

Friday 27 March 2026 / 7.30pm
Beethoven's Seventh Symphony

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No. 1

Maestoso - Adagio - Rondo (Allegro non troppo)

The premiere of Brahms's First Piano Concerto in Leipzig on 27 January 1859 was the biggest moment in the young composer's life. And... "My concerto was a brilliant, decisive, failure" he wrote to his friend Joseph Joachim the following morning. His reaction – outwardly, at least - was to shrug it all off.

Only those closest to Brahms knew how important this piece was to him, and how he'd suffered in its creation. In his early twenties, he'd lived as the protégé of Robert and Clara Schumann. The concerto started to take shape in the terrible weeks of March 1854, after Robert had attempted to drown himself in the River Rhine, and the 21-year old Johannes had become the grief-stricken household's emotional rock. Today, it's impossible not to feel the raw emotion that drives its massive first movement.

And Brahms left a string of clues: in the deep, radiant calm that floods the music when the stormclouds part, and which sings out at rapturous length in the lovely central *Adagio* (Brahms scribbled *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini* at this point in the score). The final *Rondo* begins with a theme as earnest and energetic as anything by Bach; and its struggle through to sunlight takes every ounce of a young composer's courage and skill.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 7 in A major

Poco sostenuto; Vivace - Allegretto - Presto - Allegro con brio

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony was premiered in Vienna on 8th December 1813. The occasion was a benefit concert for Austrian soldiers wounded in the recent Battle of Hanau, and the performance was one of the supreme triumphs of Beethoven's career. The *Allegretto* was encored, and a delighted Beethoven wrote to a Viennese newspaper, to thank his "honoured colleagues" for "their zeal in contributing to such a splendid result". Mind you, there were dissenters. Schumann's father-in-law, Friedrich Wieck, was convinced that Beethoven must have written the symphony while drunk.

And you can see his point. It's not just the Symphony's rough-cut humour (after the massive build-up of energy in the introductory *Poco sostenuto*, the *Vivace* launches not with a breaking storm, but a country-dance tune on the flute). And it's not just the way each movement is driven by colossal build-ups of dance rhythm (even the *Allegretto* has the rhythm of a pavane). It's the sheer, elemental energy with which Beethoven brings it off. Exuberance is written into the Symphony's very texture. Listen to the torrential gallop of the finale, and then think of Beethoven's own words: "Music is the spirit that inspires us to new creation; and I am the Bacchus, who presses out this glorious wine to intoxicate all mankind".

Dinis Sousa conductor

Dinis Sousa is Music Director of Royal Northern Sinfonia, and Founder and Artistic Director of Orquestra XXI, an award-winning orchestra that brings together some of the finest young Portuguese musicians from around the world. He is the winner of the Critics' Circle Young Talent (Conductor) Award for 2023.

With Royal Northern Sinfonia he led a complete Schumann symphony cycle in 2023/4, in addition to a performance of Schumann's *Das Paradies und die Peri* which received a 5-star review from *The Times*. Other highlights with RNS have included included a world premiere by Cassandra Miller, a UK tour, a return visit to the BBC Proms, and collaborations with soloists including Christian Tetzlaff, Steven Isserlis, Elisabeth Leonskaja, Víkingur Ólafsson, Stephen Hough and Kristian Bezuidenhout.

Sousa's work with the Monteverdi Choirs and Orchestras has earned him the highest critical acclaim, most recently for a complete Beethoven symphony cycle in London and at the Philharmonie de Paris in May 2024. Among many 5* reviews, Hugh Canning (*Operalogue*) described the cycle as "an unforgettable performance". In 2023, he won widespread praise (and further 5* reviews) for Berlioz's *Les Troyens* at the Salzburg Festival, Berlin Musikfest and the BBC Proms, with *The Guardian* noting that "Sousa was electrifying in moments of grandeur, high drama, and emotional intensity." In the autumn of 2023, he also made his Carnegie Hall debut conducting the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists in two programs of Bach and Handel.

