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Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Subscription Program No. 4: Heartbeat
January 23-24-25, 2026

This midwinter program is led by guest conductor Kazem Abdullah. We open with a work by the remarkable Peruvian/Chinese/Lithuanian/Jewish-American composer Gabriela Lena Frank. She has embraced all facets of her unique background in various works, but in *Escaramuza* (*skirmish*) it is most clearly her mother's Peruvian heritage: the work is based upon the precolombian *kachampa* dance of Peru, a celebration of the agility and strength of Inca warriors. Next is a showpiece for the orchestra, Richard Strauss's *Suite from Der Rosenkavalier*. We close with a magisterial work by Johannes Brahms, the *Piano Concerto No. 2*, a grand work of symphonic proportions. And who better play this work than the magisterial Yefim Bronfman? Mr. Bronfman has appeared with the MSO on four previous occasions: 2003 (Beethoven, *Piano Concerto No. 3*), 2008 (Prokofiev, *Piano Concerto No. 3*), 2014 (Beethoven, *Piano Concerto No. 2* and *Piano Concerto No. 5*), and 2023 (Rachmaninoff, *Piano Concerto No. 3*).

Gabriela Lena Frank, whose music is being played for the first time at these programs, is an extraordinary performer and composer, who draws upon her own unique multicultural heritage in her works.

Gabriela Lena Frank
Born: September 26, 1972, Berkeley, California.

Escaramuza

- **Composed**: 2010.
- **Premiere**: September 11, 2010, by the Huntsville (Alabama) Symphony Orchestra, Carlos Miguel Prieto conducting.
- **Previous MSO performance**: This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration**: 9:00.

Background

Frank's musical work extends to teaching and mentoring young composers, and outreach to prisons, hospitals and local (Boonville, California) public schools.

Composer and pianist Gabriela Lena Frank was born in Berkeley, California, to a Peruvian/Chinese mother and a Lithuanian/Jewish father. She was born with a significant hearing loss but has clearly overcome this in in her career. Frank is widely known as a performer and received a Latin Grammy Award for one of her recordings. As a composer, she has written commissioned works for Yo-Yo Ma, The King's Singers, and several major orchestras. Frank has served as a Composer-in-Residence to the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Frank often draws upon her own multicultural background, most frequently her mother's Peruvian heritage, but also a wide variety of other cultures in her work: she has travelled widely throughout Latin America in search of musical influences. As she puts it, she decided early in her career that: "I wanted to, in a very general way, be as *mestiza* [a woman of mixed race] in my music as I was in my person: I'm multiracial, I'm multicultural, and I think that's something deeply American." A believer in community outreach, she founded the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music, at her home in Boonville, in northern California fostering young composers. Frank also volunteers to bring music into prisons and hospitals and has also worked extensively to enhance public school music programs in Booneville: an under-resourced rural school system with a large Latino population. Her lively *Escaramuza*, composed in 2010, was commissioned by the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra League.

What You'll Hear

Her energetic *Escaramuza* (*Skirmish*) was inspired by a pre-Columbian Peruvian dance form still practiced today, celebrating Inca warriors.

Frank provides the following description:

> ***Escaramuza***, which signifies "skirmish" in the Spanish language, is inspired by the *kachampa* music of Andean Perú. Celebrating the pre-Hispanic Inca warrior, the *kachampa* dance is executed by athletic men who convey a triumphant, even joyful, spirit. Inspired by the *kachampa* dances done with fast-snapping ropes that I've witnessed in Perú, especially in Paucartambo during the *Virgen de la Carmen* festival, I've created a brightly chiseled romp in an asymmetrical 7/8 rhythm that is launched after an extended bass drum solo. Through most of *Escaramuza*, no section of the ensemble is allowed to rest for long, maintaining the high energy typical of *kachampas.*

Scored for percussion, piano, harp, and strings, *Escaramuza* is—true to Frank's description—an athletic workout for every section. It opens with a fierce, asymmetrical solo from the bass drum: evoking the *bomba* drum of Andean folk music. Percussion and later pizzicato strings accentuate this solo, before the low strings introduce a ferocious ostinato (a repeating figure) supporting a forceful dialogue between the upper strings and percussion. After a sudden transition, there is a slightly more delicate and playful contrasting section, before the cellos and basses reestablish the ostinato. In the end the bass drum is left to finish the piece, fading into nothing.

