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WITH BENJAMIN GROSVENOR

23-25 November 2023



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MENDELSSOHN PIANO CONCERTO NO 1 WITH BENJAMIN GROSVENOR

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Thursday 23 November, 7.30pm, Usher Hall, Edinburgh

Friday 24 November, 7.30pm, City Halls, Glasgow

Saturday 25 November, 7.30pm, Aberdeen Music Hall

BRAHMS Tragic Overture

MENDELSSOHN Piano Concerto No 1

Interval of 20 minutes

SCHUMANN Symphony No 4

Maxim Emelyanychev Conductor

Benjamin Grosvenor Piano



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ORCHESTRA

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Andy Fawbert

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Timpani

Louise Lewis Goodwin

Kana Kawashima
First Violin



WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO HEAR

BRAHMS (1833–1897)

Tragic Overture, Op 81
(1880)

MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Piano Concerto No 1 in G minor, Op 25
(1830–31)

Molto allegro con fuoco

Andante

Presto—Molto allegro e vivace

SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Symphony No 4 in D minor, Op 120
(1841, revised 1851)

Ziemlich langsam

Romanze

Scherzo

Langsam

There's a compelling thread of turbulent drama that stalks through tonight's programme, from the darkness-to-light journey of Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto to the stormy emotions of Schumann's Fourth Symphony – both works inspired by love.

Judging by its title, our opening piece should be the most overtly dramatic of the lot. But in the case of his Tragic Overture, Johannes Brahms had a particular intention in mind, and it was a musical one. With two successful symphonies behind him, the composer was already a celebrated and respected figure in 1880, when he wrote the Overture – so much so, in fact, that he was about to have an honorary doctorate bestowed upon him by the University of Breslau in Prussia (now Wrocław in Poland). To celebrate the occasion, he wrote his jolly, lighthearted Academic Festival Overture, awash with the tunes of student songs, in the summer of that year while holidaying in the Austrian spa town of Bad Ischl. And at the same time, he composed its darker, stormier counterpart, the Tragic Overture, explaining his decision: 'I simply could not refuse my melancholy nature the satisfaction of composing an overture for tragedy.'

The key word there is probably 'satisfaction'. Brahms consciously intended his Overture to convey drama and tragedy, and there's no doubting that he achieved that in the work's serious-minded, furrowed-brow music. But while it might be tempting – egged on perhaps by mention of his 'melancholy nature' – to see the piece as a reflection of some personal tragedy in the composer's private life, it's nothing of the sort.



Johannes Brahms

Brahms consciously intended his Overture to convey drama and tragedy, and there's no doubting that he achieved that in the work's serious-minded, furrowed-brow music.

Brahms famously found himself the champion of music as a pure and abstract ideal, concerned solely with itself and its own internal workings – in direct opposition to the unapologetically storytelling, descriptive music of composers such as Liszt or Wagner. His Tragic Overture, in fact, seems like a statement of intent: of course music can and does convey emotion, but it can achieve that without becoming autobiography, or lowering itself to satisfy the demands of a narrative.

The Tragic Overture was premiered on 20 December 1880 in Vienna, conducted by Hans Richter, where it was met with little enthusiasm. It made its mark, however, just a few days later at the University of Breslau, where it got a repeat performance alongside the premiere of the far brighter Academic Festival Overture: critics complained that its powerful, dark drama rather overshadowed the carefree gaiety of that other piece.

Indeed, from its hammer-blow opening chords, the Tragic Overture sets out to make a memorable impact, with a somewhat austere initial theme first heard in unison strings, followed by a more optimistic, even romantic melody for the violins. A quiet, almost Mahlerian march theme seems to approach from a great distance in the Overture's central development section, and when Brahms returns to his opening themes near the end of the piece, it sounds we're heading for a far more lyrical, upbeat ending. But it can't last, and it doesn't: the opening hammer blows return, propelling the Overture to its gruff conclusion.

If Brahms set out to mine a vein of musical tragedy in his opening Overture, there's no let-up in the drama in tonight's next piece. For Felix Mendelssohn and his First Piano Concerto (which he described in a letter to his father as 'really quite wild'), however, that drama was all underpinned by infatuation, possibly even burgeoning love.

