Please note that Osmo Vänskä replaces Bernard Haitink, who has been forced to cancel his appearance at these concerts.

**PROGRAM**

**ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SECOND SEASON**

**Chicago Symphony Orchestra**

**Riccardo Muti** Music Director

**Pierre Boulez** Helen Regenstein Conductor Emeritus

**Yo-Yo Ma** Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

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Thursday, October 18, 2012, at 8:00
Friday, October 19, 2012, at 8:00
Saturday, October 20, 2012, at 8:00

**Osmo Vänskä** Conductor

**Renaud Capuçon** Violin

**Gautier Capuçon** Cello

**Music by Johannes Brahms**

Concerto for Violin and Cello in A Minor, Op. 102 *(Double)*

- Allegro
- Andante
- Vivace non troppo

  
  **RENAUD CAPUÇON**

  **GAUTIER CAPUÇON**

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**INTERMISSION**

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68

- Un poco sostenuto— Allegro
- Andante sostenuto
- Un poco allegretto e grazioso
- Adagio— Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

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This program is partially supported by grants from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts.
For Brahms, the year 1887 launched a period of tying up loose ends, finishing business, and clearing his desk. He began by asking Clara Schumann, with whom he had long shared his most intimate thoughts, to return all the letters he had written to her over the years. Clara, clearly stunned, at first hoped to extract “everything relating to his artistic or private life.” “But he would not hear of it,” she wrote in her diary on October 16. “And so today I handed them over to him with tears.” Two days later, Brahms conducted the premiere of his final orchestral composition, this concerto for violin and cello—or the Double Concerto, as it would soon be known. Brahms privately decided to quit composing for good, and in 1890 he wrote to his publisher Fritz Simrock that he had thrown “a lot of torn-up manuscript paper” into the Traun River, and that he had abandoned his fifth symphony. (But Brahms was not yet done writing music: inspired by the playing of clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, he wrote a clarinet trio and quintet in 1891 and two clarinet sonatas in 1894; Clara’s death
in 1896 prompted his last work, the *Four Serious Songs*.

The *Double* Concerto, written for the great violinist Joseph Joachim and Robert Hausmann, the cellist in the Joachim Quartet, was less a work of farewell than of reconciliation. In 1887, Brahms and Joachim were no longer speaking. They had been best friends almost from the day they met in May 1853 (Brahms was twenty, Joachim twenty-two). It was Joachim who had introduced the shy young composer to the Schumanns, leading Robert to write an influential newspaper column proclaiming Brahms a “young eagle,” and arousing in Clara feelings of an intensity and emotional complexity that she would never completely shake. Brahms and Joachim were close for many years; they talked often, about everything that mattered to them, from affairs of the heart to business (Joachim offered indispensable advice on technical matters throughout the composition of Brahms’s *Violin Concerto*). Then, in 1880, Joachim, who had always been a helplessly jealous man, began to suspect that his wife, the contralto Amalie Spies, was having an affair with Fritz Simrock, Brahms’s publisher. Brahms wrote a long letter insisting on Amalie’s innocence—a clumsy attempt to patch up the Joachims’ faltering marriage that only precipitated their divorce and put an end to the friendship between the two men. For years, Brahms wrote to Joachim and sent him scores, but, although he continued to play Brahms’s music, Joachim no longer wanted his companionship.

During the summer of 1887, after Brahms settled in a rented villa overlooking Lake Thun in Switzerland, he seized upon a novel plan. In August, Brahms wrote Joachim one last letter, saying that he had been unable to resist composing a new concerto for him and Hausmann, and that if Joachim wasn’t interested, he should simply write “I decline” on a postcard. “If not,” Brahms continued, “my questions begin. Would you like to see a sample? I am now copying the solo parts. Do you feel like getting together with Hausmann to check them for playability? Could you think about trying the piece with Hausmann and with me at the piano, and eventually with the three of us with orchestra in some town or other? I won’t say out loud and specifically what I quietly hope and wish . . . .” This was the peace offering that Joachim ultimately could not refuse, and, like many a listener since, he melted as soon as he heard the music.

With Hausmann, Joachim met Brahms at Clara’s house in Baden-Baden in late September; it was the first time the two men had spoken in seven years. They played through the work around
Clara’s piano, and then with the local orchestra. Although the music making went splendidly and the conversation showed no signs of strain (Brahms and Joachim immediately reverted to the intimate “du”), the old closeness was gone, and their friendship seemed now, for certain, to be over for good.

