



# BRAHMS, BIRDS & 'BLUE CATHEDRAL'

FRIDAY & SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 11 & 12, AT 8 PM

## NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

GIANCARLO GUERRERO, *conductor*

JUN IWASAKI, *violin*

KEVIN BATE, *cello*

TAMARA WINSTON, *english horn*

**JEAN SIBELIUS**

**9 minutes**

*The Swan of Tuonela*

*Tamara Winston, english horn*

**JOHANNES BRAHMS**

**35 minutes**

*Concerto in A minor for Violin and Cello, Op. 102*

*I. Allegro*

*II. Andante*

*III. Vivace non troppo*

*Jun Iwasaki, violin*

*Kevin Bate, cello*

**INTERMISSION**

**20 minutes**

**JENNIFER HIGDON**

**13 minutes**

*blue cathedral*

**MAURICE RAVEL**

**16 minutes**

*Suite from Ma mère l'Oye ("Mother Goose")*

*1. Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant (Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty)*

*2. Petit Poucet (Little Tom Thumb)*

*3. Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes (Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas)*

*4. Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête (Conversation of Beauty & the Beast)*

*5. Le Jardin féérique (The Fairy Garden)*

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## AT A GLANCE

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Our program combines two beautiful statements of late Romanticism with music by one of the most exquisite orchestrators, written amid the turmoil of the early years of Modernism, and a veritable symphonic hit of the 21st century. Brahms was nearing the end of his career when he decided to write his Concerto for Violin and Cello. The combination was unusual against the Romantic backdrop of the heroic concerto, with its built-in drama of a powerful solo protagonist versus the collective force of the orchestra, but there was precedent in music of the past, particularly the Baroque, and Brahms casts a backward glance in this work, intended to heal a rift that had developed with one of his closest musical friends.

Sibelius, on the other hand, was just beginning his career when he composed *The Swan of Tuonela* six years later. Its dark, haunting soundscape depicts the land of the dead and emanates the spirit of Finnish mythology that inspired the composer in these *fin-de-siècle* years. Meditation on death and loss, as well as the symbolic power of soundscapes, also informs *blue cathedral*, the breakthrough orchestral piece that helped pave the way for Higdon – who spent part of her youth in Tennessee – to become one of the most frequently performed of living composers. With its prominent roles for solo flute and clarinet, *blue cathedral* is also, in its way, a version of a double concerto.

We end with Ravel's nostalgic evocation of the "poetry of childhood" he so adored in a version of the beloved fairy-tales gathered in the compilation *Ma mère l'Oye* ("Mother Goose"). Initially a suite for piano four hands, this music inspired the idea for a ballet, for which Ravel prepared a fully orchestrated version, adding some new scenes and connective tissue. The shorter orchestral suite has understandably become a concert hall favorite, since it demonstrates Ravel's beguiling wizardry in painting with orchestral texture and color.

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# JEAN SIBELIUS

## *The Swan of Tuonela*

Born on December 8, 1865, in Hämeenlinna, Finland

Died on September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää, Finland

**Composed:**  
1893; rev. 1895,  
1897, and 1900

**Estimated length:**  
9 minutes



**First performance:**

April 13, 1896, in Helsinki, with Sibelius conducting the earliest version of *Four Legends*

**First Nashville Symphony performance:**

December 12, 1950, conducted by William Strickland at Ryman Auditorium.

The collection of ancient Finnish epic myths known as the *Kalevala* nourished Jean Sibelius’s imagination across his career. It proved to be a fertile source of ideas for many compositions, including *The Swan of Tuonela*, a brief tone poem that serves as one of the four movements comprising the *Lemminkäinen Suite* (also known as *Four Legends*) from the mid-1890s. *Lemminkäinen*, known by the epithet “handsome man with a far-roving mind,” is one of the heroes who populate the *Kalevala* — a blend of a Finnish Don Juan (to cite Sibelius’s own comparison) with the reckless Siegfried.

The four episodes Sibelius selected as the topics for his suite involve Lemminkäinen’s seduction of a group of young women (whose jealous husbands eventually appear); the hero’s journey to the Underworld, known in Finnish mythology as Tuonela, on a quest to shoot the mysterious swan whose task is to guard the River of Tuoni, which separates the world of the living from this Hades; a haunting portrait of Tuonela (the best-known of the *Four Legends*, “The Swan of Tuonela”); and Lemminkäinen’s homeward journey after years of battle. (The hero, whose quest for the swan fails when he is slain by his nemesis, had in the interim been brought back to life after his mother discovered his

dismembered corpse.)

