

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Albert Combrink takes us *Inside the Concert* with notes on the programme

Achron's *Hebrew Melody* is a solo work which attempts to address the musical identity of the Jewish nation within a larger Russian nation, and so-doing became its composer's most popular work.

The conflict of the Russian Nation with itself, lays the stage for Prokofiev's World War II *Violin Sonata No.1*: Stalin depicted as a demented mechanic doll and winds floating like ghosts over the graveyards of his victims. An old composer looking back on his own creative life provides the foundation for the *First Piano Trio* by Brahms, where the veils of mystery are pulled back just far enough to experience an entire musical novel in 4 dramatic movements.

While the violin takes the centre stage in the first work, the programme builds around it to a climax in the Trio, which sees all the instruments transcend their individual identity and creating a new instrument made up of three parts.

Joseph Achron (1886-1943)

Hebrew Melody Op.33, Dedicated: "To the memory of my father"

Joseph Achron was born in Lithuania in the small town of Lodzdieje (now Lazdijai). He started Violin lessons with his father, and eventually studied at the Warsaw Conservatoire under Isadore Lotto and then the St. Petersburg Conservatory under Leopold Auer, the famous teacher of such stars as Nathan Milstein and Jascha Heifetz. Heifetz and Achron were close friends and supported each other's careers.



In 1911, Achron met Samuel Rosovsky, President of the Society for Jewish Folk Music which was recently founded in St. Petersburg. After this meeting, he set about deliberately trying to create a Jewish Musical Ethos, reacting to the political movement at the time: there was a view amongst some prominent Russian academics that after many years of dispersion and assimilation, the Jewish people had been without national roots for too long, and therefore could no longer resurrect an individual music character and should rather be absorbed into the "gypsy-"and folk-side of Russian music making.

Achron and Rosovsky begged to differ. From the Milken Archive, the following: "Achron insisted that it was still possible to ferret out and define at least some national characteristics of style, especially since some of the fundamentals of ancient Hebrew music could be traced through continuous usage (especially biblical cantillation and modal motifs), even allowing for transmutation and acculturation over time. To those opponents who posited the argument that the length and geographical breadth of the Diaspora - and its crystallization of host influences - precluded a freely created Jewish national music, he replied in an interview that "the same thing could be said about any music at the time of its creation. Always and everywhere, dependence upon others precedes the liberation of one's own artistic idiom and self-determination. In the first 'real Russian' compositions (Glinka), for example, we find Italian influences." In stating further that a valid Jewish art music must actually incorporate at least some of the acculturated aspects in order to go beyond the narrowness of pre-Diaspora elements, he demonstrated a profound understanding of the issue both historically and aesthetically."

Achron's artistic path as a composer was thus partly a lifelong search for a new language of musical expression.

Hebrew Melody of 1911 is said to be a soloistic transcription – made for his virtuoso friend Heifetz as an encore – of a Hasidic melody his father had taught him as a child. Legend has it that the work was composed in half an hour.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 – 1953)

Violin Sonata No.1 in F Minor Op.80

1. *Andante Assai (brisk walking pace)*
2. *Allegro brusco (abruptly faster)*
3. *Andante (moderate pace)*
4. *Allegroissimo – Andante Assai, come prima (very fast – as at the beginning)*

Prokofiev was born into a family of agriculturalists. His mother, a good pianist, became the highly gifted child's first mentor in music and arranged trips to the opera in Moscow. The conservatory gave Prokofiev a firm foundation in the academic fundamentals of music, but he avidly sought musical innovation and as pianist and composer he was soon regarded as an "enfant terrible" with no fear of dissonance or aggressive sonorities.



Many brilliant pianist-composers such as Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev explored the USA as a viable career-option in the wake of the 1917 revolution. European and American explorations followed. Although he enjoyed material well-being, success with the public, and contact with outstanding figures of Western culture, Prokofiev increasingly missed his homeland. Visits to the Soviet Union in 1927, 1929, and 1932 led him to conclude his foreign obligations and return to Moscow once and for all. The Ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, the Second Violin Concerto, *Lieutenant Kije* and *Peter and the Wolf* soon followed in a burst of creativity.

