

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW PARALLEL EVENTS

1836

Clara Schumann

Piano Concerto

**MUSIC**Giacomo Meyerbeer
Les Huguenots**ART**Thomas Cole
The Oxbow**LITERATURE**Charles Dickens
The Pickwick Papers**HISTORY**

The battle of the Alamo

1856

Wagner*Die Walküre***MUSIC**

The group of Russian composers known as "The Mighty Five" is formed.

**ART**Hiroshige
One Hundred Famous Views of Edo**LITERATURE**Gustave Flaubert
Madame Bovary**HISTORY**

The American Know Nothing Party nominates their first presidential candidate, former president Millard Fillmore.

1896

Dvořák*The Wood Dove***MUSIC**Ernest Chausson
Poème**ART**Camille Pissarro
Pont Boieldieu in Rouen, Rainy Weather**LITERATURE**H. G. Wells
The Island of Doctor Moreau**HISTORY**

X-rays are discovered

1920

Ravel*La valse***MUSIC**Ralph Vaughan Williams
The Lark Ascending**ART**Daniel Chester French
Abraham Lincoln Memorial
Statue in Washington, D.C.**LITERATURE**F. Scott Fitzgerald
The Island of Doctor Moreau**HISTORY**

The League of Nations holds its first meeting.

RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES!

The mid-19th century was a heady time. New nations were being formed, individual freedoms were being tested, societal norms were being challenged, and art was being redefined.

It was this crucible of change that gave rise to all four of the pieces on tonight's program.

In a largely misogynistic society, Clara Schumann was making it abundantly clear the summits of artistic achievement to which women could ascend (all while raising no less than seven healthy, well-adjusted children); a mid-career Wagner was laying out an entirely new conceptual basis for opera ("a consummate artwork of the future"), fusing all the dramatic arts—poetry, lighting, scenery, music, and acting—together as equal elements to create what he famously coined as *Gesamtkunstwerk*; Dvořák, meanwhile, helped articulate a distinct Czech cultural identity within the repressive Austro-Hungarian Empire by composing such culturally specific masterworks as *The Wood Dove*; and the revolutionary dance craze known as the waltz, with its close hold embraces and continuous, swirling motions, effectively shattered the rigid social order and formal etiquette of European ballroom culture.

The driving force behind all this change was a growing understanding of both the importance and the power of human passion. Such passion provided the raw material from which gloriously expressive music could be spun and through which artistic personalities could shine.

In 1937, paying homage to a recently deceased Maurice Ravel, French musicologist and critic Paul Landormy spoke of the "heretofore unexpected depths of Romanticism, power, vigor, and rapture" one encounters in *La Valse*. Such words are a perfect encapsulation of the entirety of what you will hear on tonight's entire program.



RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES!

Amica Rush Hour: Friday, November 20, 2026

TACO Classical: Saturday, November 21, 2026

Ride of the Valkyries, WWV 86b

RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)

Last performed February 20, 2016 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

After early successes in opera, Wagner turned in the mid-1840s to a bold new theory of the art form that would permanently reshape music history. While exiled in Switzerland for his outspoken democratic and socialist views, he wrote two major essays, *Art and Revolution* and *Opera and Drama*. In them, he developed the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art," which sought to fuse music,

drama, poetry, and staging into one continuous narrative rather than a sequence of separate arias and recitatives.

At the heart of this concept was a large orchestra, especially rich in winds, that spun a continuous musical texture. The orchestra became a central presence in the stage drama. It did more than accompany the singers like a Greek chorus; it also drove the action through commentary, interpretation, and foreshadowing.

The fullest expression of this style was Wagner's four-part cycle of "music dramas," collectively known as *The Ring of the Nibelung: Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, and Götterdämmerung*. Its vast, continuously unfolding story is extraordinarily intricate, yet it speaks directly to a wide range of recognizable human passions and traits. Because the orchestra's role is so vivid and unforgettable throughout, major orchestral excerpts from Wagner operas have long been popular in the concert hall.

The best known of these excerpts is probably the "Ride of the Valkyries," which opens Act III of *Die Walküre*, the second drama in the cycle. Its main theme, a leitmotif Wagner called "Walkürenritt," was first sketched in 1851, five years before the premiere. Recognizing its dramatic power, Wagner introduced it early in the work's development and kept it as a central element to the finished score.

In the drama, this music sounds as the curtain rises on a mountain peak, where four of Brünnhilde's eight Valkyrie sisters have gathered to carry fallen heroes to Valhalla. When the other four arrive, the orchestra presents the famous theme as the Valkyries greet one another and let loose their battle cries.

At first, Wagner considered independent performances of the "Ride" "an utter indiscretion" and forbade "any such thing." But its popularity spread quickly, and publishers, ignoring his wishes, issued it to a clamoring public as a stand-alone piece. After the complete *Ring* was performed in Bayreuth in 1876, Wagner relented; in 1877, he even conducted it in London as an encore.

