Junior Recital

Liu Xuanyu, viola · Liu Jia, piano
Monday, 30 November 2026, 1:00pm · YST Concert Hall

Programme

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)	Viola Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 120 No. 1 I. Allegro appassionato II. Andante un poco adagio III. Allegretto grazioso IV. Vivace	c. 25'

Programme Notes

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Viola Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 120 No. 1

Brahms's two sonatas Op. 120 are among the last works he ever wrote, and they almost did not exist. In 1890, at the age of 57, Brahms told friends that he intended to stop composing. The following year he heard Richard Mühlfeld, the principal clarinettist of the Meiningen court orchestra, and was so moved by his playing that he returned to writing music. For Mühlfeld he composed the Clarinet Trio, Op. 114, and the Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115, in 1891, and finally, in the summer of 1894 at the spa town of Bad Ischl, the two sonatas of Op. 120. They are his last pieces of chamber music. Brahms and Mühlfeld gave the first public performances in Vienna in January 1895.

When the sonatas were published in 1895, Brahms also issued a version for viola and piano that he prepared himself, adjusting the solo part to suit the instrument's range and its darker, warmer sound. Because the viola has so few works by the great Romantic composers, these two sonatas quickly became, and remain, the cornerstone of its repertoire. The music is typical of Brahms's late style: concentrated, autumnal and deeply lyrical, with the viola and piano treated as completely equal partners.

I. Allegro appassionato

The sonata opens with a short, sombre introduction in the piano before the viola enters with a restless, searching theme in F minor. The movement is built in sonata form and moves between passionate outbursts and moments of great tenderness. Instead of ending in a dramatic climax, it fades into a quiet, calmer coda.

II. Andante un poco adagio

The slow movement is a simple, intimate song. The viola's long, singing line unfolds over gently moving harmonies in the piano, and the music has the warmth and reflection of a composer looking back on his life.

III. Allegretto grazioso

The third movement is a graceful dance in the spirit of the Austrian Ländler, a country waltz that Brahms loved. Its easy charm is contrasted with a slightly darker middle section before the opening dance returns.

IV. Vivace

The finale moves into a bright F major and brings the sonata to a joyful close. It opens with a ringing figure of repeated notes in the piano, and the two players exchange playful, energetic ideas. After the struggles of the first movement, the work ends in high spirits.

When listening, notice how often the melody passes between the viola and the piano: neither instrument simply accompanies the other. Listen also to how the dark mood of the first movement gradually gives way to the warmth of the middle movements and the brightness of the finale.

Notes by Liu Xuanyu.