Long Terror." Pianists speak of the exquisite anxiety of stepping onto the stage with the Alpine steepness of the first movement in your head, wondering how you're going to find the place in your mind and fingers to attack it.

For Brahms himself, the Second Piano Concerto was probably, from its first inspiration during a sunny vacation in Italy, one of the most untroubled major efforts of his life. No composer had ever faced greater expectations, starting from the age of twenty, when Robert Schumann declared the boyish and beardless student the virtual messiah of German music. From then on, Brahms had to live with that forbidding prophecy hanging over him. But by the time of the Second Concerto, he had more or less fulfilled Schumann's prophecy and had little left to prove — though he never rested on his laurels. One by one, he had painstakingly mastered most of the traditional genres and produced historic masterpieces in each.

While never lacking in enemies, by his forties Brahms was generally understood to be the supreme concert composer of his generation. (His great rival Wagner dominated the operatic stage — which is a prime reason why Brahms, despite years of dreaming about composing opera, stayed away from it.) When he

began the Second Piano Concerto, he already had imposing concertos for piano and violin under his belt, and he was writing for his own instrument, where he always felt most comfortable.

To understand Brahms's cheeriness concerning the Second Piano Concerto, we have to understand what his earlier concertos had cost him. He had launched into the First Piano Concerto with youthful fervor in the wake of the dramatic events of 1853–54 — his discovery by Robert Schumann, followed by Robert's plunge into madness, then Brahms's own fall into a frustrated passion for Robert's wife Clara.

Brahms pounded away at creating the First Piano Concerto for five excruciating years, finishing it in 1858 as a flawed but remarkable work of monumental scale and singular voice. His next ambitious symphonic work was the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* of 1873, followed three years later by the First Symphony (which had been more than fifteen years in gestation). In those two works, Brahms finally found a voice with the orchestra as distinctive as every other aspect of his style.

Already in the First Piano Concerto, the essential elements of the Brahmsian concerto were in place. The scale and style are symphonic as much as concerto-like, with the soloist less the heroic voice of Romantic concertos and more a participant in a symphonic dialogue. All that carried into the Violin Concerto of 1878. Meanwhile, as Brahms scholar Michael Musgrave writes, the virtually orchestral style of the keyboard writing in the Second Piano Concerto has only one precedent in the literature, and that is Brahms's own First Piano Concerto.

The formal approach of these concertos is also particular to them. In many movements of his symphonies, especially the finales, Brahms produced innovative variations on traditional formal models. One finds less of that in the concertos — where all the finales have touches of his trademark “gypsy”-style finale, which he never used in his symphonies. (After a youthful collaboration with a Hungarian violinist, Brahms created his *Hungarian Dances*, which for years he played for friends and at parties. When finally published, they made a sensation.) So while the concertos are unusual in their overall approach, their formal outlines are relatively conservative — more or less the traditional concerto sonata form for the first movements, rondo for the last, A-B-A for the slow movements.

The B-flat concerto begins with one of the most beautiful movements of Brahms's output, its expressive import without any of his familiar touches of tragedy or fatalism. The piano textures range from massive to diaphanous, interwoven with rich orchestral textures. The piano steadily changes roles, its music moving from long, unaccompanied solos to lacy filigree accompanying the orchestra. While there are towering proclamations and moments of drama, the overall tone is lofty and magisterial. The opening horn call reminds us of Brahms's love of the outdoors, of climbing Alpine peaks. Perhaps the whole **first movement** can be heard as music of rocky summits and spreading forests — and in that respect, a complement to the nature idylls of the Second Symphony.

Next comes the movement Brahms described to a friend as a “tiny, tiny wisp of a **scherzo**.” When Brahms said things like that, he was usually joking; the D-minor scherzo (the only movement to depart from B-flat major) is immense, dark-toned, and impassioned, with a touch of gypsy tone. Brahms's only explanation for the scherzo was another joke — the opening movement was so “harmless,” he said, that he needed a strong contrast for the second. The scherzo brings to the concerto a new emotional gravitas and a relentless rhythmic drive. In fact, this scherzo was originally drafted for the Violin Concerto. He may have jettisoned it because that work needed the opposite — something lighter.

The **slow movement** begins with one of those sighing, exquisite cello melo-

dies that Brahms invented and owned. Here is one of the innovations of the Second Piano Concerto: a slow movement in which the first section is dominated by a solo cello; only in the middle does the piano come to the fore, spinning out languid quasi-improvisatory garlands. Now the scoring is intimate, chamber-like — another kind of contrast to the first movement.

