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Guest Artist



Orion Weiss

Photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

One of the most sought-after soloists and chamber music collaborators today, Orion Weiss is a “brilliant pianist” (*The New York Times*) with “powerful technique and exceptional insight” (*The Washington Post*). He has dazzled audiences worldwide with his “head-spinning range of colors” (*Chicago Tribune*) and has performed with all of the major orchestras of North America and at all of the major venues and music festivals.

In February 2025, Weiss released *Arc III*, the final album in his recital trilogy on First Hand Records. Recent performances include cycles of Beethoven’s complete violin sonatas with violinist James Ehnes; a return to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, led by Michael Tilson Thomas; his debut with the National Symphony Orchestra, led by Ken-David Masur; and performances in Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei, Hong Kong, and Seattle. Additional highlights include Weiss’s David Geffen Hall debut in New York with the American Symphony Orchestra, performances of the Goldberg Variations at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and Newport Classical, performances in Italy, London, and Norway, and a tour with the Chamber Music

Society of Lincoln Center. His recording with Augustin Hadelich won Opus Klassik’s Best Chamber Music Recording of 2025.

Known for his affinity for chamber music, Weiss performs at venues and festivals around the United States with artists such as violinists James Ehnes, Augustin Hadelich, and William Hagen; pianists Michael Stephen Brown and Shai Vosner; and many string quartets, including the Ariel, Parker, and Pacifica Quartets.

A native of Ohio, Weiss attended the Cleveland Institute of Music and made his Cleveland Orchestra debut performing Liszt’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in 1999. That same year, with less than 24 hours notice, Weiss stepped in to replace André Watts for a performance of Shostakovich’s Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Weiss’s awards include the Classical Recording Foundation’s Young Artist of the Year, Gilmore Young Artist Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, and more. His teachers include Paul Schenly, Jerome Lowenthal, and Sergei Babayan. In 2004, he graduated from the Juilliard School, where he studied with Emanuel Ax. Learn more: www.orionweiss.com.

SAVE THE DATE
February 13, 2027

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SYMPHONY

Co-chaired by Bryon Barnhill and Kyle Knas

Learn more at
WacoSymphony.com



Opening Notes Pre-Concert Talks

6:40 p.m.-7:10 p.m.

Before each Season Concert, learn about the lives of the composers and explore their music at **Opening Notes**, a free pre-concert talk led by Maestro Loh. Featured soloists often join him in conversation. These are enlightening and educational offerings to enhance your concert experience. **Location is in Recital Hall II within Waco Hall.**

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Program

Sixty-Fourth Season
First Subscription Concert

Impressions of Romanticism

Thursday, September 24, 2026
Waco Hall, 7:30 p.m.

LAWRENCE LOH, MUSIC DIRECTOR / CONDUCTOR

The Star-Spangled Banner John Stafford Smith, composer
(1750-1836)
Francis Scott Key, lyrics
(1779-1843)

Glenn Beals, vocals

Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune" (Afternoon of a Faun) Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Piano Concerto, op. 16, A minor Edvard Grieg
(1843-1907)

- I. Allegro molto moderato
- II. Adagio
- III. Allegro moderato molto e marcato

Orion Weiss, piano

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 3, op. 44, A minor Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873-1943)

- I. Lento; Allegro moderato
- II. Adagio ma non troppo
- III. Lento assai - Allegro

Special thanks to the staff of Waco Hall for their production assistance.

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The Waco Symphony is a member of the League of American Orchestras.

Program Notes By Peter J. Rabinowitz

For much of the nineteenth century, the standard repertoire of symphonic music was dominated by works of German and Austrian composers. But as the century wore on, more and more composers started to challenge that hegemony, often contributing to the development of alternative national styles. Tonight's concert features three Romantic works by composers whose voices are very different from each other's, but who, in one way or another, stepped outside the tradition that led from Beethoven through Schumann and Brahms on to Bruckner.

Of the three offerings, the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (1894) by **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918) is the one that most clearly turns away from that lineage, vigorously erasing any trace of Beethoven's extroversion, Brahms's rigor, or Bruckner's massiveness. The *Faun* was inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's symbolist poem representing a young faun's sensuous musings (are they memories or dreams?) on erotic encounters with nymphs. Mallarmé's poem was a revolutionary text—and Debussy, composing what he called a “backdrop” to it (rather than a synthesis of it), contributed revolutionary music.

But it's revolutionary in an unusual sense. When we think of revolutionary music, we often tend to think of difficult and overwhelming works like Wagner's *Ring* or Stravinsky's violent *Rite of Spring*. Debussy took a different path, undermining musical tradition by coaxing us rather than crushing us. A gentle representation of fleeting memories and dreamscapes unlike anything else in music up to that point, the *Faun* is lightly scored, luminously colored, rhythmically indefinite, and harmonically ambiguous. It's formally flexible, too, often moving in unexpected ways, never jostling us but rarely taking us precisely where we

expect. It nonetheless keeps us transfixed.

