

## WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW PARALLEL EVENTS

# 1866

### Strauss

*The Beautiful Blue Danube*



#### MUSIC

Tchaikovsky  
Symphony No. 1  
("Winter Dreams")



#### ART

Bierstadt  
*Storm in the Rocky  
Mountains, Mt. Rosalies*



#### LITERATURE

Dostoyevsky  
*Crime and  
Punishment*



#### HISTORY

Alfred Nobel  
invents dynamite.

# 1886

### Dvořák

*Three Slavonic Dances*



#### MUSIC

Saint-Saëns  
*The Carnival of the Animals*



#### ART

Degas  
*The Tub*



#### LITERATURE

Stevenson  
*Strange Case of Dr.  
Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*



#### HISTORY

Coca-Cola invented.

# 1896

### Chausson

*Poème*



#### MUSIC

Puccini  
*La  
Bohème*



#### ART

Pissarro  
*Pont Boieldieu in  
Rouen, Rainy Weather*



#### LITERATURE

Wells  
*The Island of Doctor Moreau*



#### HISTORY

Wilhelm Röntgen  
discovers the X-ray.

# 1944

### Prokofiev

*Symphony No. 5*



#### MUSIC

Bartók  
Concerto for  
Orchestra



#### ART

Léger  
*Three Musicians*



#### LITERATURE

Landon  
*Anna and the King of Siam*



#### HISTORY

Mount Vesuvius  
erupts.

## THE BLUE DANUBE

Whenever the musicians of the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra perform side-by-side with their younger counterparts in the Rhode Island Philharmonic *Youth* Orchestra, the results are always electric. And few works are better able to capitalize on this than Dvořák's sparkling *Slavonic Dances*. Pair that with an iconic waltz, a lush musical love poem, and a symphony that extolls the grandeur of the human spirit, and you've got an evening of music, by some of history's greatest melodists, that won't be soon forgotten.

First danced in Boston in 1834, the waltz ("an indecent foreign dance" according to *The London Times*) quickly captivated all of Europe, ushering in what has been called "quite simply the greatest change in dance form and dancing manners that has happened in our history." It is ironic, then, that the most recognizable example of the form started not as a dance, but as a choral tribute, complete with whispering mermaids and lingering lovers, to Vienna's cherished river. Within a year, the "waltz king" had composed an orchestral version of the piece, full of beguiling melodic invention and harmonic grace, which went on to become the envy of Brahms, the unofficial Austrian anthem, and a popular culture staple, found in everything from Daffy Duck cartoons to the runaway Netflix series *Squid Games*.

Chausson's *Poème* for Violin & Orchestra draws its inspiration, not from a river, but from "The Song of Triumphant Love," a short story by the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev, in which a violin (with a diamond-tipped bow, no less) plays a prominent role. *Poème* is a tour de force for solo violin, shifting seamlessly from the deeply intimate to the wildly pyrotechnical in an aesthetic that "blends the French impressions of the East with the Italian affect of drama, and is a unique masterpiece in the history of music."

Equally masterful is Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony. Despite his distrust of the Stalinist regime, he conducted the premiere of this magnificent work in full view of the dictator in 1945. Brimming with optimism for an imminent conclusion to World War 2, and singing full-throatedly "of a mankind free and happy," it still seems to ask the profound question "but what comes after victory?"

## THE BLUE DANUBE

Open Rehearsal: Friday, January 23, 2026

TACO Classical: Saturday, January 24, 2026

### Three Slavonic Dances

**ANTONIN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)**

*Dances Number 1 and 2 are RI Philharmonic Orchestra premieres. Dance Number 8 was last performed November 11, 1972 with Francis Madeira conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings.*

Channeling the infectious energy and enthusiasm of a deeply musical culture in communal celebration, Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* provide an ideal vehicle for bringing experienced and aspiring musicians together for a side-by-side performance. These sparkling gems fairly overflow with rhythmic drive, pulsating percussion, and vibrant brass and woodwind melodies. They are also the catalyst that propelled a young and struggling Bohemian musician into the international spotlight.

Throughout his 20s and early 30s, Dvořák had submitted piece after piece to

the Austrian State Prize for composition, hoping to gain some success and recognition. His persistence finally paid off when panelist Johannes Brahms gave him the nod, and convinced his own publisher, Fritz Simrock, to take a chance on the young unknown from Prague.