The concerto comes to rest on a **rondo finale** of marvelous lightness, whimsy, and dancing rhythms, again with gypsy touches, answering the monumental first two movements and the gently wandering embroidery of the third. British musicologist Donald Francis Tovey caught the effect of the finale in programmatic terms: “We have done our work — let the children play in the world which our work has made safer and happier for them.” For the listener, the charm of the finale is its glittering instrumental colors and its ravishing melodies. The characteristic finale of 18th-century concertos and symphonies has been called a “last dance.” The ending of Brahms’s Second Concerto follows that old pattern and is among the most danceable.

Brahms dedicated the Second Piano Concerto to Eduard Marxsen, his childhood piano and composition teacher in Hamburg. After the premiere in Budapest on November 9, 1881, Brahms and his pianist-conductor collaborator Hans von Bülow took the piece on the road. His old love Clara Schumann wrote in her journal: “Brahms is celebrating such triumphs everywhere as seldom fall to the lot of a composer.” To keep themselves amused, Bülow and Brahms gave programs including both piano concertos, switching off at piano and podium as the mood struck them. Despite the decline of Brahms’s once-brilliant piano skills to what Clara bemoaned as “thump, bang, and scrabble,” somehow he was always able to play or at least fake his way through his concertos, which, after all, are among the most beloved but also most difficult in the repertoire.

— Jan Swafford

*Jan Swafford has written biographies of Ives, Brahms, and Beethoven and contributes regularly to Slate. He is a long-time program writer and pre-concert lecturer for the Boston Symphony.*

## SOLO ARTIST: IGOR LEVIT

*Piano*

**WITH AN ALERT** and critical mind, Igor Levit places his art in the context of social events and understands it as inseparably linked to them. He has been called one of the “most important artists of his generation” by *The New York Times*. He is the most recent recipient of the Gilmore Artist Award, given every four years to a pianist who exhibits extraordinary artistry.

With this weekend’s concerts, Mr. Levit makes his second appearance with The Cleveland Orchestra. He is also a regular soloist with the Berlin Philharmonic, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic, with whom he performed at the iconic Summer Night Concert Schönbrunn in June 2021. A multi-year collaboration between Mr. Levit and the Lucerne Festival to create a new piano festival starting in 2023 was announced this past spring.

An exclusive recording artist for Sony Classical, Mr. Levit received a 2020 Opus Klassik award and a Grammy nomination for his recording of the 32 Beethoven sonatas. That same year, he was named Gramophone Artist of the Year. His next album, *Encounter*, recorded during the lockdown in spring 2020 and released that fall, is a deeply personal document, marked by a desire for human encounter and togetherness. His most recent release features Shostakovich’s 24 Preludes and Fugues, Opus 87, and Ronald Stevenson’s *Passacaglia on DSCH*.

Born in Nizhni Novgorod, Igor Levit moved to Germany with his family at the age of eight. He completed his piano studies at the Hanover University of Music, Theatre and Media with the highest score in the history of the institute. As the youngest participant in the 2005 International Arthur Rubinstein Competition in Tel Aviv, he won silver, the special prize for chamber music, the audience prize, and the special prize for the best performance of contemporary pieces. In spring 2019, he was appointed professor of piano at his alma mater. Mr. Levit is artistic director of the Chamber Music Academy and of Festival “Standpunkte” at the Heidelberg Spring Festival.

## CONDUCTOR: FRANZ WELSER-MÖST

Music Director

Kelvin Smith Family Chair, The Cleveland Orchestra

**FRANZ WELSER-MÖST** is among today's most distinguished conductors. The 2021-22 season marks his twentieth year as music director of The Cleveland Orchestra, with the future of their acclaimed partnership extended to 2027, making him the longest-serving musical leader in the ensemble's history. *The New York Times* has declared Cleveland under Welser-Möst's direction to be "America's most brilliant orchestra," praising its virtuosity, elegance of sound, variety of color, and chamber-like musical cohesion.

With Welser-Möst, The Cleveland Orchestra has been praised for its inventive programming, its ongoing support for new musical works, and for its innovative work in presenting semi-staged and staged operas. The Orchestra has also been hugely successful in building up a new and, notably, a young audience. To date, the Orchestra and Welser-Möst have been showcased around the world in nineteen international tours together. Since 2020, they launched the ensemble's own recording label and an original digital concert series, *In Focus*, that can be streamed worldwide.

