

SEPTEMBER 28, 2025

@3pm

MASTERWORKS I

A JOURNEY ABROAD

LUCAS RICHMAN, CONDUCTOR

JONATHAN BISS, PIANO

Emil Nikolaus von Rezníček

(1860–1945)

Donna Diana: Overture

Ernest Chausson

(1855–1899)

Symphony in B-flat, Op. 20

I. Lent; Allegro vivo

II. Très lent

III. Animé

INTERMISSION

Johannes Brahms

(1833–1897)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83

I. Allegro non troppo

II. Allegro appassionato

III. Andante

IV. Allegretto grazioso

Jonathan Biss, piano

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Donna Diana: Overture

Emil Nikolaus von Rezníček | 5 minutes

The career of Austrian-born composer and conductor Emil Nikolaus von Rezníček (1860–1945) straddles the late Romantic and early modern eras. A contemporary of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler, Rezníček shared their gift for colorful orchestration and sharp musical wit. He was known for his fierce independent streak—stylistically eclectic and often satirical, Rezníček refused to align himself fully with any particular musical movement. While his broader output of symphonies, chamber music, and operas has fallen into relative obscurity, one piece has remained firmly in the spotlight: the effervescent *Overture* to his comic opera *Donna Diana*.

Composed in 1894 and premiered in Berlin the same year, *Donna Diana* was Rezníček's first major operatic success. The opera draws from a 17th-century Spanish play by Agustín Moreto, already adapted by several others, including German playwright Carl Leberecht Immermann. The plot centers on the strong-willed and emotionally guarded Donna Diana, who mocks the very idea of love and gleefully toys with her suitors. Her resistance is ultimately worn down not by flattery but by the aloof Don Cesar, whose seeming indifference ignites her interest and ultimately her affection. Though the opera itself is rarely staged, the overture endures for its brilliant opening trumpet fanfare, catchy thematic material, and exuberant rhythmic drive—capturing both the wit and mischief of the story. Critics at the time were quick to praise Rezníček's craftsmanship. A reviewer for the *Allgemeine Musikzeitung* called the overture “a masterful confection—spirited, cleverly structured, and irresistibly tuneful.” More recently, musicologist Peter Franklin described it as “a work of exceptional charm, displaying Rezníček's gift for clarity and satire within the Romantic orchestral tradition.”

The *Donna Diana Overture* quickly gained favor with conductors such as Arturo Toscanini, who performed it frequently with the NBC Symphony, and Leopold Stokowski, who brought it to American audiences. Its popularity soared even higher when it was used as the theme for the mid-20th-century radio and television series *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon*, introducing Rezníček's buoyant melodies to millions. Though none of Rezníček's other works has matched the overture's enduring popularity, *Donna Diana* remains a brilliant example of late Romantic orchestral writing: theatrical, witty, and delightfully alive. As conductor Kenneth Woods noted, “It may be a relic of its time, but it's a glorious one—bursting with invention, energy, and good humor.”

Symphony in B-flat major, Op. 20

Ernest Chausson | 30 minutes

Ernest Chausson (1855–1899) occupies a unique place in French music, poised between the lush Romanticism of the 19th century and the emerging modernist voices that would define the early 20th. Born into a wealthy Parisian family, Chausson studied law before devoting himself to music in his twenties. He studied composition with Jules Massenet and later came under the artistic influence of César Franck, whose teachings on cyclic form and chromatic harmony left a lasting impression.

Composed between 1889 and 1890, the *Symphony in B-flat major* is Chausson's only symphony, and remains one of the most ambitious large-scale orchestral works by a French composer of the era. It premiered in 1891 under the baton of Franck's protégé Paul Taffanel. While the initial audience response was mixed, with some listeners puzzled by the work's serious tone and complexity, the influential critic Pierre Lalo would later describe it as "a noble work of rare dignity and sincerity, both forceful and introspective." The symphony follows a three-movement structure that reflects Franck's own *Symphony in D minor*, completed just a few years earlier. Both works employ the "cyclic" approach, in which thematic material recurs and transforms across movements. Chausson's symphony is notable for its harmonic richness and orchestral color, from the grandeur of the first movement to the melancholy of the central slow waltz, and finally to the sweeping finale that reintroduces earlier themes in a transformed light.