The First Violin Sonata lies on the list of Prokofiev's great "War-Compositions" – the great 6th, 7th and 8th Piano Sonatas, *Cinderella* and of course, the opera *War and Peace*. A dark shadow ominously looming over the work was the "Great Terror," unleashed by Joseph Stalin in 1937 - Prokofiev was a personal victim, suffering censure and professional curtailment, all while the NKVD secret police arrested (and in many cases executed) a number of his colleagues, including his patron Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky.

The work was premiered by David Oistrakh and Lev Oborin on October 23, 1946, under the personal coaching of the composer. During rehearsals, Oborin played a certain passage, marked *forte*, too gently for Prokofiev's liking, who insisted it should be more aggressive. Oborin replied that he was afraid of drowning out the violin, but Prokofiev said "It should sound in such a way that people should jump in their seat, and people will say 'Is he out of his mind?'". The first and third movements of the sonata were played at Prokofiev's funeral by Oistrakh and Samuil Feinberg.

1. As if setting up a Baroque ground bass, a suspenseful plodding piano passacaglia opens a sombre movement of reflection and brooding. Heavy bells toll while the violin first gives the impression of death-rattles before the two instruments briefly swap roles and the violin sings the lament. Eventually the music turns ethereal when the piano gently plays the opening theme in the upper register, while the violin delivers eerie runs that slither about hauntingly, like "wind in a graveyard," as described by the composer himself. The movement ends softly but chillingly.

2. Deliberately marked to be played roughly and harshly, the spiky movement opens with a hammering theme which in Prokofiev's music always associated with the war-machine: bullets, factories, machine gun fire – at once horrifying and hypnotising. A more lyrical second theme introduces an association with music of a deliberately Russian Folk-like character – which reminds a little of his music for the Montagues and the Capulets - but it is not long before the sardonic circus obliterates all romanticised fantasies of "Old Russian" life of peasant communities. A particularly striking effect is a series of overlapping chromatic passages, like nails pushed into the very fibre of the folksong. A sense of pervasive threat and dread dominates the entire movement.

3. An ethereal and dreamy theme floats on a harp-like tingling pattern, recalling one of Prokofiev's most magical ballet moments. Madness soon takes over from the deceptive reverie. A three-note motive becomes an obsession, repeating over and over as the protagonist tries to escape the desolation. It is a rocking lullaby, but if it is a lullaby to keep the ghosts at bay, or a lullaby for a ghost, is in the hands of the

performers. The haunting “wind in the graveyard” is ever-present, making this one of Prokofiev’s most melancholic, brooding and emotionally mercurial works, The veils are never drawn back far enough for us to know whose grave this is. The war victims? A beloved of Prokofiev’s?

4 A crazy dance in changing rhythms bursts onto the scene like a demented character from the *Commedia del Arte*. Its malicious intent is briefly interrupted with a quasi-romantic interlude that would not be out of place in the *Petrushka* story, where our loveable but unstable hero has his romantic investigations into Colombina interrupted by the violent Moor. Very percussive playing from both instruments drive the material back to revisit themes from the previous movements in an attempt to find a resolution to the crisis. In the end, only the graveyard bells provide some kind of closure, until all that is left is the haunting “wind in the graveyard”.

The work has an unavoidable dark, brooding nature, and contains moments of intense beauty.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, Op. 8

1. *Allegro con brio* (lively with brightness)
2. *Scherzo (Allegro molto)* (playful, getting faster)
3. *Adagio* (slow)
4. *Allegro* (lively)

This work is essentially a work composed by two composers: the first, an optimistic 21 year old Johannes



Brahms - a successful concert pianist and young lion of the keyboard, whose ambitious early compositions had already attracted the attention of Robert Schumann, who had hailed him a genius – and the second: a mature and universally acclaimed master, a wiser 57 year old Johannes Brahms. Brahms was famously self-critical and as many as 20 String Quartets - complete and ready for publication - were thrown in the fire. The fact that he chose to revise the work, rather than destroy it and compose a new one, says something for the esteem in which he held the work. Brahms was, to all intents and purposes, easing into retirement, and only the last clarinet works and final piano pieces would still come from his pen.

