



UNIVERSITY OF
THE THIRD AGE

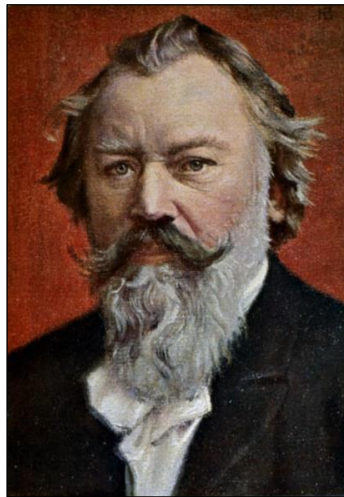
Benalla & District Inc.



Programme Notes *10th July, 2020*



Antonin Dvořák



Johannes Brahms



Dmitri Shostakovich

BTHVN
2020

About Today's Music Selections

As the introduction to episodes of "Monty Python" so often put it: "And now for something completely different". Well, not wildly different! The planned MSO concerts for July as well as showcasing some old favourites have given us an insight into another side of our 'composer of the year – Beethoven – as well of another well-known composer in Antonin Dvořák. I have to say I hadn't previously heard of Dvořák's "Legends" nor of Beethoven's concert aria "Ah Perfido!". Which, some may say, simply shows up my limited musical knowledge; although I take some refuge in the fact that neither work features largely on YouTube.

But then again, neither had I heard before of the artists who will perform these two works for us in this presentation.



The movements from Dvořák's "Legends" we hear are played by identical twin sisters Ani & Nia Sulkhanishvili. Now, do I hear you say: "Ani and Nia who"? Wikipedia informs us that they hail from Tbilisi in Georgia where they received their early music training. A scholarship for each enabled them to continue studies at the University of Music and Theatre in Munich.

Their debut as a duo at the International Young Pianists Competition in 2003 at Tbilisi, where they won first prize, saw the beginning of their international careers. They won further prizes in competitions in Athens , Moscow , Monaco and Białystok (that's in Poland) . One of the duo's greatest successes was winning the 2nd prize at the ARD International Music Competition in 2015.

ARD, by the way, is short for *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (if you repeat it often enough it will just roll off your tongue) – a joint organisation of Germany's regional public-service broadcasters. The annual ARD International Music Competition is one of the most renowned and large-scale competitions of its kind and has been the springboard that launched the careers of a number of world-renowned artists.

Since 2015 numerous invitations have taken Ani and Nia to the USA, where they performed at Carnegie Recital Hall in New York , to Mexico, Hungary and Norway, while closer to home – in the Czech Republic they played in the Rudolfinum in Prague , in Italy with the Orchestra Sinfonica della Rai in Turin and in Germany in the Herkulesaal in Munich.

The sole Beethoven work this time round – his concert aria *Ah! Perfido – per Pietà* – is sung by Dutch soprano Lenneke Ruiten, who is highly in demand as a concert singer and opera performer – something you appreciate after listening to her rendition of this Beethoven work. She can be seen and heard in Aix-en-Provence (a little college town – and university city – in Southern France which hosts, each Summer, one of Europe's greatest opera festivals), as well as at La Scala in Milan, the DNO (Dutch National Opera) in Amsterdam, La Monnaie in Brussels (Belgium's leading Opera House), and the Stuttgart opera in Strasbourg.



Ruitens has made a name for herself in Mozart but is equally at home in belcanto roles and Bach. After winning the International Vocal Competition in 's-Hertogenbosch (the capital of the province of North Brabant in the Netherlands) in 2002, she returned to the stage during the 52nd competition in 2018 for a spectacular rendering of the Mad Scene of *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

The Blog of the Houston Symphony Orchestra a couple or more years ago described *Shostakovich's 1st Symphony* as “Shostakovich's Big Break” and “maybe the greatest graduation project of all time”. Shostakovich had been only 10 years old when the February Revolution ended over 400 years of Romanov rule. As a native of St. Petersburg, he witnessed firsthand the transformation of his country from a Tsarist autocracy to a Communist dictatorship between February and October 1917. These earth-shaking events would have powerful ramifications on his work as a composer.