Scholar Jean Gallois writes that Chausson's symphony "represents the full maturity of a composer who, in spite of limited output, succeeded in marrying German depth with French clarity, preparing the way for a new orchestral language in France." Indeed, the work stands at a pivotal point in French music history, between the Wagnerian influence of the late 19th century and the more nationalistic, coloristic voice that would soon be championed by Debussy and Ravel. Although Chausson's life was tragically cut short in a bicycle accident at age 44, the *Symphony in B-flat* has earned its place in the canon. It is increasingly recognized not only as a major French symphony, but as a vital part of the broader European tradition. Together with Franck's symphony, it marks a turning point—works that are, as one critic put it, "anchored in the past, but leaning perceptibly toward the future."

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83

Johannes Brahms | 46 minutes

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) remains one of the towering figures of the Romantic era, admired for both his emotional depth and structural rigor. A devout classicist at heart, Brahms revered Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and especially Beethoven, and carried their legacy forward through his mastery of counterpoint, motivic development, and formal architecture. Unlike many of his Romantic contemporaries who embraced overtly programmatic music, Brahms fused expressive power with disciplined craftsmanship, qualities that earned him respect from conservative and progressive critics alike. Composed between 1878 and 1881, the *Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major* is one of Brahms' most expansive and ambitious works. It arrived more than two decades after the dramatic *First Concerto*, and the contrast is striking. Where the first can be described as youthful and turbulent, the second is confident and symphonic in conception. Its unusual four-movement structure blurs the lines between concerto and symphony, with soloist and orchestra in constant dialogue rather than competition.

The premiere took place in Budapest on November 9, 1881, with Brahms himself as soloist and Alexander Erkel conducting. Contemporary accounts describe the performance as a success. A Hungarian critic wrote, "The piano spoke not with thunder, but with profound eloquence... and the composer, now a master in full command of his powers, played with fire and serenity." Clara Schumann, after hearing a subsequent performance, called the piece "a great work—more than a concerto,

a whole symphony with piano.” Modern scholars have emphasized the concerto’s balance between strength and introspection. Musicologist Walter Frisch notes that “Brahms combined the epic and the intimate here with unparalleled finesse,” while pianist and scholar Charles Rosen called it “the greatest of all Romantic piano concertos, perhaps the greatest ever composed.”

Each movement highlights a different aspect of Brahms’ compositional voice. The opening *Allegro non troppo* features the iconic horn solo and intricate sonata structure. The second movement, a fiery scherzo (*Allegro appassionato*), is an unusual addition for a concerto and a testament to Brahms’ formal innovation. The third movement, featuring an extended cello solo, is tender and songlike, while the finale’s dancing character and Hungarian flair offer a charming and exuberant close. In the broader piano repertoire, Brahms’ *Second Concerto* stands alongside Beethoven and Chopin, but occupies its own niche—blending orchestral sweep with chamber-like intimacy. It reflects not just Brahms’ roots as a pianist, but his lifelong commitment to deep musical thought, tradition, and emotional authenticity.

Meet the Guest Artist



**Jonathan
Biss**

Piano

Pianist **Jonathan Biss** is recognized globally for his “impeccable taste and a formidable technique” (*The New Yorker*). Praised by *The Boston Globe* as “an eloquent and insightful music writer,” Biss published his fourth book, *Unquiet: My Life with Beethoven*, in 2020. The book was the first Audible Original by a classical musician and one of Audible’s top audiobooks of the year.

