CHARLOTTESVILLE SYMPHONY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Masterworks II: Bach Violin Concerto

November 7 & 8, 2026

Program Notes

Violin Concerto in D minor, BWV 1052R
Johann Sebastian Bach
Born 31 March 1685 in Eisenach, Germany
Died on 28 July 1750 in Leipzig, Germany

Approximate duration 24 minutes

Few of Bach's instrumental concerti survive in their original form. Most of his 14 keyboard concerti are arrangements, primarily of violin concerti. The D minor concerto is a case where scholars debate whether the original version was for keyboard and Bach later arranged it for violin and orchestra, or vice versa. In its keyboard version, it has become one of the best-known of Bach's concerti.

He obviously liked this music and thought highly of it, for he "recycled" it elsewhere in his output. The first and second movements appear, in adapted form, as both the opening sinfonia (instrumental overture) and chorus of Cantata No. 146, "Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal." The first movement material surfaces again in Cantata No. 188, "Ich habe meine Zuversicht" arranged for organ and orchestra. The richness of Bach's material permits success in all three guises. As Bach scholar Christoph Wolff has noted:

> In his transcriptions Bach never proceeded in a mechanical way; rather, he strove to give the arrangement an identity of its own by subjecting the model to further development and exhausting its potential. This often involved the addition of fresh contrapuntal parts, the alteration of detail and structural modification.

Bach's writing is virtuosic throughout the D minor concerto, providing a particularly demanding part for the soloist, with relatively simple accompaniment. The style is akin to organ or harpsichord toccata writing, and less contrapuntal than much of Bach's music.

Another unusual feature of this concerto is its slow movement in G minor. In Baroque concerti in minor mode, composers almost always switched to major mode for the middle movement, for contrast. The unrelieved sequence of movements in minor mode makes this concerto singular, if not unique. The melancholy unison statement of the opening theme (which, it turns out, is a ground bass) establishes a somber atmosphere. Above the repetitions of the ground bass, the violin soloist embroiders an intricate and expressive melodic line, almost operatic in its coloratura details.

Bach's vigorous finale captures the energy, motor rhythm, and strong rhythmic profile that characterize so much of his best music. He demonstrates here that a minor key does not preclude high spirits and sparkle. Just before the final tutti, a startling two-bar adagio affords the violinist an opportunity for a brief solo cadenza. The interruption caps a brilliant concerto with surprise and drama.

The score calls for solo violin, strings and continuo.

***Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749)**
George Frideric Handel
Born 5 March 1685 in Halle, Germany
Died 14 April 1759 in London, England

Approximate duration 19 minutes

History lesson
During the autumn of 1748, the War of the Austrian Succession ended after eight years of conflict. Under the terms of a treaty signed in 1731, England had supported Austria's Maria Theresa. While the war had strengthened England's navy, it had taken a toll on her economy. The country was eager to be at peace once again, and there was great relief when the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was signed in October 1748. King George II ordered a major celebration to take place a few months later. A large Palladian structure was erected for the occasion in London's Green Park. Early in 1749, Handel was asked for a new

composition to accompany fireworks adjacent to the Green Park structure's massive triumphal arch. The king, who was Handel's patron and employer, resisted the idea of music at first, but came around provided that there would be as many military instruments as possible. He is also said to have expressed a wish that "there would be no fidles [sic]."

Music for outdoor performance

Martial music is almost always performed in open air. Strings don't carry well outdoors. That is why military bands, marching bands and drum and bugle corps are so heavily weighted in favor of brasses, winds, and percussion. *The Music for the Royal Fireworks* was originally scored only for double winds, both in deference to the king's wishes and as a practical matter, because it was intended for outdoor performance. Handel's autograph score specifies an astonishing wind band of 24 oboes (!), 12 bassoons, nine trumpets, nine horns, and three pairs of kettledrums. He added the string parts later, with a note that they should double the oboe and bassoon parts. Even with strings, the instrumentation stresses the pomp and ceremony of military sound. Handel's practicality, experience and common sense doubtless all affected his decision to add the string parts. For while the 1748 fireworks of the title were fraught with mishaps and malfunctions, Handel's music was a great success and has remained popular ever since.

The *Music for the Royal Fireworks* is a Baroque suite in D major with an introductory movement preceding several dance movements. The two titled "La Paix" ("Peace" – a siciliana) and "La Réjouissance" ("Rejoicing") are obvious references to the treaty. Handel's Overture, at about nine minutes, runs nearly as long as all the other movements combined. It consists of two large sections, the first slower, in duple time, and the second marked Allegro, in triple time, with its own contrasting middle section in B minor. Grandeur and dignity set the tone in the first segment; the stately Allegro makes maximum use of the colorful scoring, with fanfare-like melodies that maintain the majestic atmosphere. A pair of minuets rounds out the suite.