As a child, little Felix had mingled with Europe's cultural and intellectual elite at the family's house in Berlin, developing a passion for music, painting, literature and philosophy. It was only natural that he should embark on a European tour in his early 20s, with the aim of deepening his knowledge and experience. It was a three-year, stop-start trip that began in Scotland (a journey that produced his 'Hebrides' Overture and 'Scottish' Symphony) before Mendelssohn headed south from Berlin to the more traditional destination of Italy in October 1830. He would spend ten months in the country, making his way from Venice to Naples via Bologna, Florence and Rome, then back home again through Genoa and Milan, writing his 'Italian' Symphony in 1833 as a result.

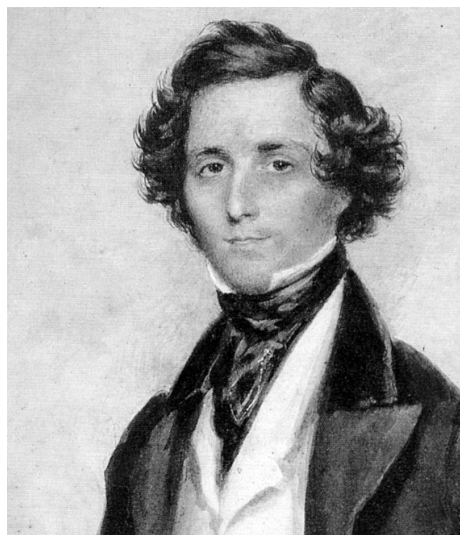
On his way south, however, he met the 16-year-old pianist Delphine von Schauroth in Munich, and was clearly rather smitten by not only her keyboard talents, but also her personality. So much so, in fact, that he dreamt up a piano concerto for Delphine during his Italian sojourn, and put it down on paper during a second stop-off in Munich during his return trip back up north. 'I wrote it in but a few days and almost carelessly,' he later remembered, but it was clearly a deeply enjoyable experience for the 21-year-old. He wrote home to his parents: 'It is a glorious feeling to waken in the morning and to know that you are going to write the score of a grand allegro... while bright weather holds out the hope of a cheering, long walk in the afternoon... I scarcely know a place where I feel as comfortable and domesticated as here.' Ironically, however, nothing would come of Mendelssohn's youthful passions, for reasons we can only guess. He dedicated

the piece to Delphine, but gave the premiere of the new Concerto himself, in Munich on 17 October 1831, and returned home alone to Berlin.

There's no denying the passion and drama that Mendelssohn injected into his music, however. Nor his exploitation of recent innovations in piano design, from the rich, heavy chords that could now compete with an orchestra's volume, to the sparkling topmost octave that adds glittering colour to his melodic decorations.

It's also a piece in which – as in his Violin Concerto more than a decade later – Mendelssohn attempted to bring a sense of unity to the concerto form's traditionally separate movements, running them together with linking material. An abrupt orchestral crescendo kicks off the stormy opening movement, immediately taken up by the solo pianist, who expands the movement's tumultuous opening theme across the extremes of the keyboard. Some rushing, dashing figurations lead into the far gentler second main theme, but the energy can't be suppressed for long: the granitic chords of the opening soon return. After some unexpected transformations and far-flung harmonic journeys in the development section, however, horns and trumpets sound repeated-note fanfares to lead us straight into the slower second movement, via a brief piano fantasia on those same repeated notes.

And Mendelssohn's slow movement couldn't be more different from the sometimes violent first, with a sweet, gentle, almost hymn-like melody shared between violas and cellos, later taken up in a more decorated version by the solo pianist.



Felix Mendelssohn

There's no denying the passion and drama that Mendelssohn injected into his music

Those brass fanfares return to lead us into the finale, now heralding a sense of gathering energy and power. When the piano joins the drama, however, it's with a barely repressed sense of fun, something that's taken further in the movement's whirling, joyful main theme. After plenty of keyboard-straddling virtuosity and a brief movement of respite, the movement dashes to its exuberant conclusion.