Debussy had a complex attitude toward tonight's second composer, **Edvard Grieg** (1843–1907). He grudgingly admired Grieg's artistry, and was even influenced by it in such works as his String Quartet (in some ways modeled on Grieg's). But partly for political reasons—he was furious at what he considered an anti-French letter Grieg had written at the height of the Dreyfus Affair—he turned against him, penning some nasty reviews in 1903, including a famous quip that Grieg's music can have “the bizarre and charming taste of a pink bonbon filled with snow”—in other words, presumably, that it can be sweet and cold, but insubstantial.

You're unlikely to think in those terms as you listen tonight: Grieg's 1868 *Piano Concerto* is certainly neither a bonbon (much less a pink one) nor chilly nor empty. But hearing these two works back-to-back highlights the differences in the composers' voices and makes it easy to see why Debussy disdained this work in particular. Certainly, it's quite a jolt to move from Debussy's hints and suggestions to Grieg's forthrightness. Debussy's faun's adventures are enshrouded in erotic mist—Grieg's thoughts, while definitely romantic, are both purer and more immediate. The Concerto was composed during a summer of happiness with his wife Nina and their new-born child; and like its model, the Concerto that Robert Schumann had written under the spell of his marriage to Clara Wieck, it's a public love-letter. Yet while Grieg clearly reflects the influence of Schumann, he just as clearly veers away: the echoes of Norwegian folk music, especially in the finale, set the Concerto vividly outside the German tradition.

That forthright grandeur is part of what makes it so immediately attractive—Grieg is often considered a purveyor of small-

Program Notes

scale works, but there's nothing small or reticent here. The Concerto is melodically memorable (especially in the passionate middle movement), rhythmically vibrant (with, as I've said, a strong Norwegian folk influence), and virtuosic (the tremendous cadenza in the first movement is one of the most thrilling of the nineteenth century). So it's easy to understand its enduring popularity. High point? For many listeners, the peak of the work comes with the flute solo that interrupts the finale. Arriving in the middle of a rugged dance, it has a touch of the distant remembrance we hear in the flute music that opens the Debussy—but it touches us in a much more direct way, and when the full orchestra, crowned by the brass section, shouts out the theme at the end of the piece, it has a self-confidence that may overwhelm you.

Debussy's attitude toward Grieg was ambiguous—**Sergei Rachmaninoff** (1873–1943), whose *Symphony No. 3* (1935–36) closes the concert, had a much more straightforward admiration. With violinist Fritz Kreisler, he made a recording of the Grieg Third Violin Sonata (which, coincidentally, Debussy also performed as accompanist), a recording that has held its place in the catalog for nearly a century. More important for understanding the relationships among tonight's works: while Debussy dismissed the piano writing in the Grieg Concerto as “very traditional,” Rachmaninoff—the greatest pianist of his time—believed that Grieg “had the gift of writing beautifully” for the instrument, and it's said that he considered it the greatest concerto ever written. It had a clear influence on Rachmaninoff's own First Concerto, and he conducted it on the famous 1908 concert where he premiered his Second Symphony.

That turned out to be an auspicious event, for the Second Symphony went on to become

Rachmaninoff's most popular orchestral work—and its lyricism and lushness have come to epitomize, for many, the “Rachmaninoff style.” But by the 1930s, that style had changed—and while his later works disappointed concert-goers when they were new, they have become ever more appreciated as time has passed. Last season's opening concert concluded with the *Symphonic Dances*, his last major work; building on that, tonight's concert—also the season opener—concludes with the Third Symphony, written a few years earlier but showing many of the same characteristics.

What are those characteristics? As conductor Larry Loh puts it, “There's a sense of adventure in these late works, a sense of nonconformity. In his middle period, he had written in a way that he felt that people wanted him to write, in order to have his music accepted. But later on, he didn't care as much about that.” How does that new spirit emerge? Most clearly, you see it in a sharper focus. The melodies are somewhat leaner, less lush—not, as Larry puts it, “the sort of themes that would translate easily to a pop song”; the rhythms are tighter, often more nervous; the harmonies are more astringent; the colors are more tart and more imaginative (percussion is far more important and more clearly integrated). At the same time, the music is more complex, in both form and texture: the dazzling fugue that shows up in the third movement is quite unlike anything in his earlier works.

Does that mean his later music is unapproachable? Certainly not. All the things we love about Rachmaninoff are still there, although in slightly less extravagant fashion. Structurally, like his other symphonies (and like the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies by his beloved Tchaikovsky), the Third is introduced by a motto theme that recurs throughout,

Program Notes

binding the work together. As in many of his other works, too, the melodies often bear the influence of Orthodox Russian chant—and, more generally, are often infused with a heartbreaking Russian melancholy growing out of his nostalgia for the homeland he'd left after the Revolution. Then, toward the end, there's its incorporation of the Catholic plainchant *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath"), which haunted Rachmaninoff throughout his compositional career. His superb sense of architecture is present, too, evidenced by its overpowering sense of arrival in the final bars. "He knows how to build to an ending,"

says Larry, and we can see this especially clearly in the Third, which "has one of the most exciting endings that he's ever written."

"The more I conduct it, the more I love it," says Larry. As you listen tonight, you'll understand why.

Peter J. Rabinowitz

Have any comments or questions? Please write to me at notes@wacosymphony.com

The Nutcracker

Saturday, December 12 / 7:00 p.m.

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