LEARN MORE: Like many traditions of the indigenous Quechua people of the Peruvian Andes, the *kachampa* dance refers back to the time before the Spanish conquest The name *Escaramuza* itself often signifies the time of intertribal warfare prior to the arrival of the Spanish, when the entire Inca empire was unified under a single emperor. It is an energetic and joyful dance by young men celebrating the strength and athleticism of Inca warriors. Whether the dancers are dressed in traditional costume, which often includes masks mimicking the white faces and facial hair of Spanish soldiers, or in modern suits and ties, the dancers represent the Incan tradition that warriors must be well-dressed as a sign of dignity and pride. Part of the costume is a tasseled rope representing the whips carried in battle. The dance is accompanied by an ensemble of drums and wooden flutes.

Der Rosenkavalier—which Richard Strauss referred to as his "Mozart opera"—was a light and amusing love story, very much in the comic tradition of Mozart. It was an enormous hit when it opened in 1910.

Richard Strauss
Born: June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany.
Died: September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partnerkirchen, Germany.

Suite* from *Der Rosenkavalier

- **Composed**: 1910.
- **Premiere**: *Der Rosenkavalier* opened at the Dresden Court Opera on January 26, 1911. The *Suite* was created in 1944 and premiered by the New York Philharmonic on October 19, 1944.

- **Previous MSO Performances**: The Madison Symphony Orchestra has performed the *Suite* on six previous occasions beginning in 1954, most recently in 2014.
- **Duration**: 24:00.

Background

Though the opera itself is set in 18th century Vienna, its music is dominated by the 19th century Viennese waltz.

After the 1905 premiere of his opera *Salome*, Strauss remarked: "Next time I shall write a Mozart opera." His next opera, *Elektra* (1909), was hardly "Mozartean," but in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Strauss and his librettist, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, created a wonderful blend of drama and comedy that is clearly in the tradition of *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. *Der Rosenkavalier* (*The Knight of the Rose*) is set in mid 18th-century Vienna, but the music is dominated by the lilting waltz rhythms of late 19th-century Vienna. The plot centers around the shifting romantic attachments of four characters: the Marschallin (a beautiful, but aging noblewoman), Octavian (a young count who is in love with her—a "pants role" sung by a woman), Baron Ochs von Lerchenau (a country bumpkin who isn't quite as young as he thinks he is), and Sophie (a young woman, to whom Baron Ochs is engaged). As the opera begins, the Marschallin and Octavian are together, having spent the night in lovemaking. Octavian is forced to disguise himself as a chambermaid by the announced arrival of a guest, but the guest is not the Marschallin's husband, as feared, but rather Baron Ochs. Ochs asks for the Marschallin's help in courting Sophie, but while she isn't looking, he makes a pass at the chambermaid, really Octavian in disguise. Octavian escapes, and in his absence, he is appointed as a Rosenkavalier, whose duty it is to carry the Baron's love-token—a silver rose—to Sophie. When Octavian carries out his mission, he and Sophie fall immediately in love, and Sophie asks him to save her from marriage to Ochs. After several dozen more plot twists, Ochs is confounded, the young lovers are united, and the Marschallin, who knew Octavian would eventually leave her for a younger woman, is left alone.

What You'll Hear

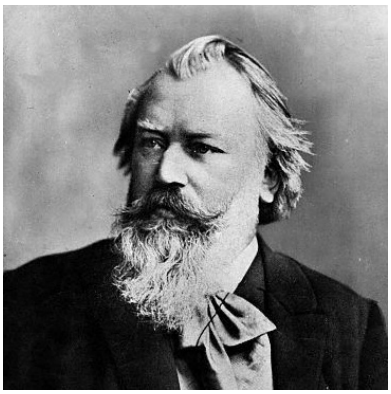
The *Suite*—likely the work of conductor Artur Rodzinski—is set in five interconnected sections, following the plot of the opera.

The opera was a huge hit, and publishers, some of them unscrupulous, began to extract and sell arrangements of its music almost as soon as it hit the stage. Strauss himself extracted a series of waltzes from the opera, and the suite heard here

appeared in 1944. It seems to have been largely the work of conductor Artur Rodzinski of the New York Philharmonic, through Strauss allowed for its publication in 1945. The *Suite* begins with the opera's orchestral *Prelude*—the big, turbulent love scene between the Marschallin and Octavian. The second section is music for the entrance of Octavian as the Rosenkavalier, and an arrangement of the initial love duet between Octavian and Sophie. After a brief moment of bluster when Baron Ochs realizes that his Rosenkavalier and his fiancée have fallen in love, there are a series of waltzes for the Baron, including a lyrical violin solo. The fourth section adapts the climactic Act III scene where the Marschallin sadly releases her hold on Octavian, and Octavian and Sophie sing a passionate love duet ("It is a dream, beyond belief, that we two are united forever."). The *Suite* closes with a reprise of Baron Ochs's waltz music and a short coda.

Brahms's second piano concerto, written over 20 years after his first, is a profound work that shows the influence of his careful work on symphonic style in the intervening decades.