The influence of Mendelssohn continues, in fact, in tonight's final piece. What we now know as Robert Schumann's Fourth Symphony should probably by rights be called his Second. He wrote it – or at least its first version – between June and October 1841, buzzing from the huge success of his First Symphony, which had been premiered by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra under Mendelssohn in January that year.

Another reason for Schumann's elation, however, was his long-hoped-for marriage

to his beloved Clara Wieck in September 1840 – following a five-year courtship, and then a protracted legal battle when her father banned their relationship (which Robert and Clara eventually won). Indeed, Schumann originally dubbed the work his 'Clara Symphony', though the name didn't stick – it perhaps felt like something of an inappropriate epithet for what the composer had in mind.

For, following his bright, buoyant, eternally optimistic 'Spring' Symphony, No 1, and despite his high spirits, Schumann set his sights on music that was far darker, stormier and more turbulent in his new symphony, and also set out to challenge symphonic conventions. Rather than a work in the traditional four movements, he'd create a pioneering Symphony that not only ran those movements together in a single span of music, but also shared themes and ideas between them, bringing a groundbreaking unity to his creation.



Robert Schumann

Despite Schumann's slight backtrack towards a more conventional symphonic structure, the Fourth remains his most original Symphony, as well as his most rigorously constructed and most serious-minded.

The radical new Symphony received its premiere on 6 December 1841, again from the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. It went down well, but it was hardly the roof-raising success that Schumann had hoped for. Rather downhearted, he set it aside.

It wasn't until a decade later that the composer, inspired by his new role as Director of Music for the city of Düsseldorf, unearthed the Symphony, making substantial revisions (and also making certain divisions between the piece's movements), and premiering it on 15 May 1853 at the Lower Rhine Music Festival. Despite Schumann's slight backtrack towards a more conventional symphonic structure, the Fourth remains his most original Symphony, as well as his most rigorously constructed and most serious-minded.

His first movement is more of a free-flowing fantasia than a conventional

symphonic beginning, with the theme from its slow, portentous opening developed further in its main faster section, where new melodies also arise. Entitled 'Romanze', the slower second movement opens with a melancholy, song-like melody for oboe and solo cello, but the music of the first movement's brooding opening returns to cast a dark shadow over its central section, before it's dispelled by a lilting theme for solo violin. That lilting theme itself returns in the central section of Schumann's third movement, a playful but also rather furrowed-brow scherzo. In his finale, the composer returns to a striding, martial theme first introduced way back in the first movement, though it's a newly introduced, sweetly lyrical melody passed between strings and woodwind that eventually propels the Symphony towards its joyful but increasingly frenetic conclusion.

Conductor

MAXIM EMELYANYCHEV



At the Scottish Chamber Orchestra Maxim Emelyanychev follows in the footsteps of just five previous Principal Conductors in the Orchestra's 49-year history; Roderick Brydon (1974-1983), Jukka-Pekka Saraste (1987-1991), Ivor Bolton (1994-1996), Joseph Swensen (1996-2005) and Robin Ticciati (2009-2018).

Recent highlights have included debuts with some of the most prestigious international orchestras: Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester, Toronto Symphony and Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, as well as returns to the Antwerp Symphony, the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and a European tour with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, followed by appearances at the Radio-France Montpellier Festival and the Edinburgh International Festival.

In October 2022, Maxim toured the USA with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and made his debut with the Berlin Philharmonic. Other touring in 2022/23 included the New Japan Philharmonic, the Osaka Kansai Philharmonic, the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, the Helsinki Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. He also returned to the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse and to the Royal Opera House in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*.

He regularly collaborates with renowned artists such as Max Emanuel Cenčić, Patrizia Ciofi, Joyce DiDonato, Franco Fagioli, Richard Goode, Sophie Karthäuser, Stephen Hough, Katia and Marielle Labèque, Marie-Nicole Lemieux, Julia Lezhneva, Alexei Lubimov, Riccardo Minasi, Xavier Sabata and Dmitry Sinkovsky.

