# 1885

## Brahms

**Symphony No.4**

**MUSIC**
Dvořák
Symphony No.7

**ART**
Van Gogh
*The Potato Eaters*

**LITERATURE**
Twain
*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

**HISTORY**
The Reservation at Niagara Falls opens, enabling access to all for free.

# 1932

## Gershwin

***Cuban Overture***

**MUSIC**
Prokofiev
Piano Concerto No. 5

**ART**
Kahlo
*Self Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States*

**LITERATURE**
Huxley
*Brave New World*

**HISTORY**
The infant son of Anne and Charles Lindbergh is kidnapped from the family home in New Jersey.

# 2023

## Childs

***Diaspora:*** **Concerto for Saxophone**

**MUSIC**
Kevin Puts
Concerto for Orchestra

**ART**
Minujin
*Sculpture of Dreams*

**LITERATURE**
Lacey
*Biography of X*

**HISTORY**
An attack by Hamas on Israeli soil leads to a major escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

## RUTH REINHARDT INAUGURAL!

"This is a chosen one," Robert Schumann proclaimed in an article introducing the world to a young composer named Johannes Brahms. This simple and powerful statement reverberates throughout tonight's concert as well, referring not only to the emergence of one of history's greatest symphonists, but also to Ruth Reinhardt's ascendancy to the podium as Music Director of the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra, the American public's choice of Gershwin as the musical voice of a nation (over 15,000 people attended the premiere of his *Cuban Overture*, with another 5,000 turned away at the gate), and saxophone virtuoso Steven Banks's choice of Billy Childs as the composer for tonight's groundbreaking concerto. "I want to cement the saxophone's classical future with music written by composers at the center of today's classical music," Banks says. "Because Billy is so well known as a jazz figure, a lot of people from that world might come into the concert hall and have their eyes opened."

Gershwin himself, after successfully finding a way to fuse jazz and symphonic forms in his iconic *Rhapsody in Blue*, had his own eyes (and ears) opened during what he called "two hysterical weeks in Cuba, where no sleep was had." Gershwin was fascinated by the popular music he heard in Havana - particularly its use of exotic percussion instruments. A few months later, the world was introduced to a joyous evocation of the Rumba known as *Cuban Overture*.

The Childs' Concerto also shines a spotlight on the unique colors and capabilities of instruments not often seen in the orchestra (the alto and soprano saxophones), let alone in front of it. Beautiful, tightly focused timbres give way to mind-blowing melodic acrobatics in this symphonic poem which musically chronicles the paradigm of the forced Black American diaspora.

Closing out this momentous evening, Brahms's astounding skill for developing great things from simple ideas will take center stage. From its gently falling first two notes to moments of profound beauty - highlighting every instrument in the orchestra - in the last movement, Brahms's final symphony has the potential, especially under the baton of someone of Maestro Reinhardt's talent, to be perennially new.

## *Cuban Overture*

**GEORGE GERSHWIN** *(1898-1937)*

*Last performed October 20, 2018 with Bramwell Tovey conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.*

During his lifetime, George Gershwin was arguably the most successful and talented of America's composers of popular music. But he had cut his teeth as a young performer on the works of Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy, and looked to France as the beating heart of classical music in the 20th century. So it was that, in 1928, he journeyed to Paris to study with the famed teacher of composition, Nadia Boulanger, as well as with Maurice Ravel. But neither would take him. Both potential mentors recognized the power of Gershwin's unique voice and were afraid that their influence might taint it. And they were right. Less than 4 years later, Gershwin would achieve unparalleled successes with his *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*, and the Concerto in F. Gershwin had an uncanny ability to absorb the sounds and energy around him and distill them into music that immediately connected with audiences.

The 1930s also saw the rise of the rumba craze in America. Gershwin, ever eager to immerse himself in new musical experiences, was keen to go to the source. So, in February of 1932, he escaped a particularly brutal New York winter, and sailed with a handful of friends to Havana, Cuba (a popular, booze-friendly tourist destination during prohibition).

In almost every bar he visited in Havana, he heard strains of the hit song "Échale Salsita", so it's unsurprising that this catchy tune would find its way weaving in and out of a new piece Gershwin had decided to write, as well as brief echoes of another popular song called "La Paloma." Also included in the new work were some authentic Cuban percussion instruments he brought home as souvenirs: a bongo drum, claves, maracas, and a gourd shaker. These latter instruments were of such importance to the piece that he insisted in the score that the percussionists be placed in front of the orchestra, rather than their traditional position in the back.

Within a few months, the premiere of what was then called *Rumba* took place during an all-Gershwin program by the New York Philharmonic in Lewisohn stadium, to a sold-out audience of 18,000. Three months after that, the composer himself conducted its second performance at a benefit concert in the new Metropolitan Opera House, but now with the new title *Cuban Overture*. As toe-tapping as it is, there are elements of musical sophistication in the work that reflect Gershwin's desire to be seen as something more than merely popular. Odd-measured phrases, polytonal harmonies, canons and counterpoint, and ostinato-based climaxes all add a sense of the high-brow to this joyous romp.

## *Diaspora:* Concerto for Saxophone

**BILLY CHILDS** *(1957-)*

*This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. In addition to a solo saxophone, this piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, alto flute, oboe, English horn, two clarinets, bassoon, contrabassoon, three horns, two trumpets, trombone, bass trombone, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celesta and strings.*

Excerpts from Composer's note by Billy Childs:

*Diaspora* is a symphonic poem which strives to chronicle the paradigm of the forced Black American diaspora, as sifted through the prism of my own experience as a Black man in America. When Steven Banks approached me about the piece, we decided that, much in the same way that Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* illustrates three poems by Aloysius Bertrand in three separate movements, so would this concerto do with poems by Black poets. But then I started thinking of the elegantly succinct and fluent structure of Barber's Symphony No. 1, where in one multi-sectioned suite, he brilliantly ties together a handful of thematic materials into a seamless and organic whole. So I used the poems Steven and I settled on (*Africa's Lament* by Nayyirah Waheed, *If We Must Die* by Claude McKay and *And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou) as guideposts for a three-part storyline.

