ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIFTH SEASON
Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Riccardo Muti Zell Music Director
Yo-Yo Ma Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

Thursday, June 16, 2016, at 8:00
Friday, June 17, 2016, at 1:30
Saturday, June 18, 2016, at 8:00
Tuesday, June 21, 2016, at 7:30

Riccardo Muti Conductor
Julia Fischer Violin

Beethoven
Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61
Allegro, ma non troppo
Larghetto—
Rondo: Allegro

JULIA FISCHER

INTERMISSION

Brahms
Serenade No. 1 in D Major, Op. 11
Allegro molto
Scherzo: Allegro non troppo
Adagio non troppo
Minuets 1 and 2
Scherzo: Allegro
Rondo: Allegro

These performances are generously sponsored by the Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Family Fund for the Canon.

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CSO Tuesday series concerts are sponsored by United Airlines.

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Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61

Ideas for the Violin Concerto and the celebrated Fifth Symphony appear side by side in sketchbooks dating from 1806, reminding us that Beethoven often worked on a number of important pieces simultaneously, and that the lyrical and heroic sides of his musical nature were never completely separate. By 1806, the powerful C minor symphony had already been in the works for two years, but it wouldn’t reach its final form until early 1808. The serene and noble Violin Concerto, on the other hand, was written quickly in 1806 and finished just in time for its premiere that December.

The concerto was written for Franz Clement, a gifted young violinist who was exploited at an early age by an enterprising father. Like Beethoven, he played in public for the first time when he was seven years old. But where the young Beethoven’s early years were spent in Bonn, Clement was dragged through Europe’s music centers by his father, who behaved as if he had a young Mozart in his care. In 1789, eight-year-old Franz started an album that in five years would encompass 415 pages of autographs and congratulatory messages gathered from leading figures in Germany, England, Holland, Belgium, and wherever else his father took him. In 1791, when Haydn was in Oxford to receive his honorary doctorate, “little Clement” played at a concert in his honor, and Haydn dutifully signed his name in the boy’s book. On a page dated 1794, Vienna, we find the autograph of Ludwig van Beethoven.

It was a number of years before Beethoven and Clement met again, but after the violinist was appointed conductor and concertmaster of Vienna’s Theater an der Wien in 1802, their paths often crossed. Clement was the concertmaster for the premiere of the Eroica Symphony in April 1805, and it was just a matter of months before Beethoven began his only violin concerto to fulfill a request from Clement. (Beethoven had started a violin concerto in the early 1790s, when he was living in Bonn, but stopped work halfway through the first movement.)

Apparently the concerto was written in some haste, and, if popular legends can be trusted, was barely finished in time for the premiere on December 23, 1806, when it was performed without sufficient rehearsal. That same legend insists that Clement played the work at sight that night, and—as if credibility weren’t already strained—that he interpolated a piece of his own between the first and second movements, playing with his violin held upside down. Like a number of works that have overcome unsuccessful

COMPOSED
1806

FIRST PERFORMANCE
December 23, 1806; Vienna, Austria

FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES
May 4 & 5, 1894, Auditorium Theatre.
Max Bendix as soloist, Theodore Thomas conducting

July 24, 1941, Ravinia Festival.
Yehudi Menuhin as soloist, Carlos Chávez conducting

MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES
October 2, 2010, Orchestra Hall.
Anne-Sophie Mutter as soloist and conductor

August 4, 2011, Ravinia Festival.
Itzhak Perlman as soloist, James Conlon conducting

APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME
46 minutes

CSO RECORDING
1977. Pinchas Zukerman as soloist, Daniel Barenboim conducting. Deutsche Grammophon

INSTRUMENTATION
solo violin, one flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings
premieres to find a large and enthusiastic public, Beethoven's Violin Concerto took some time to earn a place in the repertory. It doesn’t quickly or easily reveal its special beauty, and a number of early performances were coolly received. Not until the historic London performance of 1844, with the thirteen-year-old Joseph Joachim as soloist and Felix Mendelssohn conducting, did this concerto finally win approval.

In the meantime, at the suggestion of pianist-turned-publisher Muzio Clementi, Beethoven arranged the concerto for piano and orchestra to secure a wider audience. The transcription cost him little effort—essentially finding something for the left hand to do while the right hand added minimal ornamentation to the original violin part—but it also found little success in this form, sounding makeshift and proving that what’s sublime on the violin may well seem commonplace on the keyboard.