Comparisons of the two versions have occupied writers for many, many chapters - and adding more would not be useful here - but the important take away is that a giant super-virtuosic concert work jarred by violent contrast and escalating into mountains of dramatic development, has been trimmed to one third of its original size, without sacrificing any of its original thematic material, dramatic drive, and the undeniable Brahmsian Symphonic size of the conception. Brahms wrote to the love of his life, Clara Schumann (the wife of his dearest friend and mentor Robert Schumann): *“You cannot imagine how I trifled away the lovely summer. I have rewritten my B major Trio and can now call it Op 108 instead of Op 8. It will not be so dreary as before - but will it be better?”*

With the revision, the youthful impetuosity (and yes, it should be said, occasional verbosity) was tempered by changing the settings to lengthening autumnal shadows. Brahms wrote to his publisher Fritz Simrock: *“With regard to the refurbished trio, I want to add expressly that while it’s true that the old version is bad, I do not claim that the new version is good! What you do now with the old one, whether you melt it down or print it anew, is quite seriously all the same to me.”*

While the first version was never officially withdrawn, it is the second version which is accepted, and played today, as the first of the Piano Trios of Brahms. The rich and orchestral quality of the chamber works cannot be denied, and in this work, one may detect the shadow of one of his greatest compositions: the Double Concerto for Cello and Violin Op.102. As if it is an early study (or late reflection) on the Double Concerto the strings occasionally unite in unisons or octaves, or take over one another’s material, thereby creating a giant single instrument with the range of both instruments.

1. The work starts off as a duo between cello and piano, with the broad theme only picked up by the violin once intensity had built enough. Thick and virtuosic textures belie a taught organisational plan: string chorales and organ-like textures alternate with soloistic writing. From loud and orchestral climaxes to tender recitatives delineating intimate conversations between the three, the work is an aching amalgamation of the early passionate and impetuous Brahms, and the wise old Brahms who, like an old wine, has taken on many deeper layers of flavour. It appears as if the work will end with the lights fading to dark, but a last dramatic flourish brings the curtains down swiftly for a quick scene change:

2. A lightly scurrying scherzo comes galloping through. Mendelssohnian in its flight of fancy, one imagines Puck and the Midsummer Night's Dream fairies, but one senses also a darkness: Mercutio's Queen Mab, perhaps Goethe's Erbkönig or Aloysius Bertrand's Scarbo. Echoes of a distant hunt, or an off-beat drunken peasant dance with elements of a terrifying tarantella suddenly give way to a gentle lullaby of great consolation. The lullaby builds in passion to a climax of deep passion and pathos. Before long, the scurrying night-bogeyms are back for a final dance, before disappearing under the bed as the light fades to dark.

3. Night has arrived, a calm place of sleep, dreams and mystical expressiveness. A tender alternation between glassy string veils and stable-but-not-static piano chords, as if the listener is trying to bring into clearer focus, something that seems destined to remain just beyond grasp. An exquisite cello melody arrives almost as a distraction. Timeless piano interludes provide opportunities for the violin and cello to pass bits of the melody back and forth and even threatens to build to an expressive climax, but the veils return, drawn by invisible hands, obscuring the melody, leaving the listener hushed, in awe, as the light fades to dark.