Together, the three men began to prepare for the premiere, which the composer conducted in Cologne the following month. The reception was surprisingly tepid, and even Brahms’s old friend Theodore Billroth later told the critic Eduard Hanslick that he found the concerto’s closely wrought style tedious and wearisome, “a really senile production,” as he tastelessly put it. As with Beethoven, whose final, visionary works were dismissed because of his deafness, the novelties of Brahms’s old age convinced even his best friends that he was simply washed up. At the American premiere in New York in 1889, conducted by Theodore Thomas (with Victor Herbert, in his pre-operetta days, as the cellist), the score was dismissed as “not the most catchy thing imaginable.” It was years before the Double Concerto was accepted as the equal of Brahms’s other concertos—it was the last of the four to appear on Chicago Symphony programs—and it is still the least-often played.

The idea of writing a concerto for more than one soloist was unfamiliar in the late nineteenth century, and even Brahms, who knew music history better than any composer of the day, probably could not think of any distinguished models other than the double violin concerto by Bach; Mozart’s Sinfonia concertante for violin and viola; and Beethoven’s Triple Concerto for violin, cello, and piano. Brahms’s pairing of violin and cello was particularly unexpected. “Surely this wonderful combination has never been tried before,” Clara wrote at the time, and it is truly without precedent. Brahms himself described the score simply as a “strange flight of fancy,” although it is the logical culmination of his longtime interest in the baroque concerto grosso form, with its team of soloists. (Brahms, incidentally, was a great champion of Handel’s music, and in 1874 he conducted a performance of Solomon in Vienna.)

Brahms had written his two piano concertos for himself to play,
and he had composed his violin concerto in consultation with Joachim. Now, however, he was on his own, and he was clearly uncomfortable. “I ought to have handed on the idea to someone who knows the violin better than I do (Joachim has unfortunately given up composing),” he wrote to Clara at one point. “It is a very different matter writing for instruments whose nature and sound one only has a chance acquaintance with, or only hears in one’s mind, from writing for an instrument that one knows as thoroughly as I know the piano.” (Clara reminded him, apparently without providing consolation, that he had written four symphonies.)

Music for solo cello with orchestra, in particular, was unusual in Brahms’s day (Robert Schumann’s Cello Concerto of 1850 was not yet known). Brahms’s famous comment on first seeing the score to Dvořák’s Cello Concerto shortly before he died—“Why on earth didn’t I know one could write a cello concerto like this? If I’d only known, I’d have written one long ago!”—confirms its novelty.

Throughout Brahms’s concerto, the cello takes the lead—perhaps its role was to mediate between composer and violinist. Brahms begins with two cadenzas (each introduced by the orchestra), and while the first one, for cello, is long and expansive, the second, for violin, quickly turns into a duet with the cello. Despite its monumentality, the whole first movement is an extended dialogue—by turns intimate, heated, consoling, and ultimately conciliatory—for two instruments so alike in design yet so very different in character. The solo music throughout is extraordinarily difficult, yet there is very little obvious virtuoso spectacle. (Brahms saves for a few, telling moments the simple but stunning effect of having the violin and cello play in octaves.) The orchestral writing, for all its power, is uncommonly clear and economical. The entire movement is a masterful union of symphonic energy and inward lyricism.

In the slow movement, a horn call cues a generous, deep-voiced melody played by the soloists, again in octaves. Brahms’s command of color is so subtle and his orchestration so inventive that each repetition of the tune brings a sense of variation. An elaborate and demanding (though unshowy) double cadenza leads to one last exploration of the theme. The finale, surprisingly for such a grand and powerful work, is both playful and humorous, intended as it was for the man with whom Brahms once regularly shared jokes and laughter. Just before the end, a tender and almost wistful mood sweeps through the music. But Brahms had written this concerto in order to bring Joachim into his life again, and in the final page, so resolute and joyous, he never looks back.
Beethoven died six years before Brahms was born, but his presence was felt by almost every composer who came after him. Even Brahms, a master of piano music and songs from an early age, put off writing symphonies and string quartets—two Beethoven forms par excellence—offering only the pathetic, but honest excuse: “You can’t have any idea what it’s like always to hear such a giant marching behind you.” Eventually Brahms turned and faced the giant, but it took him nearly twenty years to do so, and only the magnificence of his own First Symphony gave him the courage to leave the ghost of Beethoven behind him for good.

Few great works of music have taken so long to get from sketch to finished product. Obviously, Brahms had his reasons for sitting on his first symphony, but eventually his friends and colleagues began to wonder if he, like Schubert before him, might leave an unfinished symphony in the attic. (In fact, in 1870, Brahms said he would never complete the piece.) His publisher, Fritz Simrock, finally wrote: “Aren’t you doing anything more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in ’73 either?” But there was no symphony in 1873, just as there had been no symphony any year since 1854, when Brahms first set out to write one.

