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# Guest Artist



Photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

## Aristo Sham

Pianist Aristo Sham won the gold medal and audience award at the 2025 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. Hailed by *The New York Times* as a pianist “whose playing combines clarity, elegance, and abundant technique,” pianist Aristo Sham has dazzled audiences on five continents.

Aristo was featured in the documentary *The World’s Greatest Musical Prodigies*, broadcast by Channel 4 in the UK, and has performed for royalty and dignitaries including Prince Charles, the Queen of Belgium, and ex-President Hu of China. He has collaborated with orchestras such as the Minnesota Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle, Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra under Edo de Waart, English Chamber Orchestra under the late Sir Raymond Leppard, and Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne and the Utah Symphony under Steven Jarvi. Recently, he recorded and hosted the complete Brahms piano solo music on RTHK4, Classical Radio in Hong Kong.

Aristo first achieved international recognition when he won First Prize in the Ettlingen

International Piano Competition in Germany in 2006, and First Prize in the Gina Bachauer International Junior Piano Competition in 2008. He is the First Prize Winner of the 2018 YCA Susan Wadsworth International Auditions and more recently has won prizes in the Vendome Prize at Verbier Festival, Casagrande, Gina Bachauer, Dublin, Clara Haskil, New York, Saint-Priest, and Viotti International Piano Competitions. In 2023, he won the Grand Prix at the Monte-Carlo Music Masters.

Aristo holds a Bachelor’s in Economics from Harvard University and a Master’s in Piano Performance at New England Conservatory, as well as an Artist Diploma from The Juilliard School under Robert McDonald and Orli Shaham. His principal teachers include Eleanor Wong, Colin Stone, Victor Rosenbaum, and Julia Mustonen-Dahlkvist, and he has been mentored by Gabriela Montero. In his free time, Aristo enjoys traveling, languages, gastronomy, and oenology.

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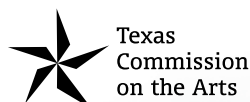
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## *Program*

Sixty-Third Season  
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### **2025 Cliburn Gold Medalist**

Thursday, January 22, 2026  
Waco Hall, 7:30 p.m.

**LAWRENCE LOH**, MUSIC DIRECTOR / CONDUCTOR

*Starburst*..... Jessie Montgomery  
(b. 1981)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15 ..... Johannes Brahms  
(1833-1897)

- I. Maestoso
  - II. Adagio
  - III. Rondo. Allegro non troppo
- Aristo Sham**, piano

#### INTERMISSION

Aristo Sham will sign CDs during intermission; a limited quantity are available for sale in the lobby.

Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 74, "Pathétique"..... Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
(1840-1893)

- I. Adagio — Allegro non troppo
- II. Allegro con grazia
- III. Allegro molto vivace
- IV. Adagio lamentoso

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## Program Notes By Peter J. Rabinowitz

Tonight's concert begins with a three-minute blast of energy: **Starburst**, by **Jessie Montgomery** (b. 1981). It's a vivid exploration of musical color in which, according to the composer, "exploding gestures are juxtaposed with gentle fleeting melodies in an attempt to create a multidimensional soundscape." It was composed with a double meaning in mind. On the more literal level, it's a sonic equivalent of an astronomical phenomenon, "the rapid formation of large numbers of new stars in a galaxy at a rate high enough to alter the structure of the galaxy significantly." On a more metaphorical level, it reflects the quality of the ensemble for which it was originally composed, the Sphinx Virtuosi, a chamber orchestra "dedicated to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in classical music." But beyond that, over the years, *Starburst* has taken on a more general celebratory function; and it's a perfect work to open the first concert of a new year—especially the 250th anniversary of the birth of the United States.

The rest of the concert is devoted to two composers—**Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840–1893) and **Johannes Brahms** (1833–1897)—who were themselves starbursts, producing large numbers of new works that altered the structure of the classical-music galaxy. They're both important Romantics; but they're generally considered to inhabit opposite aesthetic poles. Tchaikovsky is widely viewed as a hyper-expressive composer, one whose music seems a direct expression of his emotions; indeed, he is often disdained by snobs for that very reason. Brahms, in contrast, is widely viewed as a more intellectual composer for whom formal intricacy was a major virtue; and he is often disdained by more sensual listeners for that very reason.

Indeed, although the two composers got along well socially the two times they met, they did not appreciate each other's music. Tchaikovsky found "something dry, cold, vague and nebulous" in Brahms' compositions; after a rehearsal of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, Brahms criticized the composer to his face over dinner. Pairing the two composers like this would thus

seem, on the surface, like a straightforward contrast between two extremes within the Romantic school. But while these commonplaces about their differences have a great deal of truth, matters are more complex: The composers have a lot in common, too.

Thus, on the surface, the **Symphony No. 6 ("Pathétique")** would seem to epitomize the image of Tchaikovsky as an over-the-top, out-of-control composer. It's not simply his lush melodies (like the second theme of the first movement), which can break your heart. Even more, it's his commitment to exploring the extremes. Thus, the exposition of the first movement dies out with a bassoon solo marked sextuple piano (pppppp), so faint that it can't really be played by a bassoon (it's often taken by bass-clarinets, and even then, it's nearly inaudible). And it's followed immediately by a shocking *ff* attack by the full orchestra that snaps you into a different world entirely. The third movement marches relentlessly (and recklessly?) to a shattering climax of such intensity that you're apt to think the work is over—but he then daringly throws you off-balance with a slow finale (the first symphony in the standard Romantic repertoire to end this way) of extraordinary despair, ending quietly in total darkness.