*The Swan of Tuonela* originated in 1893 as the prelude for a projected opera called *The Building of the Boat* that Sibelius, besotted with Wagner but facing a version of imposter syndrome, eventually abandoned. It partakes of the *fin-de-siècle* spirit tinged by Symbolism; at the same time, the swan motif carried an intensely personal significance for Sibelius as well and would recur in an epiphany that inspired the glorious “swan hymn” theme of the Fifth Symphony’s final movement.

Though in his final revision Sibelius suppressed the brief programmatic descriptions found in the manuscript score, the one pertaining to *The Swan of Tuonela* is worth quoting: “Tuonela, the land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a large river with black waters and a rapid current on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing.”

## WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The score of this brief tone poem evokes a dark, gloomy soundscape using a relatively limited orchestral palette (no flutes, clarinets aside from bass clarinet, or trumpets, for example). The music is a marvel of artfully

sustained atmosphere. A vaporous, ascending shimmer of muted string chords sets the backdrop for the mournful voice of a solo English horn; the strings are subdivided into 13 and even more individual lines. The English horn embodies the lonely song of the Swan, its plaintive, asymmetrical melody stretching into seeming infinity.

A sense of stasis, of never-ending mythic time, unfolds, while Sibelius adds subtle, almost imperceptible nuances, such as the dripping sounds of plucked violins before a brief outburst in C major from horns and

harp — some momentary penetration of Tuonela’s eternal gloom? — or low, ominous notes on the harp near the end. Thanks to his remarkable ear for orchestral sonority and color, Sibelius would develop into one of the most original and engaging symphonists of the first half of the 20th century. *The Swan of Tuonela* was one of the pieces played at the composer’s funeral in 1957.

*Scored for oboe, English horn, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trombones, timpani, bass drum, harp and strings*

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

Concerto for Violin and Cello in A minor, Op. 102

Born on May 7, 1833, in  
Hamburg, Germany

Died on April 3, 1897,  
in Vienna

**Composed:**  
1887

**Estimated  
length:**  
35 minutes



**First performance:**

October 18, 1887, in Cologne, Germany, with Brahms conducting and Joseph Joachim and Robert Hausmann as the soloists

**First Nashville Symphony performance:**

November 23, 1954, conducted by Guy Taylor at War Memorial Auditorium.

“I reckoned the concerto to be your own ... I was certainly your most enraptured listener,” Johannes Brahms gushed to Joseph Joachim about his teenage memory of hearing the Jewish-Hungarian musician as the soloist in Beethoven’s Violin Concerto. The two actually met in 1853, when Brahms was 20 and giving his first professional concert tour as a pianist. Robert Schumann had invited the young Joachim to perform at the Lower Rhine Festival and became deeply impressed with his playing. Joachim in turn raved about Brahms as both a performer and a composer and recommended him to Schumann, who became Brahms’s mentor.

After Schumann’s mental breakdown and early

death in an asylum, his widow, Clara, remained close friends with Brahms and Joachim and together promoted an influential ideal of what art should be. The Brahms biographer Jan Swafford remarks that Joachim’s violin playing and Clara Schumann’s performances at the keyboard shared a style that was “restrained, pure, anti-virtuosic, expressing the music rather than the performer.”

Brahms soon requested advice from Joachim on his work-in-progress at the time, his First Piano Concerto, which was his first major orchestral work — the so-called Double Concerto for Violin and Cello would be his last. Thus began a pattern that included close consultation when Brahms composed his 1878

Violin Concerto for Joachim, who supplied its cadenza. But a rift split them up in 1884, when Brahms wrote a letter to Joachim's wife, Amalie, expressing his support of her side in a marital dispute — Joachim having accused her of infidelity with the powerful music publisher Fritz Simrock. Amalie ended up using the letter as part of her defense in court, which led to serious estrangement between Joachim and Brahms.

Determined to restore the friendship, Brahms began by offering Joachim the opportunity to conduct the Berlin premiere of his Third Symphony. He subsequently returned to the concerto genre, composing the Op. 102 Double Concerto while spending the summer of 1887 in Switzerland. Several of Brahms's closest friends (including Clara Schumann) privately expressed doubts about the quality of the piece, and even Joachim at first found it questionable; Brahms squelched a sequel double concerto he had been planning.

