

STONY BROOK SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday, February 28th, 2026, 7:30 PM

Michelle Merrill

Conductor

Muli Yu

Piano

PROGRAM

Piano Concerto No. 2 in Bb Major, Op. 83

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

- I. Allegro non troppo
- II. Allegro appassionato
- III. Andante
- IV. Allegretto grazioso—Un poco più presto

Transfigure to Grace

Jessie Montgomery (b. 1981)

INTERMISSION

The Firebird Suite (1919 version)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

- I. Introduction
- II. The Firebird and its Dance
- III. Variation of the Firebird
- IV. The Princesses' Round (Khorovod)
- V. Infernal Dance of King Kashchei
- VI. Berceuse (Lullaby)
- VII. Finale

Please turn off all portable devices during the performance.



Stony Brook
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Department of Music

STONY BROOK SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Michelle Merrill **Conductor**

Michelle Merrill has been inspiring audiences throughout the country with her sharply detailed and vibrant performances. A passionate and dynamic artist, she is the Music Director of both the Winston Salem Symphony and the Coastal Symphony of Georgia,



where she has ignited the growth and expansion of each orchestra's offerings both on and off the stage.

Ms. Merrill's growing guest conducting schedule includes recent and upcoming engagements with the National Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre national d'Île-de-France, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Las Vegas

Philharmonic, Sarasota Orchestra, and the Round Top Music Festival Institute. In past seasons, she has conducted concerts with the San Francisco Opera, National Arts Centre Orchestra (Ottawa), Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Jacksonville Symphony, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, River Oaks Chamber Orchestra (ROCO), Iceland Symphony Orchestra, Toledo Symphony Orchestra, Oklahoma City Philharmonic, West Virginia Symphony, Symphoria (Syracuse), Princeton Symphony Orchestra, Louisiana Philharmonic, Orlando Philharmonic, Sacramento Philharmonic & Opera, Boise Philharmonic, New Music Detroit, and the Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic, where she formerly served as the Assistant Conductor from 2012 - 2015.

During her four-year tenure from 2014 - 2018 as the Assistant and then Associate Conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin, Ms Merrill helped plan a wide variety of concerts each season, including the renowned educational webcasts, which have reached over 100,000 students to date in classrooms throughout the nation. Holding the title of Phillip and Lauren Fisher Community Ambassador,

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Ms. Merrill also gave pre-concert lectures, led adult music education seminars, engaged with students and adults in and around Metro Detroit, spoke on behalf of the DSO throughout the community, and participated in hosting Live from Orchestra Hall, the DSO's free concert webcast that launched in 2011 and is now watched in more than 100 countries.

Ms. Merrill is a proud recipient of a 2016 Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Award as well as the prestigious 2013 Ansbacher Conducting Fellowship as awarded by members of the Vienna Philharmonic and the American Austrian Foundation, which enabled her to be in residence at the world-renowned Salzburg Festival. Born in Dallas, TX, she studied conducting with Dr. Paul C. Phillips at Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts, where she holds a Master of Music Degree in conducting and a Bachelor of Music in performance. Apart from music, she loves cooking, running, hiking, and spending time outdoors with her husband, Steve Merrill, who serves as the principal percussionist of the Jacksonville Symphony, and their two sons, Davis and Emmett.

Muli Yu Piano



Muli Yu is a doctoral student in piano performance at Stony Brook University, where she studies under the guidance of Gilbert Kalish. She earned her Master of Music degree from Stony Brook University and her Bachelor of Music degree from Biola University, where she studied with Dr. Li-Shan Hung. Having begun her piano studies at the age of four, Muli has performed extensively throughout the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area—including the U.S. Department of State headquarters—as well as around the United States at venues such as Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, and internationally at the Museo

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del Violino in Cremona, Italy. Through her performances, she seeks to connect with listeners on a heartfelt level—offering comfort, shared understanding, and a reflection of God’s beauty and glory through music.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in Bb Major **Johannes Brahms**

Johannes Brahms began work on his Second Piano Concerto in 1878, but temporarily shelved it to work on his Violin Concerto, Op. 77. It was eventually completed in 1881 and dedicated to Eduard Marxsen, his former teacher. The first performance took place in Budapest on November 9, 1881 with Brahms himself at the piano. The work is unusual because it is cast in a four-movement symphonic form, with a scherzo appearing after the opening movement. It remains one of the lengthiest and most technically demanding concerti in the standard repertoire.

The work begins softly, with a solo horn introducing the theme over lush piano arpeggios. The calm mood is interrupted by a blistering cadenza that leads into the full orchestral statement of the first theme. Breakneck piano outbursts alternate with orchestral

thematic development. Piano and orchestra continue to play off one another, continuously spinning off and exploring various themes. The development section explores the distant keys of F minor and B minor, and features chordal figures and elaborate runs by the soloist around orchestral thematic fragments. A series of subdued runs and figurations finally smoothes out the pent-up energy, and allows for the brilliant reemergence of the opening theme. The calm mood of the recapitulation, however, is once again broken by the piano, this time by a vivacious episode in B minor. This leads to an exciting passage of brilliant orchestral themes and a solo part that explores exceptionally (for Brahms) chromatic piano textures. One last outburst of the opening theme by piano and full orchestra emphatically concludes the movement.

