Prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*
Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

**Orchestration:** piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings

Wagner’s original conceptions for this, his only mature comic opera, stem from personal experiences in his private life as well as from his desire in 1845 to write a lighter counterpiece for the recently-completed *Tannhauser*. His plan would produce two operas based on figures from German history—the courtly medieval Minnesingers and the fifteenth and sixteenth-century bourgeois guild of Mastersingers. In both operas, music itself as a representation of German culture stands as a central theme. For various reasons, not the least of which was Wagner’s involvement in revolutionary politics in Saxony leading to his flight from Dresden and his subsequent exile, Wagner did not complete *Die Meistersinger* until 1867. Its first performance took place in Munich in 1868, by which time the mad King of Bavaria, Ludwig II, had brought the composer to his court. The period that separated the original ideas from the final realization of this operatic project witnessed the composition of most of the *Ring of Nibelung* and *Tristan und Isolde*.

The overture is an imposing orchestral work, whose several themes are closely linked by motivic figures. In addition to three separate melodies that are associated with the Mastersingers, Wagner introduces the theme of Walther von Stolzing’s “Prize Song” from Act III. An oft-cited moment in the overture is the contrapuntal combination of the Walter’s tune with two of the Mastersingers’ melodies.
Suite from *The Firebird* (1919 version)  
Igor Stravinsky

One of the towering figures of twentieth-century music, Igor Stravinsky was born in Oranienbaum, Russia on June 17, 1882 and died in New York City on April 6, 1971. While his best known works remain the three ballet scores based on Russian themes and scenarios—*The Firebird, Petrushka,* and *The Rite of Spring*—composed for Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in the early 1910s, Stravinsky wrote works that encompass many genres and explore a wide variety of musical styles, all of which bear his own distinctive traits. *The Firebird* ballet was first performed on June 25, 1910 at the Paris Opéra with G. Pierné conducting. The 1919 Suite, a slightly revised and reduced version of the 1910 Suite was first performed in Geneva on April 12, 1919 with Ernst Ansermet conducting. The Suite is scored for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, harp, and strings.

“He who hesitates is lost,” goes the old saying. The composer Anatol Liadov, who was supposed to have composed the music for a new ballet based on the legend of the Firebird that Sergei Diaghilev planned to produce in his second Paris season, ought to have paid attention to the adage’s warning. Fortunately for the young Igor Stravinsky, Liadov did not, and the great opportunity for which Stravinsky had been hoping was now at hand. Diaghilev already had been sufficiently impressed with the talent of the precocious student of Rimsky-Korsakov to commission orchestrations of two piano pieces by Chopin from him in 1909. But a chance to collaborate as a full partner with the likes of choreographer-dancer Mikhail Fokine was almost too good to be true. The success of Stravinsky’s score to *The
Firebird, first performed at the Paris Opéra on June 25, 1910 under the baton of Gabriel Pierné, was legendary. This ballet remains to this day the most popular of all Stravinsky’s scores. Over the next two years (1911 and 1913) Stravinsky was to follow the success of The Firebird with Petrushka and the epic Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring).

The story of The Firebird revolves around three primary figures – Prince Ivan, the monster Kastchei, and the magical Firebird herself. Near the beginning of the ballet, the prince captures the fabulous beast, but she persuades him to release her by offering him one of her feathers, which he may use to summon her whenever he finds himself in peril. That moment comes when Ivan is captured by the evil Kastchei and his minions. The prince waves the Firebird’s plume, and she appears as promised. She leads Kastchei and his defenders in a wild dance, which itself is followed by their own sinister Infernal Dance, after which they fall exhausted and are lulled into a magical sleep by the Firebird. The Firebird shows Ivan a huge egg containing Kastchei’s evil soul. The Prince smashes the egg, killing Kastchei and destroying the monster’s kingdom. Thirteen princesses who had been imprisoned by Kastchei are released from their bondage, and the last of these becomes Ivan’s bride.

Stravinsky excerpted three suites from The Firebird, in 1911, 1919, and 1949 respectively. The earliest of these calls for the largest orchestra, identical to the scoring of the complete ballet. The more frequently performed Second Suite (heard on this program) is written for a smaller orchestra, but retains many of the spectacular effects (glissando harmonics, for example) of the earlier suite, even adding a few new ones, such as the glissandos for trombone and horn. Its succession of movements is as follows:
I and II. *Introduction; The Firebird and Her Dance; Variation of the Firebird.* A slow and brooding legato figure in the lower strings is punctuated with colorfully jagged woodwinds. A faster tempo introduces the fabulous firebird in passagework that taxes the skill of all the winds.

