Brahm's First Symphony
July 31, 2026

Program Notes

Overture from The Bartered Bride (1866)

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

Bohemian composer Bedřich Smetana is often called the father of Czech music. A true child prodigy, Smetana gave his first public concert at just six years old. After years of struggling to establish himself, Smetana eventually found success in Prague, where he became conductor of the Czech National Opera.

In his first season in Prague, Smetana premiered one of his most famous works: *The Bartered Bride*. The overture was composed before the opera itself, which was unusual at the time. Rather than borrowing themes directly from the opera, the overture stands on its own musically while still capturing the same playful spirit. The comic opera follows two young lovers in a rural village as they outsmart their families and the townspeople in order to be together.

From the very first explosive orchestral strike and bubbling strings, Smetana throws listeners right into the hustle and bustle of a lively Bohemian village. Folk influences shine as the stomping, syncopated dance rhythms energize the piece throughout.

Violin Concerto, Op. 53 (1879-1882)

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Antonín Dvořák's musical talent was undeniable from an early age. In 1878, his Slavonic Dances catapulted him to international fame, cementing his reputation as a composer who could highly successfully incorporate national folk styles and melodies into Romantic genres. In 1892, Dvořák accepted a position as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, bringing him to the United States. During his travels across America, he became fascinated with Native American melodies and African American spirituals. After three fruitful years in America, culminating in his monumental Ninth Symphony "From the New World," Dvořák returned to Prague, where he composed symphonic poems and his famous opera *Rusalka*.

Dvořák’s Violin Concerto was commissioned by his publisher, Simrock, and dedicated to the great violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim. Written before Dvořák’s move to America, the concerto is considered one of the masterpieces of his Slavic period.

The concerto is filled with Bohemian folk-inspired melodies, warmth, and optimism. Dvořák leans fully into the violin's lyricism while allowing the orchestra to serve as an equal partner. The first movement unfolds like a dramatic rhapsody full of sweeping energy and dialogue between soloist and orchestra. The second movement brings a more intimate atmosphere, with highly ornamented melodies surrounding a tranquil theme. Without pause, the music moves directly into the lively third movement, a spirited Bohemian dance that showcases the violin’s dazzling virtuosity.

— Intermission —

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op 68 (1862-1876)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Growing up in humble circumstances, Johannes Brahms spent much of his teenage years playing the piano at local inns and dockside taverns, where he absorbed popular and local musical styles. His breakthrough as a young man came while touring as an accompanist, when he was introduced to “Gypsy-style” cafe music and met the young violin virtuoso, Joseph Joachim. He eventually earned the praise of Robert Schumann, who famously declared Brahms a musical genius. A relentless perfectionist, Brahms has earned his place as one of the celebrated “Three Bs”, alongside Bach and Beethoven.

Deeply inspired by Beethoven, Brahms felt enormous pressure when composing his first symphony. He developed and reworked the piece for more than twenty years before finally allowing it to be performed. The result was Symphony No. 1, a work considered by many to be Beethoven’s true symphonic successor.

In the first movement, Brahms demonstrates his mastery of slowly building drama and tension. The second and third movements reveal his gift for lyricism and expressive beauty, especially through the soaring violin lines. By the finale, the symphony expands into something monumental. The darkness of the movement is interrupted by a noble horn call and a chorale seemingly searching for peace and light. When Brahms’ triumphant main theme finally emerges, the symphony closes in powerful and unrestrained grandeur.