

AX PLAYS BRAHMS



CLASSICAL SERIES

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, AT 7 PM | FRIDAY & SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 14 & 15, AT 8 PM

NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

GIANCARLO GUERRERO, *conductor*

EMANUEL AX, *piano*

JOHN CORIGLIANO

Symphony No. 1

Apologue: Of Rage and Remembrance

Tarantella

Chaconne: Giulio's Song

Epilogue

CLASSICAL SERIES
PRESENTING PARTNER



– INTERMISSION –

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 83

Allegro non troppo

Allegro appassionato

Andante

Allegretto grazioso

Emanuel Ax, piano

This concert will run 2 hours.

TONIGHT'S CONCERT | AT A GLANCE

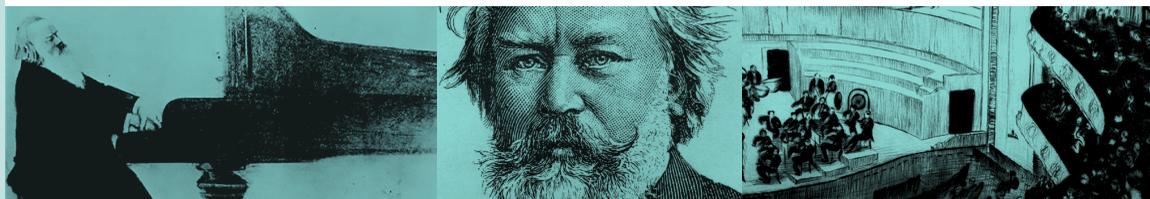
JOHN CORIGLIANO Symphony No. 1

- Composer John Corigliano grew up in the music world. His father was concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein — who gave the young composer encouragement early on — and his mother was an accomplished pianist. Best known in popular culture for composing the score to the film *The Red Violin*, he has earned a Pulitzer Prize, four GRAMMY® Awards and an Academy Award over the course of his career.
- Corigliano wrote his First Symphony in the late 1980s, in response to the AIDS crisis. “During the past decade, I have lost many friends and colleagues to the AIDS epidemic,” he wrote in his notes on the piece, “and the cumulative effect of those losses has, naturally, deeply affected me. My First Symphony was generated by feelings of loss, anger and frustration.”
- Prior to this piece, the composer had been reluctant to take on writing a symphonic work, but he was driven to do so. “My Symphony No. 1 was about world-scale tragedy and, I felt, needed a comparably epic form,” he explains.
- Each of the three main movements is dedicated to lifelong friends of Corigliano’s who succumbed to the disease, while the closing movement also pays tribute to other friends in what he calls “a quilt-like interweaving of motivic melodies.” The music is, at different times, angry, nostalgic, lyrical and rhythmic. The closing Epilogue is marked by “waves of brass chords” intended to convey “an image of timelessness.”



JOHANNES BRAHMS Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 83

- Brahms began writing his Second Piano Concerto in 1878 while traveling in Italy, and he debuted it three years later in Budapest, where he performed as the soloist. The piece came more than 20 years after his First Piano Concerto, which was not an immediate success upon its premiere, and reveals the experience he’d accrued in the intervening years working on his first two symphonies and his Violin Concerto.
- With its wide emotional scope and epic scale, this is clearly the work of a mature composer, who brings a combination of grandeur, warmth and intimacy to his writing here. For his part, the composer humorously called it “a tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo” — quite the opposite of what it is.
- Instead of following the standard concerto format of three movements, the work is organized in four movements, like a symphony. Nor does it contain a cadenza, which typically provides an opportunity for the soloist to step forward. The overall composition of the piece and the more prominent role of the orchestra also add to its distinctly symphonic qualities.





JOHN CORIGLIANO

Born on February 16, 1938, in New York City, where he currently resides

Symphony No. 1

Composed: 1988

First performance: March 15, 1990, with Daniel Barenboim conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

First Nashville Symphony performance: January 5 & 6, 2001, with music director Kenneth Schermerhorn

Estimated length: 40 minutes

An urgent need to respond to the contemporary world merges with a deep understanding of the symphonic tradition in John Corigliano's First Symphony. This eminent American composer, who turned 80 last February, was already a mature artist of 50 when he completed the work in 1988. By comparison, Johannes Brahms, with whom he shares this program, waited until his early 40s before introducing *his* First Symphony. Corigliano had come of age during a period of identity crisis for the concert music tradition, when a contingent of new-music figures were convinced that such forms as the concerto and symphony were outdated and had no more validity for modern composers.