He entered the Petrograd Conservatory at age 13 (Petrograd was formerly St Petersburg and later Leningrad) and was put into a class with much older students on account of his precocious musical abilities. He not only was a gifted pianist, but also possessed a Mozart-like musical mind (he would compose many of his pieces in his head before writing them down). Meeting with other young musicians who had imported scores from abroad, Shostakovich quickly assimilated the new musical language being developed by Stravinsky, Prokofiev and other composers. While his First Symphony does bear traces of these influences, Shostakovich wielded them into what we today recognize as his unmistakable personal voice.



Shostakovich's style would continue to develop and mature over the course of his long career, but even in this early work his characteristic sense of humour and intensity of expression are already apparent.

Naturally, to interpret his music, what better way to go is there than with a Russian Orchestra and Conductor – in this case the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev.



The **Brahms Violin Concerto** represents this month's "old favourite" (well, a favourite as far as my 18th or 19th century ears go).

Naturally there is a line-up of any number of violinists and orchestras from which to choose. I have chosen as soloist American violinist Hilary Hahn. Now, those who were members of last year's group may recall we listened to her playing part of this concerto accompanied by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra.

This time she teams up with London's Philharmonia Orchestra under the baton of their resident conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, who is Finnish by origin, in a concert from Suntory Hall, Tokyo, which, if nothing else, makes for an all-round ecumenical performance.

A three-time Grammy Award-winning violinist, Hahn is one of the most successful young musicians on the international circuit. Conservatory trained soloist, recitalist and chamber musician she made her orchestral debut at 11, and signed a major record deal at 16.

As well as being the current Principal Conductor & Artistic Advisor of the Philharmonia, Esa-Pekka Salonen is conductor laureate of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and music director-designate of the San Francisco Symphony. At the "ripe old age of 62, the 2020-21 season will be his first as Music Director.



Now, for the music.....

Antonin Dvorak "Legends" Op 59



This is great music by Dvorak, but not often played. It is in 10 sections, so not really a symphony or an overture. The composition of these ten short pieces for four-hand piano dates from Dvorak's so-called Slavic period.

If you are wondering what is meant by Dvorak's "Slavic" period, it was that short two year period from 1878 -80 (Dvorak was aged 37-39) when the Czech people were striving for national emancipation. A number of artists began to show an inclination towards folklore and Dvorak also sought inspiration from his home environment and beyond as he looked to the music of other Slav nations as well. The Slavonic Dances are the classic example of his music in this period.

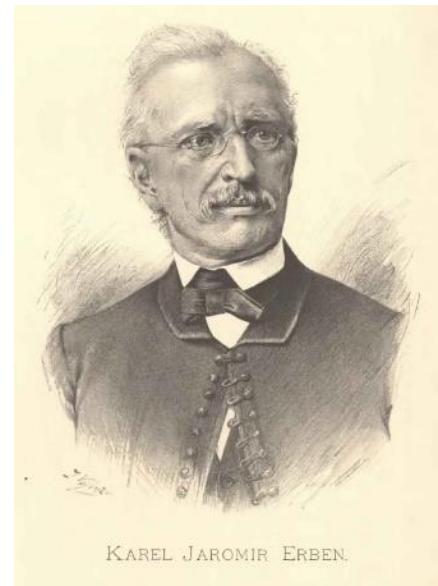
The compositions from his Slavic period assured Dvorak his first successes on the international scene and they remain some of his most frequently performed works to this day.



The first mention of Dvorak's intention to write a cycle entitled "Legends" came in a letter to his publisher. Dvorak was at the time completing his sixth symphony, and a thought is that the Legends could, in fact, be regarded as a kind of more intimate postscript to its idyllic atmosphere. The work is also sometimes seen as a counterpart to the Slavonic Dances, in contrast to which the Legends are more subtle and lyrical in character. Although the individual parts of the cycle carry no specific story, Dvorak still managed to convey the idea of a continuous narrative.