Maxim is also a highly respected chamber musician. His most recent recording, of Brahms Violin Sonatas with long-time collaborator and friend Aylen Pritchin, was released on Aparté in December 2021 and has attracted outstanding reviews internationally. With the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Maxim has recorded Schubert Symphony No 9 – the symphony with which he made his debut with the orchestra – and Mendelssohn Symphonies Nos 3 'Scottish' and 5 'Reformation' both on Linn Records.

For full biography please visit sco.org.uk

Piano

BENJAMIN GROSVENOR



British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor is internationally recognized for his sonorous lyricism and understated brilliance at the keyboard. His virtuosic interpretations are underpinned by a unique balance of technical mastery and intense musicality. Grosvenor is regarded as one of the most important pianists to emerge in several decades, with *Gramophone* recently acknowledging him as one of the top 50 pianists ever on record.

Concerto highlights in the 23/24 season include his much-anticipated debuts with DSO Berlin and Iceland Symphony Orchestra featuring Busoni's Piano Concerto in the composer's anniversary year. He also performs with Gürzenich Orchestra and Elim Chan (Prokofiev 3), CBSO, Hallé Orchestra, Washington National, Indianapolis and Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestras. Summer Festivals in 2023 included European touring with the EUYO with Manfred Honeck (Prokofiev 3), Helsingborg Piano Festival, Festival Berlioz and Summer at Snape.

Grosvenor has received *Gramophone's* 'Young Artist of the Year', a Classical Brit Critics' Award, UK Critics' Circle Award for Exceptional Young Talent and a Diapason d'Or Jeune Talent Award. He has been featured in two BBC television documentaries, BBC Breakfast, Front Row, as well as in CNN's 'Human to Hero' series. In 2016, he became the inaugural recipient of The Ronnie and Lawrence Ackman Classical Piano Prize with the New York Philharmonic.

Following studies at the Royal Academy of Music, he graduated in 2012 with the 'Queen's Commendation for Excellence' and in 2016 was awarded a RAM Fellowship. Benjamin is an Ambassador of Music Masters, a charity dedicated to making music education accessible to all children regardless of their background, championing diversity and inclusion.

For full biography please visit [sco.org.uk](https://www.sco.org.uk)

Biography

SCOTTISH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA



The Scottish Chamber Orchestra (SCO) is one of Scotland's five National Performing Companies and has been a galvanizing force in Scotland's music scene since its inception in 1974. The SCO believes that access to world-class music is not a luxury but something that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in, helping individuals and communities everywhere to thrive. Funded by the Scottish Government, City of Edinburgh Council and a community of philanthropic supporters, the SCO has an international reputation for exceptional, idiomatic performances: from mainstream classical music to newly commissioned works, each year its wide-ranging programme of work is presented across the length and breadth of Scotland, overseas and increasingly online.

Equally at home on and off the concert stage, each one of the SCO's highly talented and creative musicians and staff is passionate about transforming and enhancing lives through the power of music. The SCO's Creative Learning programme engages people of all ages and backgrounds with a diverse range of projects, concerts, participatory workshops and resources. The SCO's current five-year Residency in Edinburgh's Craigmillar builds on the area's extraordinary history of Community Arts, connecting the local community with a national cultural resource.

An exciting new chapter for the SCO began in September 2019 with the arrival of dynamic young conductor Maxim Emelyanychev as the Orchestra's Principal Conductor. His tenure has recently been extended until 2028. The SCO and Emelyanychev released their first album together (Linn Records) in November 2019 to widespread critical acclaim. Their second recording together, of Mendelssohn symphonies, was released in November 2023.

The SCO also has long-standing associations with many eminent guest conductors and directors including Andrew Manze, Pekka Kuusisto, François Leleux, Nicola Benedetti, Isabelle van Keulen, Anthony Marwood, Richard Egarr, Mark Wigglesworth, John Storgårds and Conductor Emeritus Joseph Swensen.

The Orchestra's current Associate Composer is Jay Capperauld. The SCO enjoys close relationships with numerous leading composers and has commissioned around 200 new works, including pieces by the late Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Sir James MacMillan, Anna Clyne, Sally Beamish, Martin Suckling, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Karin Rehnqvist, Mark-Anthony Turnage and Nico Muhly.

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