Indeed, Corigliano's own father — who happened to be concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein — initially discouraged his son from being a composer. “In the 1950s and 1960s, most music being written was 12-tone composition, and the audiences and critics didn't like it,” the composer recalls. “So he thought I was going to make myself unhappy and not be able to make a living.”

But Corigliano did not lack encouragement elsewhere — including from Bernstein — and began producing a body of imaginative, poetically conceived and meticulously structured works that helped revitalize contemporary concert music. Similarly, he paved the way toward the ongoing renaissance in American opera with his Metropolitan Opera-commissioned operatic debut, *The Ghosts of*

Versailles (1991), which treats the characters in Mozart's and Rossini's *Figaro* operas and sets a libretto by the composer's close friend, the late playwright William M. Hoffmann.

Both works — the First Symphony and *Ghosts* — are major statements that draw on Corigliano's instinctively dramatic sensibility. This trait also runs through much of his instrumental work, often involving a sophisticated use of allusions to the musical past. His Violin Concerto, which draws on his score to the film *The Red Violin*, represents another example. His husband Mark Adamo, also a composer, has observed that Corigliano's “career-long struggle to reconcile a titanic richness of available musical resource with unmissable structural order expresses the core American metaphor.”

The First Symphony, according to Corigliano, “was generated by feelings of loss, anger and frustration” prompted by the AIDS crisis as it unfolded in the 1980s. Corigliano had seen the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (begun in 1985), which memorializes those who had died of AIDS through personal references to their lives. “This made me want to memorialize in music those I have lost, and reflect on those I am losing,” writes the composer. He adapted the format of the multi-movement symphony to this memorializing project, devoting each of the three main movements to “three lifelong musician-friends,” followed by a brief Epilogue.

Corigliano composed his First Symphony while he was the first-ever composer-in-residence of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, from 1987 to 1990. The work, which was commissioned to mark the CSO's centennial season, has earned an unusual number of distinctions, including the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition in 1990 and several GRAMMY® Awards: Best Contemporary Composition and Best Orchestral Performance in 1991 (for Daniel Barenboim's live recording with the CSO) and Best Classical Album in 1997 (for Leonard Slatkin's recording with the National Symphony).

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The First Symphony opens with an unforgettably powerful gesture (marked “ferocious”), as striking as a war photograph: the violins and violas play an open A, sustained with almost unbearable tension. It gathers force, becoming louder until an explosive response from the percussion interrupts.

The long first movement, titled “Apologue: Of Rage and Remembrance,” pits feelings of anger against what the composer calls “the bittersweet nostalgia of remembering.” He defines the term “apologue” as “an allegorical narrative usually intended to convey a moral,” adding that the movement “reflects my distress over a concert-pianist friend.”

With the entrance of the full orchestra comes a pounding beat from the timpani that recalls a similar sonority used by Brahms in the slow introduction to his own First Symphony. Corigliano likens its steady pulse to a “musical heartbeat,” over which varied, overlapping layers of the orchestra speed up, again interrupted by angry-sounding interventions from the brass. The violins ascend to their very highest register in a massive climax.

This opening section then yields to a calmer and lyrical middle one, marked by the sound of an offstage piano. The composer notes that its music — quoting a piano transcription of Isaac Albéniz’s *Tango*, a piece beloved by the friend here commemorated — should sound as if coming back in a memory. Corigliano intersperses fragments of the *Tango* with nostalgically tinged themes “until the lyrical ‘remembrance’ theme is accompanied by the relentless[ly] pulsing timpani heartbeat.” A terrific sense of tension results from this juxtaposition of slow melody with the accelerating drumbeat, crashing us back into a tragic intensification of the music from the first section. At the climax, “the volume of this passage remains loud, so that the effect is that of a monstrous machine coming to a halt but still boiling with energy.” The music fades, but there is one final outburst before the movement ends on a single high A.

Even rhythmic energy acquires a menacing character in the contrasting second movement, titled “Tarantella” after a fast dance from Southern Italy that has a fascinating folkloric association: a person dancing it can supposedly be cured of the effects (including insanity) thought to be caused by the bite of a tarantula spider. Corigliano here pays tribute to a pianist friend to whom he had previously dedicated one of his *Gazebo Dances* for piano four hands.