Another thought is Dvorak's primary inspiration for the composition is the poetry of Czech poet Karel Jaromir Erben, who died not long before Dvorak composed this cycle. Erben, in addition to being a folklorist and poet was also a member of the Czech National Revival, and politically he was also a sympathizer of Illyrian movement and Russian Slavophilia for entrenched populations of Slavs in other parts of the world.

Dvorak had a particular fondness for Erben's works and he was inspired by them in several other compositions. According to British musicologist Gerald Abraham, Erben's influence may also be traced in the "Legends" work – claiming that in some of the parts the musical themes faithfully evoke Erben's verse.



The roots of Dvorak's fascination with Erben's poetry probably lie in his flawless comprehension of their particular colour and rhythm, in his identification with the moral principles for whose violation Erben's heroes must pay, and in his enchantment with the Czech fairy-tale world the poet was able to conjure up in his works.

Dvorak wrote the entire Legends cycle in the early part of 1881 (Erben had died in 1870) and dedicated it to leading Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick in recognition of the latter's enduring interest in his work. The cycle was published later that year. Johannes Brahms, conductor Hans von Bulow and other eminent figures from the music circles of the day expressed their great admiration for the Legends, and so the publisher requested, as he had done before in the case of the Slavonic Dances, that Dvorak write an instrumental arrangement as well. Dvorak readily agreed and orchestrated the entire cycle in late November and early December 1881.



For the purpose of this presentation we will listen to the piano arrangement for four hands of five of the Legends pieces: Nos. 1, 3, 5, 6, & 7 as played by Piano Duo Ani and Nia Sulkhanishvili.

The YouTube link is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSGZDkvv0q0>

Dmitri Shostakovich – Symphony No. 1 in F minor Opus 10

Born in 1906, Dmitri Shostakovich was a prodigious child as both pianist and composer. Starting piano lessons with his mother when he was eight, he was writing a Pushkin-inspired opera by the age of nine. But this relatively comfortable middle-class childhood would not last long.



Shostakovich in 1925 photographed while in the midst of putting the finishing touches to his 1st Symphony

After the 1917 Revolution, Shostakovich's bourgeois family background proved a distinct disadvantage in the new social order that ensued.

The unexpected death of his father in 1922 only made matters worse. His well-educated mother had to work thirteen-hour days as a cashier and Shostakovich was forced to spend many after-school hours as a silent-movie pianist to help the family cope with the hardships of the post-Revolutionary economy.

And yet, despite suffering from malnutrition and tuberculosis, there are also stories of him losing his job for laughing too much at the Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin films he was employed to accompany.

This apparent contradiction was a personality trait that would stay with him his whole life, and the sometimes juddering juxtaposition of the lighted-hearted with the profound marked his compositions from the very beginning.

Dmitri Shostakovich's First Symphony may be the greatest graduation project of all time. Composed at the age of 18, his First Symphony was written to fulfill the graduation requirements of the Leningrad Conservatory (earning him the equivalent of a college music degree), and would take the international music world by storm the following year.



Shostakovich completed the short score of the symphony by May of 1925, just in time to present it to his professors. Despite the symphony's unconventional elements, the faculty was so impressed that they recommended it for public performance by the Leningrad Philharmonic. The directors of the conservatory were excited by the genius they felt they had nurtured and arranged for the symphony to be performed by Nikolai Malko and the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra.

The première, on 12th May 1926, was an enormous success, and it was not long before the work gained worldwide recognition. This new work caused a sensation, and the image of the 19-year-old, bespectacled composer nervously taking his bows would become a famous in Shostakovich lore. The Soviet Union had discovered its first international star, the first to be trained solely under the new system rather than old imperialist Russia, and the authorities proclaimed him as an exaltation of the new at the expense of the old. In time, this much repeated role would become as much a burden to him as it was a saving grace.

The symphony has been likened to the opening chapter of a novel, setting the tone for all that follows. The composer's trade-mark musical gestures are all immediately obvious. Nervous tension and sarcastic wit, passion and intelligence, contemplation and action, nobility and banality – all expressed with an economy of means that is simultaneously subtle and direct.