**Movement I: MOTHERLAND**

The program of the composition starts out on a positive note. The first theme played, by the soprano saxophone, and later joined by an uplifting scherzo accompaniment from the orchestra, is meant to evoke a sense of well-being and security. But it's not a utopia I'm trying to illustrate here; rather, a sense of purity. After a 16th-note pattern in the strings that signals trouble on the horizon, the soprano saxophone takes on a more urgent tone, playing short bursts of melodic fragments. Then a battle ensues, a battle between the slave traders and the future slaves, as signaled by the triplet figures in the soprano sax accompanied by triplet patterns in the orchestra, and climaxing in an orchestral tutti section bolstered by a brass fanfare. After a dissonant orchestral hit, the soprano sax utters a melancholy theme as the slaves are being led to the slave ship. This takes us to the first saxophone cadenza which, to my mind, represents a moment of painful reflection about being captured like a wild animal and led to a ship, the destination of which is to a future hell.

**Movement II: IF WE MUST DIE**

Part two of the journey begins with the first vision of the slave ship. This is illustrated by a loud tutti blast in the orchestra, following a slow six-measure buildup. The alto saxophone is now the voice of the piece, introducing a rapid 12-tone theme which turns out to be a constant phrase weaving in and out of the entire piece at various moments. Sweeping rapid scales in the lower strings, woodwinds and harp describe the back-and-forth movement of the waves. This section develops and reaches a high point with a jarring saxophone multiphonic pair of notes followed by a forearm piano cluster; we now see America for the first time, from the point of view of the slaves. Confusion, rage and terror are followed by resistance, anger, and rebellion, after which the alto saxophone plays a short and tender cadenza which signifies the resilience of Black Americans and the introduction of the idea of self love, self worth and self determination.

**Movement III: AND STILL I RISE**

This final section is about Black empowerment. The church has always been a cultural focal point in the Black community, a sanctuary providing psychological and emotional relief from the particular hardships of Black life in America. So, this final chapter of the piece starts out with a hymn-like passage, a plaintive reading orchestrated for just alto saxophone and piano, as though the solo saxophonist were a singer accompanied by a piano during a Sunday church service. Soon the melodic theme in the alto sax is treated with a lush accompaniment, as a healing self-awareness and love becomes more palpable. This is followed by a march-like ostinato which symbolizes steely determination. As the alto sax plays rapidly above the orchestral momentum, we finally reach the victorious fanfare at the conclusion of the piece. Maya Angelou's shining poem reminds us (and America) that Black people cannot and will not be held to a position of second-class citizenship—we will still rise.

## Symphony No.4 in E minor, op.98

**JOHANNES BRAHMS** *(1833-1897)*

*Last performed September 18, 2021 with Bramwell Tovey conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings.*

The essence of symphonic music, in the words of Leonard Bernstein (and many others), is development. And although that term can technically refer to a specific section of the classical sonata form, its broader meaning is far more important. In the work of Brahms, it is everything.

It is easy to understand how a composer might start with a compelling melody and then build upon it - adding new variations, complexities, colors and textures - until we appreciate the original in a whole new light. But when Brahms creates one of the 19th century's greatest masterpieces out of nothing more than a pair of falling notes, the result is breathtaking.

The opening 2-note theme, played by the violins, is, in fact, a bit breathless itself - a sigh, if you will. Every time it appears, it seems to change direction, compounding its inherent sense of unease. But there is also something passionate about it, a passion which is enhanced by surging waves of arpeggios in the low strings. Eventually, the woodwinds offer a new idea that transitions us to a rhythmic tango presented by the cellos and horns. From there, the themes continuously unfold into an emotional build-up that seems unstoppable, until finally erupting with both power and resolve.

Unison horns, solemn and powerful, usher in the second movement with a reverberant sound that evokes ancient cathedrals and grand processions, largely due to its use of a scale similar to the Medieval Phrygian mode, which Brahms thought expressed "profound need and remorse." Not to be outdone, the clarinets take up their own version of the theme, accompanied by pizzicato strings, until a warm and flowing second theme seems to conjure memories of a bittersweet past.

A vigorous scherzo follows, full of movement and fury, featuring one of the rare instances in the repertoire where the triangle plays a significant role. A contemporary of Brahms's aptly noted its "hastening, restless rhythms," and its "suddenly pulsing energy." Set in the brightest of keys - C major - and allowing

ample time for the wind players to revel in their highest registers, this movement can be a jolt to the senses in the immediate aftermath of the preceding movement.

As in the second movement, Brahms draws upon an important element from music history – this time the chaconne - to give shape to his ingenious Finale. Simply put, a chaconne takes a bass line (or sequence of harmonies) and repeats it multiple times, each with a new variation crafted above, around, or under it. With reverence, Brahms used the bass line from Bach's Partita in D minor for solo violin as the foundation for his own chaconne. And while the tempo marking - Allegro energico e passionate – may suggest something joyous and flamboyant, this is music that reflects deep emotional struggle.

At the outset, the main theme is loudly proclaimed by the brass. From there, Brahms's vast imagination is on full display as he reshapes and recontextualizes the theme in a dizzying myriad way. There are moments of light and dark, spirited dances, and solemn chorales. It's a virtuoso demonstration of why Brahms stands in the highest ranks of composers—beauty, profundity, and technique wedded together seamlessly.