That this concerto was written especially for Clement is apparent not only from the dedication (with its pun on clemency towards the poor composer), but from its graceful, delicate, and tender tone—all words used to describe Clement’s elegant playing. Perhaps inspired by his soloist’s musical nature, Beethoven finds an inner repose and an expansive, noble tone that’s a remarkable contrast to the grand statements of the Eroica and Fifth symphonies, until one remembers that these same years also produced the calm and gracious Fourth Symphony and the gentle G major piano concerto.

As the critic Donald Tovey pointed out long ago, almost all of Beethoven’s flashes of genius in this concerto are mysteriously quiet. The opening is a case in point: four soft strokes of the timpani, answered by gentle chords in the winds. It may well have seemed like madness to start a piece with unaccompanied drumbeats in 1806 (there’s no precedent for such a thing), but the soft dynamic, measured tempo, and calm wind music preclude our hearing it as the least bit revolutionary. Even in 1806 it drew no particular criticism. What’s considerably more disruptive (and also marked piano) is the entrance of the first violins only eight bars later, imitating the drumbeats on D-sharp, probably the last note one would think of placing so prominently at this point in a D major concerto. Tovey further emphasizes that this surprising D-sharp was written as E-flat in the first sketches, suggesting Beethoven’s own ambivalence about its function, and, since it’s not harmonized (and thus explained) till later in the movement, it nags at us for some time.

The most important moment in any concerto is the entrance of the soloist, which is handled differently and with great imagination in each of Beethoven’s mature concertos. The novelty of the Fourth Piano Concerto, written the same year as this one for violin, is the unprecedented appearance of the unaccompanied soloist in the very first measure. Here Beethoven takes the opposite approach, delaying the soloist’s first notes as long as possible, and, even then, making the violin climb up, almost unnoticed, above the full orchestra before it begins to attract attention.

From here, the solo violin plays tirelessly virtuosic music until the very last measures of the movement (even joining in after the cadenza), often singing at the very top of its range. There are many subtle touches here, like the absence of the drumbeat when the violin plays the second theme, even though it had seemed an integral part of that music when the orchestra played it the first time.

The Larghetto is, almost uniquely in Beethoven’s output, music without action, conceived as a set of variations on a theme that goes nowhere, has no inherent contrast of material, and doesn’t imply any change of key. The result is a romance, as Beethoven called it, of breathtaking stillness and restricted dynamic range, which rises once in the middle and again in the very last bars over a multitude of p and pp markings. There’s fresh detail and invention at every turn, and, surprisingly, a growing sense of energy. The violin even slips in an entirely new theme after the third variation and then goes on to the fourth as if nothing has happened. Beethoven stays steadfastly in G major until the very end, when the simple move to the dominant to introduce the finale sounds altogether extraordinary. Since this kind of contemplative music doesn’t end easily, the violin takes the situation in hand and moves directly into the pastoral theme of the rondo-finale.

This simple, genial tune is so distinctive that Beethoven sees no reason to alter even one note whenever it comes back (thus saving himself the
Today, Brahms’s two genial serenades are often thought of as mere studies for his celebrated symphonies—as a way of warming up for the serious business of following in Beethoven’s footsteps and tackling the greatest of classical forms. (“After Haydn,” Brahms once said, “writing a symphony was no longer a joke but a matter of life and death.”) The serenades clearly are the work of a young man who was gaining experience writing for an orchestra and learning about large-scale form. And they are the obvious link between the earliest stage of Brahms’s career, when the slim and beardless composer wrote little but piano music, and the full maturity of the commanding, grandfatherly figure whose symphonies and concertos were the talk of Vienna. But Brahms’s serenades are also his response to the great tradition of Mozart’s serenades and divertimentos, and like Beethoven’s septet and Schubert’s octet, they are small-boned masterpieces in their own right.

Robert Schumann was the first musician to predict the extent of Brahms’s transformation, hearing “veiled symphonies” in the young man’s piano works, and he wouldn’t have been the least bit surprised to see Brahms stepping out and trying his hand at writing for larger ensembles. “Should he direct his magic wand where the powers of the masses in chorus and orchestra may lend him their forces,” Schumann wrote in 1853, just four years before Brahms began this serenade, “we can look forward to even more wondrous glimpses of the secret world of spirits.” After Brahms took a job in Detmold in 1857, where he had the opportunity to work firsthand with an orchestra, he started writing orchestral music.