The work opens with a virtuosic brilliance heavily influenced by Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. But perhaps it was not only that work's orchestration, with its soloistic piano part, that fascinated the student composer. Like Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, another piece he admired, the disconcerting idea of human beings as puppets, with their actions manipulated by unseen string-pullers from on high, was one that stayed with the composer right the way through to his final symphony, written almost fifty years later.

After composing the first two movements, Shostakovich wrote to a friend that it would be more fitting to call the work a 'symphony-grotesque'. But the style was about to change. 'I am in a terrible mood,' he continued. 'Sometimes I just want to shout. To cry out in terror. Doubts and problems. All this darkness suffocates me. From sheer misery, I've started to compose the finale of the symphony. It's turning out pretty gloomy.' The second half of the piece is certainly much more tragic in vein. And the Mahlerian string sonorities and Tchaikovsky-like descriptions of fate and death are more old-fashioned influences than contemporary ones.



Vaslav Nijinsky in the role of *Petrushka*. The Stravinsky ballet may have influenced Shostakovich's 1st Symphony

Somehow, this symphony that began with schoolboy pranks and ended with tragic love destroyed by violence spoke to the Leningrad audience, which had been through so much in the past decade. Within a year, it would be performed by the Berlin Philharmonic under Bruno Walter and the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski (who would later become the Houston Symphony's Music Director in the 1950s). Nearly overnight, the teenage Shostakovich had achieved international fame, a fame that would protect him throughout his many dangerous confrontations with the Soviet state in the years to come. The symphony remains one of his most popular works.

Sources: houstonsymphony.org & markwigglesworth.com

The YouTube link to the performance by The Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, directed by Valery Gergiev is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgWnh1xOxXQ&t=720s>

Ludwig van Beethoven - Ah Perfido Op. 65

"Ah! Perfido - Per pietà, non dirmi addio" (Ah! Deceiver For pity's sake, do not bid me farewell), is a concert aria for soprano and orchestra. The origin of this concert aria, which is a core piece in the singer's repertoire, is swathed in mystery. We still do not know where Beethoven found the text for the aria, but it has been conjectured that the work is a setting of verses from "Achille in Sciro", by Pietro Trapassi, a Roman who was court poet in Vienna (1729-1782) and who wrote under the name of Metastasio. While the text for the recitative was taken from Pietro Metastasio's poem, it was not followed there by an aria. It is also not clear why Beethoven only published the piece nine years after writing it.



Pietro Metastasio



The reason it bears an opus number high in relation to its date of composition is that, though it was written in 1796, it was not published until 1805. The piece was probably written for its first performer, the then-celebrated soprano Josepha Duschek.

Composed in Prague and modelled on Mozart's *Bella mia fiamma*, which was also written for Duschek, this has generally been one of the composer's more popular vocal pieces down through the years. A decade or so after composing the work, Beethoven reflected that it was suited more to a theatre setting than to the concert hall. He was unusually emphatic in stipulating that it needed "a curtain," or similar environs, to achieve its proper effect.

The text deals with a young woman betrayed by her lover, expressing the rage she experiences. At first, she pleads with the gods to punish him, but then asks for mercy for him. Then she offers to die for him, instead. After bewailing her fate, she asks for mercy.

The music begins dramatically with the soprano intoning the words, "Ah, perfido! spergiuro, barbaro traditor, tu parti?" (Ah, unfaithful liar! vile deceiver, you leave me?). The music then slows, and the young woman's emotions for a time seem contained, but tension quickly develops. Still, for all the rage she expresses, she does not erupt with a potent outburst to vent her feelings, but instead maintains an intensity that seems to border on just such an outburst.

When the aria, "Per pietà, non dirmi addio" ("For pity's sake, do not leave me") is reached, the spirit of Mozart appears. (The character of the theme in the third movement of Mozart's "Gran Partita" Serenade No. 10, K. 361, is not unlike that of the attractive melody here.) The aria music, marked Adagio, is most moving and effective in its heartrending beauty. Even if it is strongly reminiscent of Mozart, it is charming enough not to seem derivative. The tempo returns to Allegro as the soprano lashes out at her cruel treatment at the hands of fate. There is a brief return to an Adagio tempo before the Allegro conclusion.