As a guest conductor, Sousa made debuts in 2023/4 with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (Brahms' *German Requiem* with Christian Gerhaher, Lenneke Ruiten and the Monteverdi Choir) and Swedish Radio Symphony. In the 2024/25 season he makes debuts with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Bergen Philharmonic, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Symphonique de Québec, National Symphony Orchestra (Dublin) and Royal Danish Opera Orchestra; and makes return visits to the Euskadiko (Basque National) Orchestra and the Ulster Orchestra.

His operatic experience includes Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and in 2025 he leads a new production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* for Graz Opera.

With Orquestra XXI, recent highlights have included opening the Gulbenkian Foundation's season, and a critically acclaimed tour of Mahler's Symphony No 5 to celebrate the orchestra's 10th anniversary. In recognition of his work with Orquestra XXI, he was awarded the title of Knight of the Order of Prince Henry in Portugal.

Stephen Hough piano

Named by *The Economist* as one of Twenty Living Polymaths, Sir Stephen Hough combines a distinguished career of a concert pianist with those of a composer and writer. In recognition of his contribution to cultural life, he became the first classical performer to be given a MacArthur Fellowship, and was awarded a Knighthood for Services to Music in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2022.

In a career spanning over 40 years, Stephen Hough has played regularly with most of the world's leading orchestras, including televised and filmed appearances with the Berlin, London, China, Seoul and New York Philharmonic Orchestras, and the Concertgebouw, Budapest Festival and the NHK Symphony Orchestras. He has been a regular guest of recital series and festivals including Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium, London's Royal Festival Hall, Salzburg, Verbier, La Roque-d'Anthéron, Aspen, Tanglewood, Aldeburgh and Edinburgh.

He begins his 2024/25 concert season with his 30th appearance at the BBC Proms, performing at Last Night of the Proms to a live audience of 6,000 and televised audience of 3.5 million. Over the course of the following 12 months Hough performs over 80 concerts on four continents, opening Philharmonia Orchestra's season at the Royal Festival Hall, performances with the Cleveland Orchestra, performing a solo recital at Barbican Centre and giving the world premiere of his Willa Cather-inspired Piano Quintet at Lincoln Center's David Geffen Hall. Following the 2024 world premiere of his own Piano Concerto (*The World of Yesterday*), named after Stefan Zweig's memoir, Hough brings the work to Adelaide, Bournemouth, Oregon, Singapore and Vermont Symphony Orchestras.

Royal Northern Sinfonia

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37 musicians at the top of their game. Electrifying music, old and new. All the talent, determination, and creativity of the North East on a worldwide stage. From their home at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, Royal Northern Sinfonia share the joy and wonder of orchestral music with thousands of people across the North of England - and beyond - every year.

From symphonies to string quartets, film soundtracks to choral masses, and original performances with awesome artists from Sheku Kanneh-Mason to Self Esteem, the orchestra's members have got one of the most varied jobs there is. They're always looking for fresh new sounds from up-and-coming composers, inviting local communities to share a stage, and doing everything they can to inspire and prepare the musicians of tomorrow to one day take their place.

They're also working hard to smash the barriers that can stop brilliant people getting into classical music. They've teamed up with national partners to support women conductors to develop their careers, to help global majority musicians get vital experience in the orchestra world, and to celebrate disabled and non-disabled musicians breaking new ground together in inclusive ensemble RNS Moves. And they bring new musical opportunities to the region, headlining the first-ever BBC Proms weekend outside London.

Because they whole-heartedly believe orchestral music is for anyone - big cities and rural villages, tiny babies and life-long listeners, die-hard fans and curious minds - they travel far and wide to make sure there's top-notch classical music on offer for anyone ready to say "I'll give that a go". You'll find them in churches, castles, and community venues across the North, as well as leading the charge in Carlisle, Kendal, Middlesbrough, and Sunderland.

With 65 years of success to build on, they've signed a dynamic artistic leadership – Music Director Dinis Sousa, Artistic Partner Maria Włoszczowska, Principal Guest Conductor Nil Venditti and Associate Conductor Ellie Slorach – to lead the way into a bold, bright future.

Wherever the orchestra play and whoever they share a stage with, every performance is a chance to see, hear and feel the music.