Taking a page from the Brahms playbook, Dvořák leveraged the wild success of his mentor's *Hungarian Dances* and penned his own set of *Slavonic Dances*, opus 46, for two pianos. This turned out to be a brilliant move, as they flew off the retailers' shelves, and Simrock soon requested that the composer write arrangements of the dances for orchestra as well. Happy to oblige, Dvořák had these ready in short order, and they quickly became beloved and enduring hallmarks of the romantic repertoire.

Unlike Brahms' Hungarian ones, the *Slavonic Dances* do not incorporate actual folk melodies—all the tunes are of the composer's own invention, but the character is authentic enough to give the impression of good times on the village green. Dvořák emulates several different dance types from across the Slavic world. From the bold and brash *furiant* (opus 46, no. 1), to the more melancholy and reflective Ukrainian *dumka* (opus 72, no. 2) and back, Dvořák moves seamlessly between major and minor modes, with invigorating rhythms and catchy melodic figures. These pieces are lyrical and danceable all at once.

## **Poème, op.25**

**ERNEST CHAUSSON (1855-1899)**

*Last performed December 8, 1953 with Francis Madeira conducting and soloist Julian Olevsky. In addition to a solo violin, this piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, harp and strings.*

When Ernest Chausson died at the young age of 44, from injuries sustained in a bicycle accident, so ended the promise of the most distinctive voice in French music of his generation. His music forms a bridge between Cesar Franck's lush, Wagnerian Romanticism and the sensuous Impressionism of Claude Debussy. In fact, it was a performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* that inspired Chausson to leave a comfortable life as a lawyer and study composition at the Paris Conservatory. Despite his gentle, unassuming character, Chausson's creative and generous spirit was infectious, and his salon soon became a hub for the Parisian musical community.

Among his friends was the renowned violinist, Eugène Ysaÿe, who asked him to write a new concerto. Chausson was daunted, calling concerto writing "the devil's own task," but he did agree to write a free-form shorter work that would allow his friend to provide audiences with an unforgettable, indeed immersive, musical experience.

The result, simply titled *Poème*, is a work of seamless form and supple structure, with a deeply emotional core. It so impressed the composer Isaac Albéniz (another friend), that the latter paid for it to be published out of his own pocket. The music is inspired by the steamy tale of a love triangle with mystical overtones found in Ivan Turgenev's short story "Le Chant de l'amour triomphant." Specifically, *Poème* evokes a scene in which one of the suitors begins to play a violin (with a diamond-tipped bow) that he had procured from far India: "when Muzio began the final song, the very sound suddenly grew stronger and quivered resonantly and powerfully; a passionate melody poured out from beneath the broad sweeps of the bow, poured out in beautiful sinuous coils like that very snake whose skin covered the top of the violin; and the melody burned with such fire, was radiant with such triumphant joy, that both Fabio and Valeria were pierced to their very hearts and tears came into their eyes. Muzio, with his head bent forward, pressed over the violin, his

cheeks grown pale and his brows drawn together in one straight line, seemed even more concentrated and solemn—and the diamond on the end of the violin bow shed sparkling rays as it moved, as if it had also been ignited by the fire of the wondrous song...”

It's unsurprising, then, that tone and expression are probably the holy grail for violinists who approach this piece. Technical challenges, such as an onslaught of double-stops, perfecting the intonation in the instrument's highest register, and mastering quick shifts in vibrato speed, certainly abound. But they are just the beginning, a foundation from which to build the actual music. From its dark and intimate first notes to the freewheeling pyrotechnics of the last, *Poème*, at its best, is a sensually gripping experience, for player and listener alike.

### ***The Beautiful Blue Danube, op.314***

**JOHANN STRAUSS (1825-1899)**

*Last performed January 26, 2019 with Tania Miller conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.*

While Johann Strauss, the elder, may have played an instrumental role in building - and capitalizing upon - the insatiable appetite for waltzes in 19th century Austria, it was his son, Johann Strauss II, who provided us with most of the waltzes we still know and love today. With an unparalleled gift for melodic invention, harmonic grace, and rhythmic verve, Strauss II garnered the sincere praise of no less a figure than Brahms, who once wrote of *The Beautiful Blue Danube* that it was “unfortunately, not by Brahms.”