The orchestral writing is effective throughout, even if it, too, owes something to Mozart. While some may feel the music sounds less agitated in places than the text might seem to call for, Beethoven captures the spirit of Metastasio's verses. The range of emotions that he depicts in the music, together with the ebb and flow of tension, are remarkably well balanced. The work, known for its immense vocal difficulty, was premiered on November 21, 1796, in Leipzig. A typical performance of it lasts about from about 12 to 15 minutes.

(Source: allmusic.com)



The recording we hear is by Lenneke Ruiken accompanied by Le Concert Olympique, conducted by its founder, Jan Caeyers - formerly a director of the Beethoven Academy.



This is a relatively new orchestra of 45 selected musicians from the whole of Europe who come together several times a year to, as it were, drink in the Beethoven expertise of Jan Caeyers and together with him perform the carefully selected programmes and projects in which Beethoven and his contemporaries take centre stage.

The YouTube link to the recording is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiUNiTL51Jk>

Johannes Brahms - Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major Op 77



Brahms Violin concerto is a work that has been variously described as a concerto against violin, and 'for violin against orchestra' and the violin wins!

The concerto starts with a big orchestral tutti and the solo violin doesn't play for a while.

The same thing happens with the beginning of the second movement where it starts again with the orchestra and features the oboe with the beautiful melody. When the concerto got premiered, some virtuoso violinists at the time objected to the fact that it didn't show off or feature the violin straight away, that it sounded like a symphony rather than a violin concerto, so perhaps that's how that comment was said..... perhaps!

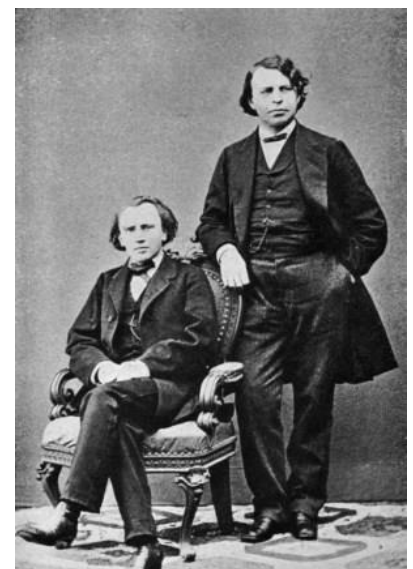
Brahms lived and worked under the shadow of Beethoven throughout his career. Brahms was very conscious of this – indeed, it was one of the main reasons why he took so long to compose a symphony – and in the case of this violin concerto, there is an obvious parallel to be made between the two composers' works.

Both wrote only one concerto for this most popular of instruments. Neither had any personal experience of playing the violin and therefore had to rely heavily on others to interpret the music and to guide its progress. And, despite all this, both composed a violin concerto that would end up in every great soloist's repertoire, and in every lover of the instrument's CD collection.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

In Brahms's case, the inspiration and guide for the piece was his great friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim.

Born in 1831 to a Hungarian-Jewish family, Joseph Joachim was a child prodigy who became one of the great violinists of the 19th century. At age 12, he made his London solo debut playing Beethoven's Violin Concerto with none other than Mendelssohn leading the orchestra. Through subsequent performances, the young virtuoso all but single-handedly revived this long-forgotten masterpiece.



The young Johannes Brahms and Joseph Joachim pose for a photograph (Brahms is seated).

Even from a young age, Joachim became renowned for playing with complete faithfulness to a score while also creating the illusion of improvisation, almost as if he were channelling the spirit of a composer. A 14-year-old Brahms witnessed his remarkable performance style when he first saw Joachim perform Beethoven's Violin Concerto in 1848.



Joseph Joachim in
later years.