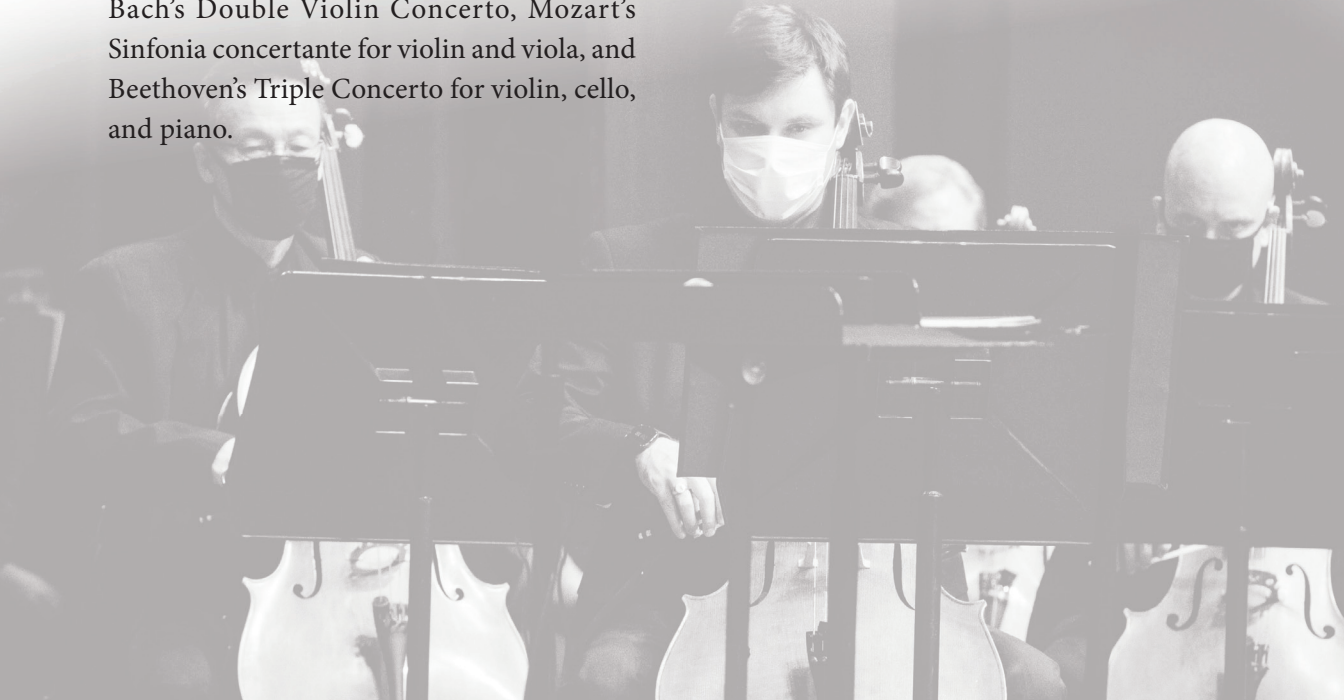
Yet the Double Concerto succeeded in reconciling the friends (though without restoring the former warmth of their relationship), and Joachim eventually became an admirer of the score, which posterity has found to be more valuable than did Brahms's contemporaries. The concept of two soloists harkens back to an earlier age of musical values, echoing memories J.S. Bach's Double Violin Concerto, Mozart's Sinfonia concertante for violin and viola, and Beethoven's Triple Concerto for violin, cello, and piano.

## WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The main theme, decisive and determined, is stated at the outset, but then the solo cello enters right away, followed by the solo violin and a combined cadenza. The orchestra returns to give a proper workout of the main theme, with the solo instruments contributing and diverging according to their distinctive personalities. In the transportive Andante that switches from the minor to D major, Brahms gently joins violin and cello in a unison statement of the radiant melody, separated by an octave. This music looks ahead to his final works of autumnal introspection.

Returning to the home key of A minor, the finale alludes to what was instantly recognized as “Hungarian” style — a nod to Joachim's origins. Brahms subtly plays with the dance-like pulse of its main theme to enhance a sense of ambiguity, which, “like transformation ... is a prime feature” of his musical language, as David Epstein remarks. Throughout the work, Brahms develops what for the Romantics had become an engine of individual virtuosity, the concerto, into an ode to friendship and mutuality.

*Scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings, plus solo violin and cello*



# JENNIFER HIGDON

*blue cathedral*

Born on December 31, 1962, in  
Brooklyn, New York

Currently resides in Philadelphia

**Composed:**  
1999

**Estimated  
length:**  
13 minutes



**First performance:**

March 1, 2000, in Philadelphia,  
with Robert Spano conducting  
the Curtis Institute of Music  
Symphony Orchestra

**First Nashville Symphony  
performance:**

These are the first Nashville  
Symphony performances of  
this work.