There is no rest for the pianist after the virtuosic first movement, though. The piano introduces the austere theme in D minor that begins the Scherzo. This theme is directly followed by a quasi-modal theme introduced by strings in octaves. These ideas are repeated and developed, but just as the

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Scherzo reaches a conclusion, Brahms swiftly moves into a D major trio. The trio theme is a simple, triadic melody with horn accompaniment, creating a total contrast with its Volkstümlich atmosphere. After brief chromatic figures in the piano and one last joyous repetition of the trio melody, the opening scherzo returns. A final restatement of the Scherzo material, propelled by rapid chordal figures in the piano, brings the movement to a close.

The Adagio, cast in B flat major, is conceived as a duet between solo cello and piano, leading some to interpret this movement as a veiled reference to Brahms' mysterious relationship with Clara Schumann. The opening cello melody, tender and inviting, strongly resembles his later Lied, "Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer," from his Op. 105 Lieder. The middle section is dominated by the piano, which begins close to the cello melody but strays towards a more tempestuous mood at times, seeming to reject the comfort offered by the now-absent cello. The piano softens during a brief foray into F# major, however. By way of a yearning gesture in the high register, the cello returns to the opening melody, with the

piano now providing gentle accompaniment. Their duet rises to a sweet and poignant climax, providing a warm end to this movement.

The final movement is a brisk, comparatively light-hearted rondo in B flat major. The piano introduces a dotted theme and is answered by the strings. The first episode is clock-like with a focus on reed instruments. The rondo theme is restated in the distant keys of E major and B minor, and then returns smoothly back to the home key. This is followed by a lurching episode first stated in the strings and echoed in the woodwinds. Despite the thematic change, the piano continuously propels the movement forward. A brief cadenza leads to the final statement of the rondo theme in the full orchestra. Leaping figures and brilliant runs by the soloist bring the Concerto to its satisfying conclusion.

Note by David Blake

Transfigure to Grace **Jessie Montgomery**

In 2019, I composed a work for ballet in collaboration with the Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Virginia Arts Festival to commemorate the 1619

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Project, which acknowledged the arrival of the first enslaved Africans brought to the United States. In the years that followed, significant movements in my own life, and in society at large, reminded me of the necessity of that commemoration, and the importance of exploring this music further. As a result, elements of that composition have since flowed through other pieces I've written, incorporating themes of self-reflection and the natural world — perhaps as a way to regain a connection to self and purpose.

This episodic suite recalls some of the essential themes of water and transformation from the ballet, with the French horn playing a primary role as it leads the major transitions between sections of the suite. The music begins with vivid imagery of water evolving into a dynamic surge; it is meant to evoke an unfinished chapter in our journey toward equality and grace of humankind.

— Jessie Montgomery

The Firebird Suite (1919 version) **Igor Stravinsky**

"Astonish me!" With these words, Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) changed the fate of Russian ballet in the twentieth

century. The famed impresario had just hosted a string of successful performances in France as part of a "historical concerts" series, including works by Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Scriabin, and Rachmaninoff. The 1909 concert, the first to include ballet on its program, proved extremely popular; however, French critics bemoaned the absence of the "exotic" Russian sounds they had come to love through the previous concerts. Diaghilev was quick to begin planning a hitherto unseen spectacle of Russian pageantry for the 1910 concert. To do so, Diaghilev needed to find the composer willing to engage with his unique musical project: creating a folklorist style with just enough "exotic" musical elements to sound, to French ears, quintessentially Russian.

The 28-year-old Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) was the first to accept Diaghilev's commission after the impresario had been rejected by four other composers. Stravinsky's music for the production may be understood as two contrasting styles tracing the plot of the ballet: a tonal, folklorist style to accompany the human characters, and a fantastical, chromatic ("exotic") style for the

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evil magician Kaschey and the eponymous Firebird, a mythical beast of incomparable beauty and power. The folk music for the humans is authentic: the composer mined One Hundred Russian Folk Songs for suitable material, an anthology published by Stravinsky's former teacher Rimsky-Korsakov.

The plot of the ballet, devised by artist Alexandre Benois and choreographer Michel Fokine, is a stitching together of several Slavic folktales into a single cohesive story. This story revolves around the main character, Prince Ivan, a human, who one day while hunting stumbles into the realm of the evil magician Kaschey the Immortal. Ivan soon encounters the Firebird, tracks her, and is on the verge of slaughtering her when the beast pleads for reprieve, which Ivan grants her. Thus spared, the Firebird tells Ivan that he may summon her whenever he finds himself in dire need.

In the next scene, Ivan encounters thirteen princesses, one of whom he immediately falls in love with. Upon discovering that they are under the spell of Kaschey, Ivan decides to rescue them with the help of the Firebird, who

protects Ivan as he confronts the magician. The Firebird casts her own spell over Kaschey, causing him and his minions to dance maniacally and ultimately fall into a deep sleep, accompanied by Stravinsky's infamous "Infernal Dance" music. While Kaschey sleeps, Ivan finds the hidden egg where the magician keeps his soul and source of immortality, destroys it, and subsequently releases the princesses from his spell; Kaschey's minions revert to human form, and all celebrate as Ivan and his beloved princess marry.

The ballet's premiere in Paris with the Ballet Russe was an enormous success, and in 1919 Stravinsky published an abridged version of the dance movements, the version we hear tonight.

Note Supervised by Sarah Fuller

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