When Brahms met Joachim five years later, the two became lifelong friends, united by their shared musical values: respect for music of the past, and the belief that music should have real meaning and substance rather than mere flashy virtuoso passages or stylistic novelties. Many years, however, would pass before Brahms composed his violin concerto, likely because Joachim wrote three concertos of his own.

In later years, when Joachim composed less and focused on performance and teaching, Brahms at last felt free to create a musical masterpiece that would showcase the gifts of his long-time friend.

THE MUSIC

In terms of its expressive preoccupations, the concerto has much in common with the symphony that preceded it in Brahms' output (including its key of D major). The first movement opens with a simple, pentatonic (a scale of five notes) phrase in the style of a horn call (it only uses notes that could easily be played on a valveless, natural horn), evoking an idyllic, pastoral atmosphere.

The harmony shifts to the distant key of C major as the oboe continues the melody, which soon turns toward darker, more dissonant harmonies.

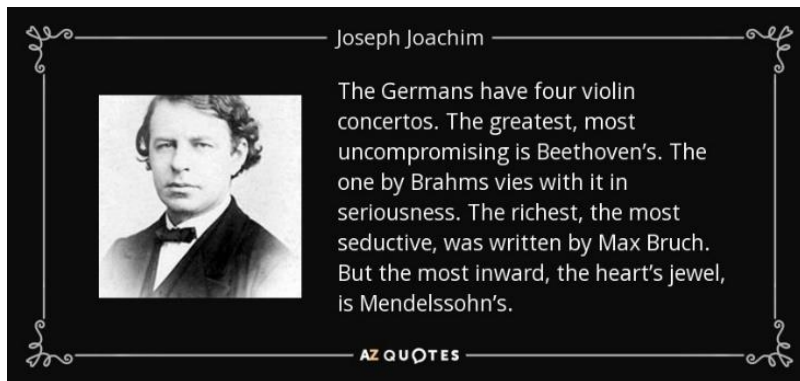
Strident, unharmonized octaves force the music back to D major, and the return of the opening motifs begins a transitional passage.

The music fades; above a timpani roll, the woodwinds prepare to introduce the expected lyrical second theme, but the theme fails to appear. In its place, the transitional music continues as its harmonies darken, leading to a stern theme marked by dotted-rhythms in D minor. The music becomes stormy, until the soloist makes a dramatic entrance.

Fending off the menacing staccato theme in the orchestra, the soloist leads back to the opening theme, expanding and reinterpreting the ideas presented thus far. This time, however, after the transitional passage the soloist does introduce the missing second theme: a singing, beautiful melody.

The stern, staccato theme soon follows, however, now played by the soloist. The theme builds to an extended orchestral passage: the violins play a dark, turbulent version of the once peaceful opening theme. Memories of the lovely second theme alternate with the transitional material until the soloist re-enters.

Together the soloist and orchestra continue to develop the transitional material. The soloist introduces a melancholy new idea in counterpoint to it, which becomes increasingly intense.



At last, the solo violin turns the music in a new direction with fragments of the staccato theme and the opening theme, leading to a grand reprise of the movement's main ideas.

This time, the menacing staccato theme is met by a powerful orchestral passage based on the opening, which builds to a grand pause. A cadenza—an extended passage for the soloist alone—ensues. In the days of Mozart, the soloist (usually the composer) would have improvised the cadenza in the moment, but by Brahms' day composers almost always wrote cadenzas into their scores. In a nod to the earlier tradition, Brahms chose to let Joachim write the cadenza for this concerto. Though others have written cadenzas for it as well, Joachim's remains the standard. Joachim's cadenza touches on all of the movement's main themes with the exception of the lyrical second theme. Notably, it serves to recapitulate the melancholy counterpoint that arose during the movement's development.

The soloist's traditional final trill leads to a tranquil coda. The opening theme takes on a sunset hue as the soloist plays it for the last time. Just as the movement seems about to fade away, the music accelerates to a thrilling conclusion.

Source: houstonsymphony.org.

The YouTube link to this performance by Hilary Hahn with the Philharmonia Orchestra is:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXo8KnfPCXM&t=1156s>