But Brahms was cautious: the First Serenade performed this week originally was sketched as a piece for nine players and then arranged for orchestra. The Second Serenade is technically the first piece Brahms wrote with the sound of an orchestra in mind (he was also working on trouble of writing it out each time—a useful shortcut when writing on deadline). The finale’s progress is straightforward, with few surprises, except perhaps for two pizzicato notes from the soloist, the only ones in the whole concerto. As in the first movement, Beethoven makes something captivating of the soloist’s trilling at the end of the cadenza, here dropping down into A-flat—the key most removed from D major—and then swinging back in a flash for the final bars.
his First Piano Concerto at the time, although that piece started out as a big sonata for two pianos). The two serenades not only marked a turning point in his career—and in his growing self-confidence, as well—but they are both works of real originality—the earliest compositions to reveal the promise that Schumann had seen. (Unfortunately, Schumann died in 1856 without hearing any of Brahms's greatest works.)

The D major serenade began life as chamber music, which may account for its conversational manner, leisurely pace, and unbuttoned humor. In the summer of 1858, when Brahms first shared the new piece with his friends, it was a four-movement work for flute, clarinet, horn, bassoon, and strings. Brahms was apparently eager to expand it: in October, the great violinist-composer-conductor Joseph Joachim wrote to him, “Without hearing it I shouldn’t like to help in deciding whether you really should set the serenade for orchestra, or perhaps only add another horn and oboe.” And then Joachim wrote a sentence that was sure to hit Brahms like a thunderbolt: “In any case, the piece has ‘symphony’ written all over it.”

Brahms and violinist Joseph Joachim

It would be another eighteen years before Brahms would premiere his First Symphony, but the transformation of this D major score from a modest work of chamber music into a symphonic serenade is one of the first steps in that famous, if protracted, development. First Brahms added two movements, both scherzos, and it is that version, performed by a small orchestra, that Joachim premiered in Hamburg in March 1859. “Yesterday the serenade was played to nearly twelve hundred people, and you were not among them,” Brahms wrote to Robert Schumann’s widow Clara, who had become his closest confidante and who was unable to make the trip to Hamburg. “It really seemed to reach the audience. The applause continued until I reached the platform.” (From his pointed comment about Clara’s absence at the premiere, it is clear that she had already become the critic he trusted most; with his Second Serenade, which he finished around the same time, he took no chances and sent her the score ahead of time to get the feedback he wanted.)

Brahms apparently was still dissatisfied with his First Serenade, even in its new guise, and in December 1859 he wrote to Joachim asking him to send a supply of large manuscript pages: “I need the paper in order finally to turn the First Serenade into a symphony. The work is a kind of mongrel, I see, nothing is right.” But Brahms sidestepped the issue again, this time heading his newly orchestrated score a “symphony-serenade,” acknowledging upfront that it was, in a sense, neither. It was Joachim who set the record straight: “Here come the score and parts to the D major Serenade, if I may,” he wrote to Brahms early in 1860, when he was preparing to rehearse the new version, for full orchestra with trumpets and drums.

Today, when the four symphonies Brahms ultimately composed are considered cornerstones of the orchestral repertory, this genial D major serenade does not quite fit our idea of a Brahms symphony either. The overall design is not an extension of Beethoven’s symphonic ideal, but a throwback to the loose, multi-movement layout of Mozart’s serenades.

Brahms opens with a pastoral scene, launched by a lilting hunting-horn theme over a bagpipe-like drone. This is his homage to the finale of the last symphony by Haydn, one of his favorite composers. That in itself is a sign of Brahms’s point of view; this is music of reflection, not revolution. Aside from the four horns, Brahms even writes for a Haydn orchestra, or at least something very close to the one that Haydn had at his disposal in his last
years more than half a century earlier, rather than the more opulently colored orchestra that Liszt was using at the time. In 1859, Brahms had told Joachim that “his fingers often itched to start a fight, to write something anti-Liszt.” Perhaps then, this is Brahms’s quiet revolution, after all. In any case, the entire movement is delightful and overflowing with melodic ideas; the extensive development section hints at the mature mastery of the four symphonies to come.

Brahms continues with a scherzo, the first of two in his six-movement plan. This one is the darker and more mysterious of the two, with a nicely sunlit trio to offer momentary relief. The Adagio is particularly gracious and warm-hearted. It unfolds at a leisurely pace (although non troppo—not too, as Brahms dictates), with a wealth of melodic interest and accompanying detail, and it suggests that grandly expansive slow movements will often stand at the emotional center of Brahms’s later works.

Next Brahms writes a pair of minuets, an open reminder of an earlier musical era. (Beethoven switched to using the term scherzo with his Second Symphony, which was premiered in 1803.) They are followed by the second scherzo, this one fast, short, energetic—and even a bit Beethovenian. The delightful finale is as untroubled as anything Brahms would ever write.

Phillip Huscher has been the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1987.