**M**aestro Giancarlo Guerrero and the Nashville Symphony have been important advocates of the music of Jennifer Higdon — their 2018 recording of her work *All Things Majestic* as well as her concertos for oboe and viola won the Grammy® Award for Best Classical Compendium in 2018, with the Viola Concerto receiving another Grammy® for Best Contemporary Classical Composition. Higdon, who reaches the milestone of 60 later this year, is a major figure in contemporary classical music: she received the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her Violin Concerto and two more Grammy® Awards, in 2010 and 2020, respectively, for her Percussion Concerto and Harp Concerto. She has established herself among the most frequently featured living composers, with several hundred performances of her works each season.

*blue cathedral* in particular ranks among the most-performed contemporary orchestral works, having tallied more than 650 renditions worldwide since its premiere in 2000. Higdon's works have been recorded on more than 60 CDs. Her 2015 debut opera, based on Charles Frazier's best-selling novel *Cold Mountain*, with a libretto by Gene Scheer, earned the International Opera Award for Best World Premiere.

Born in Brooklyn, Higdon she came to the world of classical music relatively late. She came of age in Atlanta and rural eastern Tennessee — “Dolly Parton grew up ‘a couple hollers over from us,’ as we like to say,” as she puts it — and had lots of exposure to country and rock and, thanks to her parents’ involvement with the visual arts, to avant-garde art happenings. At age 15, Higdon decided to teach herself flute and became a performance major at Bowling Green State University.

The idea of composing, Higdon recalls, emerged almost by chance after a few years of study, when her flute teacher asked her to write a short piece. “I found arranging sounds to be fascinating,” says Higdon. The urge to compose became unavoidable, taking over her life. Now, with commissions pouring in and her music in high demand, Higdon is frequently on the road yet still maintains the discipline to compose several hours every day of the week. She also taught composition for more than a quarter-century at Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music, which commissioned Higdon to write *blue cathedral* to commemorate its 75th anniversary.

Despite that institutional motivation, the impetus for *blue cathedral* was intensely private: she had recently lost her younger brother, Andrew Blue, which led her to

“reflect on the amazing journeys that we all make in our lives, crossing paths with so many individuals singularly and collectively, learning and growing each step of the way.” *blue cathedral*, she writes, “represents the expression of the individual and the group ... our inner travels and the places our souls carry us, the lessons we learn, and the growth we experience.”

## WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Each word of the title carries symbolic resonance, as the composer explains: “Blue... like the sky. Where all possibilities soar. Cathedrals... a place of thought, growth, spiritual expression... serving as a symbolic doorway into and out of this world. Blue represents all potential and the progression of journeys. Cathedrals represent a place of beginnings, endings, solitude, fellowship, contemplation, knowledge, and growth. As I was writing this piece, I found myself imagining a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky. Because the walls would be transparent, I saw the image of clouds and blueness permeating from the outside of this church.”

“In my mind’s eye, the listener would enter from the back of the sanctuary, floating along the corridor amongst giant crystal pillars, moving in a contemplative stance. The stained

glass windows’ figures would start moving with song, singing a heavenly music. The listener would float down the aisle, slowly moving upward at first and then progressing at a quicker pace, rising towards an immense ceiling which would open to the sky... as this journey progressed, the speed of the traveler would increase, rushing forward and upward. I wanted to create the sensation of contemplation and quiet peace at the beginning, moving towards the feeling of celebration and ecstatic expansion of the soul, all the while singing along with that heavenly music.”

Higdon includes prominent solos for clarinet, which her brother used to play, as well as flute, her own instrument. “Because I am the older sibling, it is the flute that appears first in this dialog. At the end of the work, the two instruments continue their dialogue, but it is the flute that drops out and the clarinet that continues on in the upward progressing journey. This is a story that commemorates living and passing through places of knowledge and of sharing and of that song called life.”

*Scored for 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (crotales, marimba, tam-tam, vibraphone, glockenspiel, bell tree, sizzle cymbal, suspended cymbal, chimes, bass drum, tom-tom, 2 triangles), piano (doubling celesta) and strings*



# MAURICE RAVEL

Suite from *Ma mère l'Oye* (“Mother Goose”)

Born on March 7, 1875,  
in Ciboure, France

Died on December 28, 1937,  
in Paris

**Composed:**

1908-10 as a  
suite for piano  
four hands;  
orchestrated  
1911-12

**Estimated  
length:**

16 minutes



**First performance:**

The orchestrated ballet version  
was premiered in Paris on  
January 28, 1912, in Paris.