It's undeniably extreme. But is it really an unfiltered outpouring of the composer's own despair? Many believe that it is—even that it represents a premonition of his own death (he died nine days after the symphony's premiere). The link between music and biography was heightened for a while in the 1980s, when there was a now-discredited rumor that he had committed suicide under orders from former schoolmates outraged because he was gay—a rumor that seemed to "explain" the music.

And yet... Attempts to tie the music so directly to Tchaikovsky's state of mind misrepresent him in at least two ways. First, Tchaikovsky's output is as upbeat as it is despairing. In fact, the Sixth Symphony was composed right after *The Nutcracker*. Second, and more important,

## Program Notes

this way of talking about his music suggests that he lacked artistic skill and integrity. But whatever its extremities, the Sixth Symphony—in its form, in its orchestration, in its melodic content, in its handling of rhythm—is a work of utmost artistic control. It's no accident that later composers (in particular, Mahler and Shostakovich) took it so seriously.

As I said, Brahms was more overtly intellectual than Tchaikovsky, more self-consciously concerned with form and less overt in his expression of emotions. In fact, that's what most attracts tonight's soloist, Aristo Sham, to his music. Aristo is not only the Gold Medalist and winner of the "Audience Favorite" prize at the 2025 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition; he's also got a degree in economics from Harvard. An incongruous combination? Not really, he says. "Economics, like music, is really a mixture of structures and models, along with the human interpretive element, right?" As a consequence, his "approach is very similar" in the two areas. "For any piece of music, especially a big one, to make sense, it has to make sense structurally and grammatically." And he loves working out the "relations between different elements of the piece." His favorite music is music in which "the craft of writing and the perfection of form and structure correlate so much with the intent, with the strength and intensity of the content, the message, and the emotions. The composers that I'm drawn to generally have this balance: Rachmaninoff,

Ravel, Beethoven, Mozart—and, of course, Brahms." It's significant that, as a Covid project, he made radio recordings of all of Brahms's solo piano music.

And yet... That's not a full description of Brahms's practice, especially with respect to tonight's offering, the **Piano Concerto No. 1** (1854–1858), which has an emotional overflow one might more readily associate with Tchaikovsky. "The First Piano Concerto," says Aristo, "is unlike any other piece that Brahms wrote. It's so spontaneous, as if the angst and fire of the moment carried him away while he was composing. Unlike the Second Concerto, where everything is perfectly constructed, the First is written so intuitively that it actually doesn't have a lot of the Brahms-signature structural elements. That, for me, is part of the charm of the piece. It's so lopsided, so spur-of-the-moment." Examples? Aristo points to the first movement's second theme. "It is just one of the most gorgeous things anyone has ever written. And I think he dwells on it way longer than the structure asks for: That's part of the beauty of this piece."

There's good reason for the emotional churning here: the music was written at a time of immense psychological pressure. Brahms was being mentored by the century's power couple, Robert and Clara Schumann, and fell in love with Clara—who, probably chastely, returned his passion. Matters were especially treacherous after 1854, when Robert entered a sanatorium following an attempt to kill himself, and Brahms



### Concerto Circle for Young Professionals

**Concerto Circle** (age 20-40) gather for special social events prior to the Waco Symphony Season Concerts, enjoy cocktails and hors d'oeuvres at **DiamondBack's**.

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For more information about joining Concerto Circle, call **254.754.0851**.

# Program Notes

moved into the Schumann household to help care for the children. To add to the pressure, the doctors wouldn't let Clara visit Robert, instead placing Brahms in the awkward position of go-between. What better recipe for emotional turmoil? There was, in addition, a musical catalyst for Brahms's psychological turbulence. Around that time, he heard Beethoven's Ninth for the first time and was profoundly shaken by its overwhelming power. No surprise, then, that the First Concerto, the young composer's

attempt to cope with these life-shattering forces, breaks through Classical-era constraints as it takes us through a turbulent first movement, a calmer middle movement probably inspired by Clara, and a closing rondo in which he confronts his circumstances. The emotionally fraught relationship with Clara lasted his entire life, but at least this Concerto achieves a hard-won victory.

**Peter J. Rabinowitz**  
Have any comments or questions? Please write to me at [notes@wacosymphony.com](mailto:notes@wacosymphony.com)

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See page 27 for a list of WSO Musicians and Fellows.



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Laura and Matt Pattillo  
Leslie and John Pegrarn  
Shelley and Matt Reeves  
Lauren and Josh Satterfield  
Esme and John Sawyer  
Sarah and Nolan Schaffer  
Jennifer and Michel Schornack  
Suzanne and Jonathan Sibley  
Deanna and Sam Starling  
Libby and Martin Starr  
Elizabeth and Gary Stripling  
Laura and Tod Swann  
Dr. Dianna Vitanza  
Deborah and John Warner  
Pam and Brent Watts  
Allison Weeks  
Heather and Brian White  
Mandy and Tom Williams  
Meredith Williams and Chris  
Gatlin  
James Wilson  
Kendra and Brad Wilson  
Christi and Jeff Young

## Concerto Circle

Annie and Alec Burriss  
Katie and Rhett Dawson  
Rebecca and Chris Eubank  
Penny and Jon Gimble

Andrea and Hunter Kosar  
Genesis and Ryan Luna  
Andrew Marshall  
Amanda and Jason Milam

Grayson Palmer  
Ryan and Andy Pattillo  
Ashleigh and John Prothro  
Andrea Racoti