Music for the Royal Fireworks was first performed in London's Green Park in April 1749. This weekend's orchestra comprises 3 oboes, 3 bassoons, 3 horns, 3 trumpets, timpani, continuo, and strings.

[As part of our education and outreach initiatives, Central Virginia middle and high school students will play alongside our regular musicians in these performances of the Handel.]

***Four Sea Interludes,* Op. 33a**
Benjamin Britten
Born 22 November 1913 in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England
Died 4 December 1976 in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, England

Approximate duration 16 minutes

Shortly after World War II ended, London's Sadlers Wells Opera made plans to reopen with Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*. At the time, Britten was a relatively unknown quantity in opera; his sole previous experience was the small-scale *Paul Bunyan* (1941). The decision to stage *Peter Grimes* – Britten's first full length opera – was thus both courageous and risky.

Despite his youth, however, Britten already had extensive experience composing vocal and choral music, and an instinctive flair for drama that served him well throughout his career. With tenor Peter Pears in the title role, the premiere of *Peter Grimes* was a huge success, establishing Britten as an opera composer of international stature and re-establishing England, for the first time since Henry Purcell, as a major center for opera.

George Crabbe's "The Borough" (1810) provided the inspiration for Britten's opera. Crabbe's poem is dominated by the image of the cold, grey sea. Similarly, the sea is integral to the atmosphere of Britten's opera. Britten grew up near the sea, and eventually took up residence in Aldeburgh, where Crabbe's poem is set; he was spiritually bound to the sea his entire life. The Suffolk setting and the seascapes lend a decidedly English character to this music.

Of the six instrumental interludes linking the acts and scenes of *Peter Grimes*, three are portraits of the sea in its various guises; two are psychological portraits of Peter, and one, the "Storm" interlude, is both.

"Dawn" opens with a tense unison melody in the violins, answered first by harp and clarinet; these are early morning sunlight and light breezes dance on the surface of the water, and the gulls swoop down. Then low brasses and timpani respond; the ocean swell of the larger waves is omnipresent and inexorable.

"Sunday Morning" evokes church bells, their clangor suggesting several houses of worship calling parishioners to services. Britten evokes the bustling streets of a small seaside town whose church life dominates activity on the Sabbath. Discord in the horns and an ambivalence between major and minor mode characterize this movement, giving the interlude a piquant flavor.

"Moonlight" is indebted to Britten's principal composition teacher, Frank Bridge (1879-1941), whose orchestral suite *The Sea* (1911) Britten knew and admired. Lower strings, bassoons and horns combine to suggest the ocean's undulating surface. Moonlight glittering on the sea is suggested by the higher range instruments – flutes, harp, and some percussion. Britten captures the sea's grandeur with fine orchestral color.

"Storm" depicts both the chaos within Peter's tormented mind and nature's havoc wrought by the elements in a gale. We hear the relentless high wind and rain pelting on anything in their path. Similarly, the disorderly state of Peter's thoughts as his mind slips away from him fills our ears with violence and anguish.

Britten scored the *Sea Interludes* for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, chimes, cymbals, gong, tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, harp and strings.

Romanian Rhapsody No.1 in A major, Op.11 No.1
George Enescu
Born 19 August 1881 in Liveni Vîrnav, near Dorohoi, Romania
Died 3 or 4 May 1955 in Paris

Approximate duration 11 minutes

Romanian-born George Enescu (known in France as Georges Enesco) is an elusive composer. The two Romanian Rhapsodies are his only works that have become staples of the orchestral repertoire and audience favorites. His other music is little known. Enescu is generally regarded as the finest composer and overall musician Romania has produced. His remarkable career embraced success and international acclaim as a teacher, composer, conductor, and violin virtuoso. In private, he also played both cello and piano creditably.

Enescu received much of his formal musical training in France, where his teachers included many of the most important French composers of the time: Fauré, Massenet, Dubois, Gédalge, and Thomas. To this formidable academic education he brought a unique musical language and a formidable string technique that informed nearly all his works.

The First and Second Rhapsodies (both composed in 1901) are examples of Enescu's early emphasis on Romanian folk music. Although they have become his most celebrated works, they are not representative of his mature style. Rather, they are descendants of Franz Liszt's popular Hungarian Rhapsodies: brilliant and improvisatory, drawing on folk material but treating it freely, with spontaneity rather than in traditional musical structures such as sonata form. The closest approximation to traditional is variations: restatement of certain ideas with different orchestration or harmonization. The themes are straightforward and memorable. Enescu's treatment is imaginative and easy to follow. He will have you swaying in some parts, tapping your foot in others, and smiling throughout.

The score calls for three flutes (all doubling piccolo), three oboes (two doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, snare drum, two harps, and strings.

by Laurie Shulman ©2026