The composer explains: “This was a jaunty little piece whose mood, as in many *tarantellas*, seems to be at odds with its purpose.... The association of madness and my piano piece proved both prophetic and bitterly ironic when my friend, whose wit and intelligence were legendary in the music field,

became insane as a result of AIDS dementia. In writing a *tarantella* movement for this symphony, I tried to picture some of the schizophrenic and hallucinatory images that would have accompanied that madness, as well as the moments of lucidity.... There is a slow and relentless progression toward an accelerated ‘madness.’ The ending can only be described as a brutal scream.”

For the slow third movement, Corigliano recycles a musical format widely used in the Baroque: the chaconne, in which a chord sequence keeps repeating as other ideas unfold and are varied. Here, it’s a sequence of 12 chords first played by the strings (except for violins). Titled “Chaconne: Giulio’s Song,” this movement recalls an amateur cellist friend. Corigliano discovered an old tape of himself (on piano) improvising with Giulio, which served as the source for the lengthy cello solo that emerges over the final chord of the chaconne pattern.

A second cello contributes a musical remembrance of another friend, and the movement continues with material interweaving memories of still other lost friends. For these ideas, Corigliano inserted the music he had composed to set various brief eulogies written by William Hoffman, using solo instruments instead of voices. After a solo trumpet enters with the ominous note A, the rest of the brass reinforce it until the Symphony’s opening music crowds out everything else. The tragic pulse from the timpani now turns into a funeral march. An enormous climax is followed by a solo cello resignedly playing an A that leads into the final movement, “Epilogue.”

“Waves of brass chords,” explains the composer, form a recurring pattern in this section, adding: “To me, the sound of ocean waves conveys an image of timelessness.” These form a backdrop to a reprise of ideas from the first three movements: the Albéniz *Tango*, the *tarantella* melody and the solo cellos. The work ends with a single cello fading on the note A — no longer angry but dying away.

The Symphony No. 1 is scored for 4 flutes (doubling 3 piccolos), 3 oboes and English horn, 4 clarinets (doubling E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, and contrabass clarinet), 3 bassoons and contrabassoon, 6 horns, 5 trumpets, 4 trombones, 2 tubas, 2 timpani, percussion (at least 5 players), harp, piano, strings and mandolin.



JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born on May 7, 1833, in Hamburg (in present-day Germany); died on April 3, 1897, in Vienna

Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 83

Composed: 1878-1881

First performance: November 9, 1881, in Budapest, with Brahms as the soloist and Alexander Erkel leading the National Theater Orchestra (Brahms had earlier tried out the work in a private performance with the Meiningen Orchestra)

First Nashville Symphony performance: January 24, 1950, with music director William Strickland and soloist Eugene Istomin

Estimated length: 50 minutes

Though titled a Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Brahms' Op. 83 could be referred to as a symphony in its own right, alongside his four works officially designated as such. In this sense, he carries forward the legacy of Beethoven's final piano concerto, the so-called "Emperor," which likewise paved new ground with its epic and symphonically conceived design. Brahms' Second Concerto is even cast in the four movements associated with a Classical symphony, as opposed to the conventional three used for the concerto format.

In other words, it contains the best of both worlds. It can be appreciated as the vehicle for an almost superhuman level of artistry from the soloist, requiring not just inexhaustible technical resources, but also intellectual power. And the Second Piano Concerto can be enjoyed as a richly textured, organically developed symphony with prominent roles for other solo instruments alongside the Shakespearean one for the pianist.

Brahms spent many years on his tempestuous First Piano Concerto before introducing it in 1859. A lengthy gap separates the creation of that music — his first orchestral work to be performed — from the Second, by which time he was able to draw on the experience with large-scale orchestral forms he had acquired writing his first two symphonies and his Violin Concerto (another "symphonic" concerto).

This score's epic scale was obviously on the composer's mind when he described it with his wry, ironic sense of humor as the opposite of what it really is: "a tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo." The music draws on material Brahms began sketching while traveling in Italy in the spring of 1878. (He recycled some material rejected from his initial plans for the Violin Concerto, written that same year.) Brahms debuted the Second Concerto at a private event before the public premiere in Budapest in 1881. He dedicated the score to the pianist and composer Eduard Marxsen (1806-1887), who had been an important teacher and mentor during his youth.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Following a solo melody given by the horn — like a question dreamily posed — the piano soloist enters at once with a keyboard-spanning response. This dialogue establishes the vast horizon against which the first movement unfolds. Brahms allows room for moments of agitation, which can even become fierce, as in the first cadenza-like outburst from the piano before it cedes control to the orchestra. But the overall pattern is one of thoughtful, deeply engaged conversation between soloist and ensemble. An adventurous development section (beginning with a minor-key variant of the horn tune) and a spellbinding coda that casts the main theme in a splendid new light are among the movement's highlights.