Throughout the 2024-25 season, Biss continued his ongoing project pairing Schubert’s last sonatas with new compositions by Alvin Singleton, Tyson Gholston Davis, and Tyshawyn Sorey, including performances at the Frederic Chopin Society in St. Paul, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the Meany Center in Washington and more. He appeared with the Boston Symphony led by Xian Zhang, the BBC Symphony led by Jakub Hrusa, Ottawa’s National Arts Centre Orchestra, the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, the San Diego Symphony, the National Symphony Orchestra of Taiwan, and the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland. Biss also joined the Doric String Quartet for dates in Denmark before going on to perform with Liza Ferschtman, Malin Broman, and Antoine Lederlin in Madrid, Helsinki, and throughout the Netherlands.

Biss has appeared as a soloist with some of the world’s foremost orchestras, including the Los Angeles and New York Philharmonics, the Boston Symphony, the Royal Concertgebouw, the London Symphony and more. He has served as the Co-Artistic Director of the Marlboro Music School and Festival alongside pianist Mitsuko Uchida since 2018. He served on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music for ten years, and has been a guest professor at schools such as the Guildhall SOMAD and the New England Conservatory of Music. Biss is also the author of *Unquiet: My Life with*

Beethoven, in which he examines music and his own life's journey through the lens of Beethoven's last piano sonatas.

In 2015, Biss embarked on a groundbreaking journey with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, launching the *Beethoven/5* commissioning project, which has yielded a collection of five new piano concerti, each written by a distinguished composer in response to one of Beethoven's iconic works. In April of 2024, Orchid Classics released the first volume of the recorded series, pairing Beethoven's fifth piano concerto, the 'Emperor', together with its companion work, *Gneixendorfermusik: Eine Winterreise*, by lauded composer Brett Dean, recorded with the Swedish Radio Symphony under the baton of David Afkham. The second volume of the series releases in October 2024 and features the commissioned concerto by Sally Beamish, *City Stanzas*, paired with Beethoven's *Piano Concerto no. 1*. The three subsequent volumes will include works by Caroline Shaw, Timo Andres, and Salvatore Sciarrino with releases planned through 2026.

Over the course of his career, Biss has collaborated with a wide range of esteemed musicians, from Mark Padmore to Midori. In the 2023–24 season, he joined the critically acclaimed Brentano String Quartet and double bassist Joseph Conyers for a tour of Beethoven's late works and Schubert's Trout Quintet. In the spring of 2024, Biss joined forces with fellow pianist Mitsuko Uchida to highlight Schubert's four-hand piano music in a series of concerts at Carnegie Hall, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Princeton University, and Schenctady's Union College, following an international tour to London, Dublin and at the Salzburg, San Sebastian and Gstaad Festivals. An advocate of newly-commissioned works, Biss most recently collaborated with composers Alvin Singleton, Tysahwn Sorey, and Tyson Gholson Davis for his Schubert commissioning project, which he presented at Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, San Francisco Performances, and the Ravinia Festival in the 2023–24 season.

In 2020, coinciding with the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, Biss recorded the composer's complete piano sonatas, and offered insights to all 32 landmark works via his free, online Coursera lecture series *Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas*. In March 2020, Biss gave a virtual recital presented by 92NY, wherein he performed Beethoven's last three piano sonatas for an online audience of more than 280,000 people. In 2024, Biss participated in Princeton University Concert's Healing Through Music Series, appearing alongside author Adam Haslett for a panel discussion on anxiety, depression, and creativity.

Biss is the recipient of numerous honors, including the Leonard Bernstein Award, the Andrew Wolf Memorial Chamber Music Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award, and a Gilmore Young Artist Award. His albums for EMI won the Diapason d'Or de l'Année and Edison awards. He was an artist-in-residence on American Public Media's *Performance Today* and was the first American chosen to participate in the BBC's New Generation Artist program.

Biss is a third-generation professional musician; his grandmother is Raya Garbousova, one of the first famous female cellists (for whom Samuel Barber composed his Cello Concerto), and his parents are violinist Miriam Fried and violist/violinist Paul Biss. Growing up surrounded by music, Biss began his piano studies at age six, with his first musical collaborations alongside his mother and father. He studied with Evelyn Brancart at Indiana University and Leon Fleisher at the Curtis Institute of Music.