4. Hungarian folk music flavours the main theme of this movement, surprisingly composed in the minor key (this is a major-key work, after all). The second theme is also in a surprise major key. The sunshine and serenity of the first movement is but a memory, and a thrilling, tragic drama unfolds amid swirling stormclouds articulated by dramatic and ominous piano arpeggios while the strings unite in their "Super-String-Instrument" to do battle with the piano. About three-quarters through the movement, the sun seems to peek through the clouds, and one has hopes for resolution, a triumphant victory of the initial B Major tonality, or perhaps a winding down to a peaceful end to a tempestuous day. But no. The final bars surge relentlessly to a dark and tempestuous conclusion.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

With a “dark-hued tone and razor-sharp technique” (The New York Times), violinist **Yevgeny Kutik** has captivated audiences worldwide with an old-world sound that communicates a modern intellect. Praised for his technical precision and virtuosity, he is also lauded for his poetic and imaginative interpretations of standard works as well as rarely heard and newly composed repertoire. Kutik is also Artistic Director and co-founder of The Birch Festival — a festival built around connecting and integrating leading musicians with the Berkshire community, while highlighting the unique and original stories of those who make up the Berkshires.

A native of Minsk, Belarus, Yevgeny Kutik immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of five. His 2014 album, *Music from the Suitcase: A Collection of Russian Miniatures* (Marquis Classics), features music he found in his family’s suitcase after immigrating to the United States from the Soviet Union in 1990, and debuted at No. 5 on the Billboard Classical chart. The album garnered critical acclaim and was featured on NPR’s *All Things Considered* and in *The New York Times*. The album is currently being developed into an immersive stage and performance production for the 2024-2025 season.

Kutik’s additional releases on Marquis include his most recent album, *The Death of Juliet and Other Tales* (2021), which highlights Russia’s rich history of folklore and folktales portrayed in the music of Prokofiev. The album connects Prokofiev’s *Solo Sonata for Violin, Sonata No. 2*, and “Parting Scene and Death of Juliet” (arr. Borisovsky) to five Russian folk melodies in new arrangements by Kutik, Michael Gandolfi, and Kati Agócs, commissioned specifically for the album. In 2019, he released *Meditations on Family*, for which he commissioned eight composers to translate a personal family photo into a short musical miniature for violin and various ensemble, envisioning the project as a living archive of new works inspired by memories, home, and belonging. *Strings Magazine* featured Kutik as its cover story for the March/April issue, reporting, “True to Kutik’s vision, each miniature is a window into the composer’s emotional life.” Featured composers include Joseph Schwantner, Andreia Pinto Correia, Gity Razaz, Timo Andres, Chris Cerrone, Kinan Azmeh, Gregory Vajda, and Paola Prestini. Kutik’s 2016 album, *Words Fail* uses Mendelssohn’s *Songs Without Words* as a starting point to expand upon the idea that music surpasses traditional language in its expressive capabilities. His 2012 debut album, *Sounds of Defiance*, features the music of Achron, Pärt, Schnittke, and Shostakovich, focusing on music written during the darkest periods of the lives of these composers.

In 2021, Kutik made his debut with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra led by Leonard Slatkin, performing the world premiere of Joseph Schwantner’s *Violin Concerto*, written specifically for Kutik. This is based on Schwantner’s earlier *The Poet’s Hour – Soliloquy for Violin*, which Kutik recorded on episode six of Gerard Schwarz’s *All-Star Orchestra*, a made-for-television classical music concert series released on DVD by Naxos and broadcast nationally on PBS. Kutik gave the world premiere of *Cântico*, a work for solo violin by Andreia Pinto Correia, at the Tanglewood Music Festival in August 2022. The work was co-commissioned for Kutik by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Throughout the United States, Kutik has performed with orchestras including the Rochester and Dayton Philharmonics, Tallahassee, New Haven, Asheville, Wyoming, and La Crosse symphony orchestras, as well as Florida’s SYMPHONIA, New York City’s Riverside Symphony and Park Avenue Chamber Symphony, and the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston. Abroad, he has appeared as guest soloist with Germany’s Norddeutsche Philharmonie Rostock and WDR Rundfunk Orchestra Köln, Montenegro’s Montenegrin Symphony Orchestra, Japan’s Tokyo Vivaldi Ensemble, and the Cape Town Philharmonic in South Africa. He has appeared in recital as a part of the Dame Myra Hess Concerts Chicago, Peoples’ Symphony Concerts, Merkin Hall Tuesday Matinee Series, and National Sawdust in New York City, the Embassy Series and The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C., and at the Lobkowitz Collections Prague presented by Prince William Lobkowitz. Festival performances have included the Tanglewood Music Festival, Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival, Pennsylvania’s Gretna Music, Germany’s Ludwigsburger Schlossfestspiele, and the Verbier Festival in Switzerland.