Today, excerpts from Wagner's operas are a standard part of the orchestral repertoire, enabling many a listener who has never entered an opera house to become acquainted with the magical power of Wagner's orchestral writing.

Piano Concerto in A minor, op.7

CLARA SCHUMANN (1819-1896)

This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. In addition to a solo piano, this piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani and strings.

"I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose—there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?"

Clara Wieck Schumann must have written these words in a moment of discouragement, for she was unquestionably a gifted composer whose works were respected in her lifetime and remain highly regarded today. The challenge was not a lack of talent, but that she was celebrated above all as one of the

great pianists of the nineteenth century, a musician equal to any of her peers and a trailblazer who helped define the standards of performance, repertoire, and artistic integrity expected of virtuoso pianists. The story is not a unique one. Performers at the highest level of performance have often struggled to gain equal recognition as composers. Schumann also lived in the shadow of her husband, Robert, whose music she championed with devotion. Not only was she his artistic partner and collaborator, she also bore him eight children, raised the seven who survived, helped care for her grandchildren, managed the household, earned the family income, paid the bills, and toured across Europe to great acclaim.

Schumann completed, published, and premiered her Piano Concerto in 1836, when she was just sixteen (!). But that remarkable fact doesn't quite tell the whole story. She began the work three years earlier - composing the finale first, with considerable help from Robert, who also orchestrated it. She had initially conceived that movement as a stand-alone piece, but then expanded it into a concerto by adding the first and second movements, which she orchestrated herself. The concerto reveals the qualities one might expect from so young and accomplished a performer: brilliant and demanding piano writing, adventurous and colorful harmonies, a vivid imagination, and, above all, a daring and unconventional command of form.

The first movement opens with a bold statement of the main theme, followed by a flourish from the solo piano. Soon the pianist presents the full theme alone, without orchestral support. Florid passagework worthy of Liszt leads to a second theme, but there are questions. Is this sonata form? Some sort of theme & variations? The answer remains unsettled, for the structure is strikingly original and hard to define. The second theme then begins in the expected key, but quickly veers away, never to return. A development-like passage follows, with echoes of earlier themes and harmonic detours through A^b, F minor, and E major. Yet there is no true recapitulation. Instead, the mood softens, the tempo relaxes, and the movement fades into a slow ascending arpeggio that leads directly to the graceful Romanze in A^b—a distant key from the concerto's home key of A minor.

After a brief harmonic detour, the music returns to the home key with a sublime cello solo over piano figuration (those familiar with Brahms's Second Piano Concerto may detect a bit of foreshadowing here). The cello carries the movement to its close, and soft timpani lead into the energetic finale, heralded by the trumpets.

Compared with the more modest scale and mood of the first two movements, the finale is clearly the concerto's largest and most forceful movement, reversing the usual balance of a concerto. In most concertos, the first movement carries the greatest weight, while the last releases the tension with lighter, more sparkling energy. Not here. It is easy to understand why Clara first imagined this movement as an independent virtuoso *tour de force* for piano and orchestra. Many hear a Chopin-esque *Grand Polonaise* in its rhythm and drive. Yet, true to her flexible treatment of form in the first movement, she crafts the finale as a rondo unencumbered by rules. In the end, what matters most is the music's impact: this dynamic finale is exhilarating, entertaining, and compelling evidence of the extraordinary technical command of a remarkably young artist. By this point in her life, Clara Schumann was already an experienced and admired performer in the fiercely competitive world of piano virtuosi, and this imaginative closing movement is dazzling proof of it.

The Wood Dove, op.110, B.198

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

A musically gifted child of a Prague butcher, Antonín Dvořák soaked in the city's rich musical life, including performances by Clara Schumann. Such an environment proved to be fertile soil for the composer who would soon become internationally recognized as the architect of a distinctly Bohemian musical voice, one that successfully brought authentic folk elements into the concert hall. American cultural leaders in the late nineteenth century recognized this and invited him to the New World in hopes that he would inspire students and colleagues to cultivate a similarly distinctive American music.

Yet despite the undeniable admiration he won in the United States, Dvořák could not remain away from home for long.

Upon his return to a loving wife, children, native language, and familiar surroundings, he wrote four distinctive symphonic poems in a single year, all based on Czech fairy tales: *The Water Goblin*, *The Noon Witch*, *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, and *The Wood Dove*. These stories differ sharply from the fairy tales familiar to many modern American audiences; they are darker, stranger, and more unsettling, much like the work of Czech illustrator Adolf Born (if you don't know him, look him up).

In these tales, innocent children often fall prey to sinister figures such as witches and water goblins. *The Wood Dove* is no exception. It begins with a funeral march to the graveyard, where the grieving young widow is revealed to be her husband's poisoner. She killed him in order to marry the handsome young suitor who appears in the next section, which becomes a rollicking Bohemian wedding. But the cheer is short-lived. A wild dove—the spirit of her murdered husband— returns to accuse her, with haunting and persistent cooing.