Johannes Brahms
Born: May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.
Died: April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.



Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83

- **Composed**: Begun in 1878 and completed in July 1881.
- **Premiere**: Brahams played the solo part at the first performance, a private concert in Meiningen in October 1881, and was also the pianist for the public premiere, in Budapest, on November 9, 1881.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: Nine previous performances at these concerts have featured Gunnar Johansen (1955), Bela Szilagi (1962), Van Cliburn (1971), Alicia de Larrocha (1981), André Watts (1990), Garrick Ohlsson (2002), Philippe Bianconi (2013) and Emanuel Ax (2005 and 2018).
- **Duration**: 50:00.

Background

More than most 19th-century concertos, this work calls on the piano soloist to work as an equal partner with the orchestra in developing the composer's thematic ideas.

When a 26-year-old Brahms premiered his first piano concerto in 1859, audience reactions ranged from indifference to revulsion. While its failure seems to have been due as much to musical politics as the work itself, Brahms was in no hurry to return to writing piano concertos, and certainly stayed away from works as passionate and flashy as the first concerto. He wrote to the violinist Joseph Joachim: "A second will sound different." Brahms was true to his word, but a second piano concerto was over 20 years in coming. He began sketching the concerto in 1878, during a trip to Italy, and continued to work on it over the next three years. It was not until the summer of 1881, that Brahms—with tongue firmly in cheek—announced to his friend, Elisabeth von Herzogenberg: "I have written a tiny little piano concerto with a little wisp of a scherzo. It is in B-flat..." Brahms clearly understood that his "tiny little B-flat concerto" was the largest work in this genre since Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto. Soon after its completion, Brahms and a colleague played a two-piano arrangement of the concerto for a small group of friends, including the influential critic Eduard Hanslick. The concerto's reputation spread quickly, and Brahms was soon invited by Hans von Bülow to perform it with Bülow's orchestra at Meiningen. After working out small details in this private performance, Brahms played the work at in a public concert at the Redoutensaal in Budapest. In contrast to the dismal reception given his first piano concerto, this work was very successful, almost immediately gaining acceptance as a part of the standard repertoire.

In the decades between 1859 and 1881, Brahms had become a self-confident and internationally acknowledged master of symphonic form. The sharp distinction between the first and second concertos is clear in this light. While his youthful D minor concerto had been a brilliant and somewhat autobiographical work, Brahms himself was aware of its shortcomings, most of which resulted from his inexperience in orchestration. In contrast, the B-flat concerto is a more mature and emotionally reserved work that makes skillful use of the orchestra. The work was composed directly after the completion of his second symphony, and the elements of his mature symphonic style are heard in this concerto. Brahms even adds a fourth movement, expanding the typical three-movement concerto form to symphonic proportions. But his second piano concerto also presents special challenges for the soloist, above

and beyond sheer endurance. The pianist must be sensitive to the equal role played by the orchestra in developing thematic material. While there are few outward displays of virtuosity, the soloist is also called upon to play passages in octaves and sixths, immense chords, and complex rhythms, often in partnership with the full orchestra.

What You'll Hear

This concerto is set in four movements:

- A large opening movement in sonata form.
- A turbulent scherzo with a Major-key central episode.
- A lovely *Andante* movement, with a prominent solo role for the cello.
- A vigorous and expansive closing rondo, that features virtuosic passages for the piano.

The concerto begins with a calm and dignified theme played by solo horn, in dialogue with the soloist. After a brief cadenza, the main theme is reintroduced, now by full orchestra. The opening movement (*Allegro non troppo*) continues in a greatly expanded sonata form. Brahms's formal model for this opening movement seems to have been the equally expansive opening of Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto. The second movement (*Allegro appassionato*), Brahms's "little wisp of a scherzo," begins in D minor, with a vigorous offbeat figure in the piano. Aside from a jaunty Major-key central episode in D Major, the mood is turbulent throughout. Again, Brahms has expanded the form, inserting a great deal of thematic development into this normally clear-cut three-part form. After the stormy scherzo, Brahms places a gentle *Andante*. This movement opens with a solo cello presenting a quiet theme that is later picked up by the soloist in a tranquil and unhurried cadenza. (Brahms liked this theme enough that he later reworked it in a song: *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*.) A central section is more agitated, with the piano taking a leading role, but the solo cello, now in dialogue with the piano, returns to round off the *Andante*. The finale (*Allegretto grazioso*), which contains the most dramatic and virtuosic music for the soloist, is set in rondo form. The recurring refrain begins with a forceful dotted motive in the piano. The rondo, typically the lightest of Classical forms—based upon the repeat of a main idea with contrasting ideas in between—is here expanded to massive proportions: anything less would be overbalanced by what has come before.

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