Passionate about his heritage and its influence on his artistry, Kutik is an advocate for the Jewish Federations of North America, the organization that assisted his family in coming to the United States, and regularly speaks and performs across the United States to both raise awareness and promote the

assistance of refugees from around the world. He was a featured performer for the 2012 March of the Living observances, where he played for audiences at the Krakow Opera House and for over 10,000 people at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Yevgeny Kutik began violin studies with his mother, Alla Zernitskaya, and went on to study with Zinaida Gilels, Shirley Givens, Roman Totenberg, and Donald Weilerstein. He holds a bachelor's degree from Boston University and a master's degree from the New England Conservatory and currently resides in Boston. In 2006, he was awarded the Salon de Virtuosi Grant as well as the Tanglewood Music Center Jules Reiner Violin Prize. Kutik's violin was crafted in Italy in 1915 by Stefano Scarpella.

Acknowledged as one of South Africa's leading concert pianists and musicians, **François du Toit** is an Associate Professor of Piano and Head of Practical Studies at the University of Cape Town. He received tuition in South Africa with Merryl Preston and Laura Searle and with Arie Vardi and Bernd Goetzke in Germany.

During his period of study, he distinguished himself in several international competitions, taking top prizes in Hannover, Rotterdam and Athens.

He has over 40 concertos in his repertoire, ranging from Bach to Scharwenka and has also performed the concerto premieres of South African composers, Hendrik Hofmeyr and Adrian More, collaborating with conductors including Bernhard Gueller, Omri Hadari, Alun Francis, Thomas Sanderling, Piero Gambo, Arjan Tien and Alexander Lazarev.

Francois recorded all five Beethoven piano concertos with the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Victor Yampolsky. In 2017 he received the Creative Works Award from UCT.

David Pinoit started to play the cello at the age of 9 with Christian Wolf at the Conservatoire National de Région de Dijon. After obtaining his Diplôme d'Etudes Musicales, he left to study in Lausanne, Switzerland. He obtained his Master of Arts in music performance in 2014 under the direction of cellist François Salque. During several music academies and master classes, David has also worked with Xavier Gagnepain, Roland Pidoux, Jérôme Pernoo, Arto Noras, Frans Helmerson, Gary Hoffman and Natalia Gutman.

David Pinoit has performed regularly in various festivals, notably in France, Belgium, Switzerland and South Africa: Chagny Festival, Au Fil de la Vouge Festival, Musique en Voûte Festival, Pablo Casals Festival in Prades, contemporary concerts at the Château de Montey, Brussels Museum of Historical Instruments, Classics for All Festival in Greyton, Woordfees Festival in Stellenbosch, Klein Karoo National Arts Festival in Oudtshoorn and the Cape Chamber Music Collective in Cape Town. David has had the opportunity to perform several times as a soloist at the Festival Musique en Morvan, under the baton of Pierre Cao. In 2006, he won the first prize for chamber music at the Avallon competition in piano trio.

In 2014, David moved to Durban, South Africa, and worked for the KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic Orchestra until September 2017. He then joined the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra as a cellist until 2020. David now dedicates most of his time to chamber music and regularly collaborates with south-african artists such as Liesl Stoltz, Francois Du Toit, Tertia Visser-Downie, Farida Bacharova, David Bester, Petrus Coetzee and Jan Hugo.