Strikingly, Brahms omits the ritual of stand-alone cadenzas in this work. After all, the keyboard's point of view is so finely integrated into the larger fabric of the discussion that they would feel superfluous. Yet his writing for the instrument sweeps across its entire spectrum, from the deepest bass to its highest notes — a fitting emblem for the comprehensiveness and abundance of Brahms' musical imagination. The Second Concerto embraces moments of luminous meditation and intense debate alike.

The remaining three movements pose a counterweight to what might otherwise have been a "top-heavy" concerto (as, indeed, the First Piano Concerto arguably is). Brahms originally intended to include an "extra" Scherzo movement in the Violin Concerto but ended up incorporating that material here in the Allegro appassionato movement, whose D minor key hearkens back to the First Concerto — and to its grimly tempestuous sensibility, which is

assuaged by quieter material and a turn to D major in the contrasting middle section.

The Andante gives its opening statement to a solo cello. The piano traces embellishments of the melody; in fact, it never really states the melody as such, which is confined to Brahms' reduced orchestra. (The trumpets and tympani are omitted both here and in the finale.) Later, after a development of these ideas, Brahms interlaces a pair of clarinets with the piano in a passage that resembles one of his chamber music works.

As a finale, Brahms offers not the expected rondo, with its recurring main idea and contrasting episodes, but instead a complex organization of five sections that combine ideas already introduced with newly

introduced material; the ideas are, however, subtly related. One of these sections, in the minor key, imparts what was associated in Brahms' time with a "melancholy" Roma spirit. Brahms shifts the meter and accelerates the tempo in the coda, in which the soloist and full orchestra merge to reaffirm the ebullient conclusion.

In addition to solo piano, the Piano Concerto No. 2 is scored for pairs of flutes (one doubling piccolo), oboes, clarinets and bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; timpani; and strings.

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

ABOUT THE ARTIST



EMANUEL AX
piano

Born in modern day Lvov, Poland, Emanuel Ax moved to Winnipeg, Canada, with his family when he was a young boy. His studies at The Juilliard School were supported by the sponsorship of the Epstein Scholarship Program of the Boys Clubs of America, and he subsequently won the Young Concert Artists Award. Additionally, he attended Columbia University, where he majored in French. Ax made his New York debut in the Young Concert Artists Series and captured public attention in 1974, when he won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Tel Aviv. In 1975, he won the Michaels Award of Young Concert Artists, followed four years later by the coveted Avery Fisher Prize.

In partnership with colleagues Leonidas Kavakos and Yo-Yo Ma, Ax begins the current season with concerts in Vienna, Paris and London with the trios of Brahms recently released by Sony Classical. In the U.S., he returns to orchestras in Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Washington, Detroit, Pittsburgh and Portland, Oregon, and to Carnegie Hall for a recital to conclude the season. In Europe, he can be heard in Munich, Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome, Vienna, London and on tour with the Budapest Festival Orchestra in Italy.

Always a committed exponent of contemporary

composers, with works written for him by John Adams, Christopher Rouse, Krzysztof Penderecki, Bright Sheng and Melinda Wagner in his repertoire, Ax has most recently added HK Gruber's Piano Concerto and Samuel Adams' "Impromptus."

A Sony Classical exclusive recording artist since 1987, Ax has released recordings of Mendelssohn Trios with Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman, Strauss' *Enoch Arden* narrated by Patrick Stewart, and discs of two-piano music by Brahms and Rachmaninoff with Yefim Bronfman.

Ax has received GRAMMY® Awards for the second and third volumes of his cycle of Haydn's piano sonatas. He has also made a series of GRAMMY®-winning recordings with cellist Yo-Yo Ma of the Beethoven and Brahms sonatas for cello and piano. His other recordings include the concertos of Liszt and Schoenberg, three solo Brahms albums, an album of tangos by Astor Piazzolla, and the premiere recording of John Adams' *Century Rolls* with The Cleveland Orchestra for Nonesuch.

A frequent and committed partner for chamber music, he has worked regularly with Young Uck Kim, Cho-Liang Lin, Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer, Peter Serkin, Jaime Laredo and the late Isaac Stern.

Ax resides in New York City with his wife, pianist Yoko Nozaki. They have two children together, Joseph and Sarah. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and holds honorary doctorates of music from Skidmore College, Yale University and Columbia University.