

## ROMANTIC BRAHMS

7.30PM, Thursday 10 APRIL  
Auckland Town Hall

# Programme Notes

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**Louise Farrenc** (1804-1875)

Overture No.2 (1834)

DURATION: c.12'

Born Jeanne-Louise Dumont, Louise Farrenc had a number of advantages that should have seen her advance easily as a composer. Growing up in the 1830s, she was part of the cultural expansion that saw music leap ahead as the main recreational activity of bourgeois Paris.

Farrenc had another, more personal advantage in the form of her social connections. She was raised in a very cultured household with a brilliant family that could boast royal painters and sculptors stretching back to the 17th century. Thanks to her father's contacts, her teachers included such famous musicians as Hummel and Auber, while composers such as Schumann and Berlioz wrote admiringly of her music.

Needless to say, Farrenc's major disadvantage was that she was a woman. In those days, formal qualifications, composition courses, prizes and performance opportunities were largely denied to women. The measure of success that Farrenc did achieve was thanks to her rugged determination. Eventually, she was admitted to the piano teaching staff of the Conservatoire, but at a grudgingly low salary — which she later successfully fought to change.

Apart from her piano and chamber ensembles, she worked on large public compositions including two overtures and three symphonies. The overtures were both written in 1834 and are works of great energy. As one might expect, they owe much to Beethoven's style, but with many special features including a relentless dramatic thrust, a beguilingly lyrical vein when appropriate, and a natural feeling for orchestration.

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**Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No.2 (1881)

- I. *Allegro non troppo*
- II. *Allegro appassionato*
- III. *Andante*
- IV. *Allegretto grazioso*

DURATION: c.46'

Brahms completed this piano concerto in 1881. He had not approached it lightly. His First Piano Concerto, appearing almost 20 years earlier, had been given a mixed reception, so he had shied away from providing a successor until he felt more confident. However, by the late 1870s, his list of compositions had grown long and varied, and included two highly acclaimed symphonies. There was no reason for him to continue to feel tentative.

Right from its first performance the concerto was warmly received by public, critics and composers alike. Even Franz Liszt, hardly one of the composer's admirers, spoke grandly of the work's 'distinction' where 'thought and feeling move in noble harmony'. The concerto is indeed a masterpiece of formal design, yet its expressive range is

**Conductor** Elena Schwarz  
**Piano** Inon Barnatan

widely drawn, and always to the fore.

Take the very opening passage: a seductive exchange between horn and solo piano, based on what will become the main theme, followed by some secondary material in the orchestra. These are suddenly interrupted by a cadenza for piano. The cadenza material opens with a jerky, dotted rhythm that will recur, and when the orchestra re-enters, it moves quickly to the second main theme. In little more than two minutes, the movement's expressive horizons have been indicated, and all the thematic material has been laid out.

The D minor, scherzo-like movement that follows (very *appassionato*) alternates stormy passages with brief moments of repose, and the ensuing slow movement extends that repose into a mood of deep tranquillity. By contrast, the closing rondo movement is intentionally four-square, dance-like, and orchestrally simple in its effect. The fireworks, when they come, are all given to the soloist, who eventually closes the parade with glittering arpeggios and a couple of hammer-blow chords.

## INTERVAL

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**César Franck** (1822-1890)

Symphony in D minor (1888)

- I. *Lento — Allegro non troppo*
- II. *Allegretto*
- III. *Allegro non troppo*

DURATION: c.38'

César Franck is probably the 19th century's least-known top-rank French composer. He lived in revolutionary musical times, straddling the end of one era and the beginning of another. He died in 1890, which is just seven years after Wagner's death, yet only four years before Debussy's game-changing *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*. 1890 was also the decade of Schoenberg's experiments that would soon lead him to shake free of traditional tonality completely.

Franck, however, was moved by few of these innovations, preferring instead to develop his own style of securely tonal music with rich harmonies and an attractively plastic melodic line. These qualities grace the composition of this symphony. It begins with a mysterious, questioning motif, already used by Beethoven and Liszt, among others.

The main melody that eventually surges to the fore circles around one repeated note and is animated by a bouncing, syncopated rhythm.

The second movement, plaintive and nostalgic, features a striking new element — a long solo played by the cor anglais. This melody reappears triumphantly at the end of the symphony when Franck reviews all his major themes in a 'cyclic' pattern that leads the work to its end in a blaze of glory.

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