As a guest conductor, Mr. Welser-Möst enjoys a close and productive relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic. He will lead its celebrated New Year's Concert in January 2023, and regularly conducts the orchestra in Vienna, as well as on tour. Highlights of recent and upcoming appearances include performances of Strauss's *Die Ägyptische Helena* at Teatro alla Scala and *Elektra* at the Vienna State Opera, and concerts with the New York Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. He is a regular guest at the Salzburg Festival, where he most recently led an acclaimed production of *Elektra* and will conduct a performance of *Il Trittico* this summer.

From 2010 to 2014, Franz Welser-Möst served as general music director of the Vienna State Opera. Previously, Mr. Welser-Möst led the Zurich Opera across a decade, conducting more than forty new productions.

During the 2020 Salzburg Festival, Mr. Welser-Möst was awarded the festival ruby pin and the Salzburg Badge of Honor. In 2019, he received the Gold Medal in the Arts by the Kennedy Center International Committee on the Arts in recognition of his impact on the international arts community. Other honors include The Cleveland Orchestra's Distinguished Service Award, a special citation from the Cleveland Arts Prize, the Vienna Philharmonic's "Ring of Honor" for his longstanding personal and artistic relationship with the ensemble, recognition from the Western Law Center for Disability Rights, honorary membership in the Vienna Singverein, appointment as an Academician of the European Academy of Yuste, and the Kilenyi Medal from the Bruckner Society of America.

Franz Welser-Möst's book *From Silence: Finding Calm in a Dissonant World* was published in Austria in July 2020 under the title *Als ich die Stille fand*, followed by an English version released worldwide in Summer 2021.



## THE CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA

**NOW IN ITS** second century, The Cleveland Orchestra, under the leadership of Franz Welser-Möst since 2002, remains one of the most sought-after performing ensembles in the world. Year after year the ensemble exemplifies extraordinary artistic excellence, creative programming, and community engagement. In recent years, *The New York Times* has called Cleveland “the best in America” for its virtuosity, elegance of sound, variety of color, and chamber-like musical cohesion, “virtually flawless,” and “one of the finest ensembles in the country (if not the world).”

Founded by Adella Prentiss Hughes, the Orchestra performed its inaugural concert in December 1918. By the middle of the century, decades of growth and sustained support had turned the ensemble into one of the most admired around the world.

The past decade has seen an increasing number of young people attending concerts, bringing fresh attention to The Cleveland Orchestra’s legendary sound and committed programming. More recently the Orchestra launched several bold digital projects, including the streaming broadcast series *In Focus*, the podcast *On A Personal Note*, and its own recording label.

The 2021-22 season marks Franz Welser-Möst’s 20th year as music director, a period in which The Cleveland Orchestra earned unprecedented acclaim around the world, including a series of residencies at the Musikverein in Vienna, the first of its kind by an American orchestra. The Orchestra’s 100th season in 2017-18 featured two international tours, concluding with the presentation of Welser-Möst’s *Prometheus Project*, featuring works by Beethoven, on three continents.

Its acclaimed opera presentations, including Strauss’s *Ariadne auf Naxos* (2019), Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* (May 2017), Bartók’s *Miraculous Mandarin* and *Bluebeard’s Castle* (April 2016), and Janáček’s *The Cunning Little Vixen* (2014 and 2017), have showcased the ensemble’s unique artistry and collaborative work ethic.

Since 1918, seven music directors — Nikolai Sokoloff, Artur Rodziński, Erich Leinsdorf, George Szell, Lorin Maazel, Christoph von Dohnányi, and Franz Welser-Möst — have guided and shaped the ensemble’s growth and sound. Through concerts at home and on tour, broadcasts, and a catalog of acclaimed recordings, The Cleveland Orchestra is heard today by a growing group of fans around the world.

For more information, visit: [www.clevelandorchestra.com](http://www.clevelandorchestra.com).

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*The Cleveland Orchestra is proud of its long-term partnership with Kent State University, made possible in part through generous funding from the State of Ohio.*

*The Cleveland Orchestra is proud to have its home, Severance Hall, located on the campus of Case Western Reserve University, with whom it has a long history of collaboration and partnership.*