**First Nashville Symphony  
performance:**

December 18, 1951,  
conducted by Guy Taylor at  
War Memorial Auditorium.

Themes involving childlike fantasy recur over and over in the oeuvre of Maurice Ravel, and dance is likewise a guiding thread through several of his most important compositions. Both aspects — childhood and the dance — merge in his ballet *Ma mère l'Oye* (“Mother Goose”). Between 1908 and 1910, Ravel at first conceived this music as a piano duet for two children, Mimie and Jean Godebski. Their artistically inclined parents, the artists Cipa and Ida Godebski, held salons that attracted a remarkable array of Parisian cultural figures, and they provided a kind of alternative home for the childless, lonely Ravel. The biographer Gerald Larner speculates that the death of the composer’s father in 1908 likely predisposed him to muse on his own childhood as he entertained the Godebskis and “took refuge in [the realm of] fairy tale and the domesticity of the piano duet.” As a result, adds Larner, “there is at least as much adult nostalgia as childish joy... and far more Ravel” in these pieces.

The original piano duet version of *Ma mère l'Oye* carries the subtitle “five children’s pieces” and was written as a private gift for the Godebski children to play. But for the first public performance, in 1910, the children were not up to the task — they complained it would require too much practice — and it

was premiered by another pair of prodigies.

The following year, Ravel orchestrated the pieces, rearranging their order and adding two more scenes and connective interludes to make it suitable as a ballet score. For this he concocted a scenario linking the famous fairy-tale stories that were the starting point of the piano pieces. These were drawn from multiple French sources, including Charles Perrault’s 1697 anthology, subtitled *Tales of Mother Goose*, as well as Perrault’s contemporary, Baroness d’Aulnoy, and Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont. The Suite we hear presents the orchestrations of the original five-piece piano suite.

## WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The clarity and simplicity of presentation in this score belie the subtleties of Ravel’s orchestration. In his scenario, the tale of *Sleeping Beauty* provides a framework for *Ma mère l'Oye*. *Pavane de la belle au bois dormant*, (“Sleeping Beauty’s Pavane”) depicts the Princess in a stately dance with brief, stately processional writing for woodwinds. The ensuing tales are enacted as she sleeps, in episodes that precede the moment of her awakening in the final tableau. At the same



time, the *Pavane*'s sustained wistfulness hints at the ambivalence of Ravel's summoning of childhood — a past recaptured by the knowing adult's memory.

*Petit Poucet* ("Tom Thumb" — also known as Hop-'o-my-Thumb, one of the many folktale variants of this story involving miniature people) recounts the episode in which the poor woodcutter's son tries to plan a way out of the woods by dropping breadcrumbs, only to discover (like Hansel and Gretel) that birds have eaten them. Tom Thumb (oboe) wanders in confusion, trying to find the path, while Ravel's vivid depiction of the birds near the end shows off his facility for conjuring nature.

Little people likewise figure in *Laideronnette, impératrice des Pagodes* ("Little Ugly, Empress of the Pagodas"). Here, a princess has been made the ugliest woman in the world by a witch's spell but finds herself transported into a magical kingdom where her miniature subjects, robed in gems, serenade her with an orchestra whose instruments (the "pagodas" in Ravel's sense) are made from the shells of walnuts and almonds. The use of pentatonic melody and touches from the percussion are

intended to mimic an Asian gamelan.

In *Les entretiens de la belle et de la bête* ("Conversations of Beauty and the Beast"), Ravel details the unlikely love story in three parts. These chart the appearance of Beauty (clarinet) in a Satie-like waltz, the gruff pleas of Beast (contrabassoon), which emerge from the bass, and the mixture of both in a duet. A glissando from the harp signals Beast's transformation into a handsome prince (now represented by violin in place of the contrabassoon).

For the concluding tale, Ravel introduces another handsome prince into his musical landscape. Prince Charming arrives to awaken the Princess, and the wood becomes *Le jardin féérique* ("The Enchanted Garden") — the very site of imaginative fantasy. A crescendo steadily builds, reaching an apotheosis and ending the Suite with the triumphant sounds of wedding and coronation.

— Thomas May is the Nashville Symphony's program annotator.