That earliest effort, in the key of D minor (the key of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, incidentally) neatly sidestepped the issue to become Brahms’s first piano symphony.

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**Johannes Brahms**

**Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68**

**COMPOSED**
1850s–1876

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**
November 4, 1876; Karlsruhe, Germany

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCE**
February 9, 1894, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCE**
April 28, 2009, Orchestra Hall. Bernard Haitink conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**
two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**
45 minutes

**CSO RECORDINGS**
1952. Rafael Kubelík conducting. Mercury
1975. James Levine conducting. RCA
1989. Günter Wand conducting. RCA
1993. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Erato
concerto, even though the idea of “symphony” is written all over it. Brahms also avoided the challenge with the two serenades that gave him needed and valuable experience writing for the orchestra without directly taking on Beethoven. There was further testing of the waters in the substantial orchestral accompaniment to A German Requiem and other important choral works. And finally, a dress rehearsal of sorts—the grand Variations on a Theme of Haydn from 1873—though this too, for all its mastery of instrumentation and intellectual rigor, was not a symphony.

But Brahms did have a symphony in the works. As early as 1862, he sent a completed first movement to Clara Schumann. “Imagine my surprise!” she wrote to Joseph Joachim, who would one day play the violin concerto Brahms wrote for him in a single summer. Clara’s surprise eventually turned to dismay when Brahms continued to drag things out, sending her the horn call from the finale as a birthday card some six years later, and finally sitting her down to listen as he played the whole symphony at the piano another eight years after that. Although Brahms certainly took his time, he proved to an impatient musical public that there was still music being written that was worth the wait. Unlike his contemporary Anton Bruckner, who made a career out of having second thoughts, Brahms was the best judge of his own work. When a piece didn’t please him, he put it aside or reworked it, or—in the case of his Fifth Symphony—he destroyed it. But he wouldn’t release it.

When Brahms sent his completed first movement to Clara Schumann in 1862, it didn’t begin with the fierce and arresting introduction we know, but took off like a rocket from the headlong Allegro. Clara confessed to Joachim that the beginning seemed bold and “rather harsh, but I have become used to it.” Brahms, however, evidently didn’t, because when he played the entire symphony for Clara more than a dozen years later, it began with the powerful, measured drum beat and chromatic unfolding that now lead straight into the Allegro. Even though it was written after the fact—or, perhaps because of that—Brahms’s introduction serves as a preview of what follows: the opening violin line rising by half steps, for example, and the falling thirds in the winds will both be whipped into meaningful shape elsewhere.

The Allegro is conceived on the largest scale. The final turn into the recapitulation, in particular, is stretched to incredible lengths—and then, with the destination clearly in sight, resolution is further delayed by a daring descent into a remote key. For a moment it appears that Brahms has thrown caution to the wind, but this sudden whim, too, is part of his plan, all calculated with the skill of a master craftsman.

From the beginning, Hermann Levi—a perceptive German conductor—thought the two inner movements more suited to a serenade or a suite. But brevity and
conciseness aren’t at odds with the symphonic scale—although the grandeur of Brahms’s first movement might lead one to expect something equally imposing to follow. Instead, Brahms’s slow movement, in the surprising key of E major, is intimate and modest, with lovely woodwind solos and a magnificent one for violin at the end. The third movement is no scherzo, but an intermezzo, as warm and ingratiating as Brahms’s piano pieces which actually bear the name.

With the finale we come again to Beethoven, partly because any symphony that begins in C minor and then forges triumphantly into C major at the end must face comparison with Beethoven’s Fifth, and partly because Brahms’s big allegro melody suggests nothing more than the great song of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.” When the likeness was pointed out, Brahms simply said, “Any ass can see that.” More to the point, Donald Tovey noted that Brahms’s theme is regularly compared with Beethoven’s “only because it is the solitary one among hundreds of the same type that is great enough to suggest the resemblance.” There are other echoes of Beethoven, too. Certainly the finale’s extensive introduction, clouded with mystery and flaring up with occasional turbulence, takes a cue from Beethoven’s Ninth. But then so do countless works written in the nineteenth century that don’t profit from the comparison. There’s also much that is pure Brahms, like the unforgettable horn call that parts the clouds and admits the bright sunlight of the C major allegro theme, or the brilliant and hair-raising coda, which nearly beats Beethoven at his own game. The ending, in fact, is as exalted and triumphant as any in music, and it’s clear that the triumph is Brahms’s alone.

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Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.