III. *The Princesses’ Round: Khorovod.* A lush movement in B Major is inaugurated by the flutes, and continued by a beautiful melody in the oboe, accompanied by the harp. Other gentle tunes are presented in the winds and strings and the movement comes to a shimmering conclusion couched in the softest possible dynamic.

IV. *Infernal Dance of King Kastchei.* The calm of the previous movement is shattered by the full orchestra as Kastchei and his followers revel in syncopated rhythms. The Infernal Dance unfolds as one of the most exciting *tours de force* in all orchestral music, leading without pause into the fourth movement. Much of its harmonic exoticism comes from Stravinsky’s bold use of an augmented triad.

V. *Berceuse and Finale.* The evocative timbre of the high bassoon sings the Firebird’s lullaby. A magical passage of chromatic harmonies leads to a noble melody in the solo horn, marking the onset of the finale. This tune—a variant of one heard in the second movement—is repeated, growing louder with each statement. A sudden pulling back of dynamics in the tremolo violins ushers in a brilliant faster version of the tune which yields finally to a grandiose broadening of tempo and pompous closure for the full orchestra, led by the triumphant brass.

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**Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, Op. 77**

Johannes Brahms

*Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833 in Hamburg and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. One of the dominant composers of the late nineteenth century, Brahms greatly enriched the repertory for piano, organ, chamber music, chorus, and orchestra. His only Concerto for Violin and Orchestra was composed in the summer and early fall of 1878 in one of his favorite locales, Pörtschach am Wörthersee in Carinthia (Austria). Brahms effected minor revisions after its premiere on January 1, 1879 in Leipzig with the composer conducting the Gewandhaus Orchestra with Joseph Joachim as soloist. It is scored for solo violin, 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.*

Few would deny that the violin concertos of Beethoven and Brahms stand at the pinnacle of the genre. It is also true that Beethoven’s work served as a model for Brahms, resulting in many clear points of contact between the works. Both concertos, for example, use the orchestra extensively, lending a symphonic quality to them. Each work not only explores the virtuosic capabilities of the violin, but also its lyrical side. The first movement of both works follows the classical principle of tutti-solo alternation (a carryover from the Baroque ritornello form) in conjunction with the dialectic of sonata form. Yet, even while clinging to classical forms, both concertos ultimately transcend them. They are not just great violin concertos; they are superb musical compositions. As such, therefore, they tax their performers in both technical prowess and musicality.
Brahms’s Concerto emerged from the master’s highly productive summer of 1878, a period that also produced the Symphony no. 2, the First Sonata for Violin and Piano, and early work on the Second Piano Concerto. The genesis and growth of Brahms’s Violin Concerto owes to the composer’s continuing friendship and professional affiliation with the great violinist, Joseph Joachim. This virtuoso musician, who also was a composer of no small ability, offered much more than merely technical advice to the composer. The Brahms-Joachim correspondence reveals much valuable insight into the concerto’s compositional genesis. One document, for example, shows Joachim dissuading Brahms from his plan to extend the work into a four-movement composition through the addition of a scherzo (Those familiar with Brahms’s Piano Concerto no. 2 will be aware that the composer successfully added such a movement in that work). But Joachim surely was right in his instincts regarding the Violin Concerto. The three-movement design was perfect as it stood.

The magical moments in Brahms’s Violin Concerto are almost too numerous to count, but a few are worth noting. The first comes very near the start of the opening Allegro non troppo, when after a purely diatonic D-major opening paragraph, an unexpected surprise comes in the form of a shudder—a counterstatement that starts in the foreign key of C Major. The first entrance of the solo instrument takes place in a highly charged and dramatic D Minor. Also worthy of mention is the gentle and lyrical reentry of the orchestra after the first movement’s cadenza—one of several instances of the influence of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto (a work that was also performed, at Joachim’s insistence, at the premiere). Joachim composed and performed his own cadenza (still used by many violinists) for the first performance of the Brahms. Both the cadenza and Joachim’s superb playing of it, according to a letter from Brahms to a friend, trampled over this poignant moment with immediate applause from the audience.

Speaking of lyricism, it is difficult to imagine a more sublime melody than the F-Major oboe solo that inaugurates the Adagio second movement. Indeed, the scoring for woodwinds throughout this movement is incomparable. This writer, for one, lives for the end of the movement’s introduction, when in an astonishing sequence, the solo flute drops from an F natural in a high register to a low F sharp, followed by a rest before
resolving sweetly to a G. The next two measures land the music gently in its final cadence in the home key. This sequence is repeated later in the movement by the solo violin.

The finale is a gypsy-inspired Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace, filled with technical challenges aplenty, as well as metrical subtleties, but never exceeding Brahms’s customary decorum. The movement is rounded out by a piquant and exciting coda, Poco più presto.

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