This unmistakable symbol of joy and celebration begins with shimmering strings and a foreshadowing horn call, followed by a pensive response in the winds, all invoking a sense of “sunrise on the river,” before the first melody emerges in its entirety. There are, in fact, a total of five separate melodies that make up *The Beautiful Blue Danube*. Some more romantic, some more joyous; some major, some minor; some featuring the harp, some featuring crashing cymbals. But as they gracefully move from one to the next, they unified by such a subtle and logical connection of stylistic elements that each change of tune goes by almost imperceptibly.

One of the most tantalizing features of any waltz performance is the *einschliefen*, or a slowing down of the tempo that makes the music appear to hover in space for a moment before continuing on. One might think that this effect could work only when an orchestra performs without dancers, but it was actually a natural and highly anticipated part of any Viennese ball, as if the revelers took this moment to catch their collective breaths.

### ***Symphony No.5 in B-flat major, op.100***

**SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)**

*Last performed September 20, 2014 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano and strings.*

From the time Sergei Prokofiev left Russia after the 1917 revolution to well into the 1930s, the highly prolific composer had created dozens of popular works for stage and for chamber and orchestral ensembles. His music had found acceptance far beyond

Russia's borders, and he was in great demand as a performer and conductor throughout Europe and the United States. Hoping to bolster its cultural standing in the world, the newly formed USSR encouraged Prokofiev to return to his homeland, promising greater opportunities for him and his fellow musicians. Cautiously optimistic, Prokofiev agreed, and while initially things seemed promising, the rise of Stalin meant that artists of all sorts were soon subjected to extreme oversight, sent away to work camps, executed, or simply disappeared. Prokofiev himself was never again allowed to leave Russia, and he tread with great care when considering what to compose and how to present it.

In a rare act of generosity, Stalin invited Prokofiev and his colleagues Glière, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Kabalevsky to spend the summer of 1944 at a retreat in Ivanovo, about 150 miles outside of Moscow, so they could compose in an environment free of city bombings and wartime shortages. It was there that Prokofiev penned the first draft of his fifth symphony. In language that sounds like an attempt to appease the censors, Prokofiev described it as "glorifying the human spirit. I wanted to sing of a mankind free and happy - his strength, his generosity, and the purity of his soul. I cannot say that I chose this theme. It was innate in me and had to be expressed." His PR strategy worked, and even enjoyed a serendipitous boost when, while conducting the work's 1945 premiere in Moscow Conservatory's Great Hall, the composer had to pause before his first downbeat, as he was interrupted by celebratory gunfire signaling the victorious advance of the Red Army across the Vistula River into German territory.

Rather than opening in a customarily fast tempo, Prokofiev's fifth symphony begins with a noble *Andante*. This allows Prokofiev to infuse the music with some of his most colorful writing, especially for the wind and brass sections. Listen for the elegant lyricism shared by flute and bassoon in the relatively calm first theme, and for tremolo strings that propel an elaborate development towards an electrifying coda. We also hear plenty of his trademark harmonic "side-slips" that frequently take the music - seemingly inevitably - into wildly unexpected places.

The second movement is a scherzo (the musical term for "joke") in all but name. Adding to his already rich orchestral color palette, Prokofiev calls upon percussion and trumpet to lead us on an exhilarating ride, while clarinets dazzle us with virtuosity. Folksy tunes with ever-shifting rhythm patterns, played mostly by oboe and clarinet, provide an exotic respite in the middle section, followed by a breathless *accelerando* that leads us back to the movement's opening material.

The dreamy *Adagio* movement forms the center of gravity for the entire symphony. A haunting ambiguity pervades this movement, wafting somewhere in between major and minor modalities. Above this uncertainty, one of Prokofiev's most beautiful melodies soars in the violins. Also of note is a refrain of special poignancy, always played by the oboe and bassoon, that eventually builds to a tortured climax before receding to a quiet end.

The finale begins in almost whimsical fashion, with a cello choir playing a slow introduction that recalls the first theme of the first movement. The violas then usher in a new mood, inviting the high-spirited clarinet to give us another dazzling display of virtuosity. Then, just as the movement is striving to end on a victorious note, the music degenerates into a frenzy, which is stripped down to a string quartet playing staccato "wrong notes" with rude interjections from low trumpets. Color and irony dance in unbridled splendor here, making for a wild and brilliant conclusion to what is arguably the greatest symphonic masterpiece of the mid-20th century.