Not everyone admired these artistic choices. The influential Austrian critic Eduard Hanslick, until then a champion of Dvořák's music, warned of the "dangers of this latest tendency":

It is with a strange passion that Dvořák now indulges in ugly, unnatural, and ghastly stories which correspond so little to his amiable character and to the true musician that he is.

Leoš Janáček, however, greatly admired the work. He conducted the premiere of *Wood Dove* and offered this analytical description: "The widow, a 'lovely rose,' is accompanying her [deceased] husband on his last journey—Violoncellos and double basses mark the solemn strides of the funeral procession by a characteristic [dotted] rhythm.... Arching above this rhythm, cast in two voices, is the plaintive melody in violins and flutes, whose beginning, variously altered, appears many times throughout the composition."

The central "wedding" section, reminiscent of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*, bursts into an exuberant dance driven by winds, brass, and even bagpipe-like drones in the cellos and basses. But sudden, dissonant tremolos signal that something is amiss. A wood dove's ominous cooing appears in the flutes, followed by threatening sounds in the bass clarinet, which, in Janáček's words, seems to sing: "Stop

cooing, stop calling, stop howling into my ear: Your cruel song is piercing my soul!" By this point, the wife is overwhelmed by remorse, and her self-destruction is imminent.

Janáček considered this "the truly dramatic part of the composition." We can almost see the widow hurl herself in despair into the cold, rushing water, with flashes of her white dress visible between the waves. In Janáček's words, "The unlucky woman tried to find herself a grave." The mournful funeral music returns, now joined by the dove's merciless call.

Janáček continues: "The hollow sounds of the flutes...are filled by the dark clarinet and...the trembling tone of the harp. Under the heavy [chorale] chords pressing against one another we can almost feel the heavy stone weighing down on the unfortunate woman's body. 'Yet no stone can ever be as heavy as the curse attached to her name!'"

As Janáček's comments suggest, the work's power is due, in large part, to Dvořák's masterful orchestration. Using a traditional orchestra with only subtle touches of harp, bells, and triangle, he creates sounds that are often truly breathtaking.

La Valse

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

Last performed November 20, 2010 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings.

The idea for *La Valse* dates to 1906, when Ravel first conceived of a work titled *Vienne*, later *Wien*—the French and German names for Vienna. He initially imagined it as a tribute to the waltzes of Johann Strauss II, and described the project as "a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which is mingled in my mind the idea of the fantastic whirl of destiny." Some of that vision surfaced in his 1911 *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, written amid the cautious optimism of the waning days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Neither Ravel nor his contemporaries could foresee the looming clouds of the First World War, though his image of a "fantastic whirl of destiny" now seems strikingly prophetic.

When war broke out, Ravel felt he could no longer write a piece named after an enemy capital, so he set *Wien* aside. Despite his age and a heart condition, he enlisted as a truck driver in the 13th Artillery Regiment, hauling munitions to the front. Heavy bombardment and the loss of friends and comrades took its toll. A bout of peritonitis led to intestinal surgery and then, during a painful period of recovery he learned of his mother's death—a blow that proved devastating.

Discharged from the army and deeply depressed, Ravel spent the next several years in and out of hospitals and resisted composing—joking, perhaps bitterly, that the piano in his apartment was out of tune.

So it was that, in 1919, Serge Diaghilev—the great impresario of the Ballets Russes and champion of choreographers and composers who would revolutionize both dance and music—asked Ravel for a new ballet. The commission gave him a needed push to start composing again, and he returned to his earlier idea. It was soon clear, however, that the piece had become something far more complex than the straightforward homage he had first envisioned.

When Ravel finally played the new score for Diaghilev, the impresario declined it—but not because he didn't like it. In fact, he called it a “masterpiece.” But he also insisted that “it is not a ballet,” rather a work *about* dance. Ravel accepted the distinction, went home, and subtitled *La Valse* a “choreographic poem.”

The work begins in near silence, as double basses rumble and cellos and harps gradually join them. Fragmentary figures emerge and gather into a muted theme in bassoons and violas. Then the harps help propel the music toward its first full flowering: led by the violins, the orchestra bursts into the principal waltz theme.

A series of six contrasting waltzes follows, each with its own character and dynamic profile, from mild and slightly shy variations for oboe, violins, and flutes, to the triumphant song of strings as they soar above crashing cymbals and blazing brass. Sometimes tender, sometimes restless, sometimes playful, sometimes yearning, each successive waltz draws you in like a book you can't put down. And that's only the first half.

The second half reintroduces the earlier waltzes in altered form. We hear them all again, but now they are reshaped with unexpected modulations and changed instrumentation (listen, for instance, for material once owned by the flutes now taken over by the trumpets). And then, again, the momentum breaks. An ominous sequence steadily builds with unsettling repetitions until the orchestra drives helter-skelter toward a *danse macabre* coda. The work ends with a forceful gesture that seems to shatter the waltz rhythm itself into countless shards on the floor.