2026–2027 Musical Interludes | Loss Transformed

Program Notes

This season's Musical Interludes concerts explore transformation, in music itself and in the lives behind the music. This program turns to loss: of a loved one, of health, of a composer's own voice. Clara Schumann's Romances are among the last works she wrote before she stopped composing, and Brahms wrote his Horn Trio the year his mother died. Schubert's final songs were named "Swan Song" by his publisher after his death, and Beethoven completed his quartet in deafness, never hearing it played. Not all of this music is sorrowful; much of it is tender, playful, even exuberant.

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Clara Schumann (1819–1896) was one of the most celebrated pianists of the nineteenth century, performing in public from the age of nine. She also composed from childhood, though not without doubt. "I once thought that I possessed creative talent," she wrote in her diary at twenty, "but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose." She kept writing anyway. In the summer of 1853, living in Düsseldorf with her husband, the composer Robert Schumann, and their children, she entered one of her most productive periods and completed the ***Three Romances***, Op. 22, for violin and piano. Within months, Robert's health collapsed. He attempted suicide in February 1854 and spent his last two years in an asylum. After his death in 1856, Clara devoted herself to performing and to championing his music. She would compose almost nothing in her remaining forty years, and the Romances are among the last works she wrote.

The first Romance is marked *Andante molto*, an unhurried walking pace, and opens with the violin singing a long, tender line over a gently rippling piano. The harmony drifts in unexpected directions before the piece settles into quiet. The second is more restless. Its melody is plaintive and simple, carried over a lightly moving accompaniment, with a brighter middle section before the opening returns. The third, marked *Leidenschaftlich schnell* ("passionately fast"), is the most expansive. The piano surges in wave-like figures beneath a soaring, unbroken violin line. Today they are among Clara Schumann's most frequently performed works.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) was devoted to his mother, Christiane. In February 1865 she suffered a stroke in Hamburg and died at seventy-five. Later that year, staying in the village
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of Lichtental near Baden-Baden, close to his friend Clara Schumann, Brahms wrote the ***Horn Trio in E-flat***, Op. 40, for horn, violin, and piano. It is his only chamber work for horn. Brahms had learned the instrument as a boy from his father, a working musician in Hamburg, and he wrote specifically for the natural horn, an older instrument without valves. The player shapes notes with a hand inside the bell, which gives some tones a veiled, covered sound. Brahms left no statement tying the trio to his mother. However, the timing and the music itself have led listeners to hear it as a memorial. In the years that followed, he completed *A German Requiem*, another work often linked to her death.

This program features movements three and four – the final two movements of the trio. *Adagio mesto* ("slow and mournful"), begins with the piano alone, low and hushed. The violin and horn enter quietly in long, sighing lines. The music gathers weight, swells to a climax, and falls back into stillness. Along the way, the horn and violin offer a gentle, folk-like tune, almost in passing. By some accounts, it echoes a folk song Brahms learned from his mother. In the *Finale*, that tune returns transformed. It is now quick and bright, in the galloping rhythm of a hunting call. The horn, an instrument long associated with the outdoors and hunting, leads a movement of open-air energy that drives straight through to the end.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) spent his last months in Vienna working at a remarkable pace. In 1828 alone he completed his final three piano sonatas, the String Quintet in C, and a group of songs on poems by Ludwig Rellstab and Heinrich Heine. In early November he fell seriously ill. He wrote to a friend on November 12, "I am ill. I have eaten nothing for eleven days and drunk nothing." He died a week later, at thirty-one. The Viennese publisher Tobias Haslinger gathered fourteen of the late songs and issued them the following year as *Schwanengesang* ("Swan Song"), after the legend that a swan sings only once, just before it dies. Schubert never conceived the songs as a cycle. The title was the publisher's.

Loss Transformed includes two of the Rellstab songs. "Liebesbotschaft" ("Love's Message") opens the published set. The piano ripples in a continuous, murmuring figure, the sound of a brook. The singer asks the stream to carry his greetings to his distant beloved, to refresh her flowers, and at sunset to lull her to sleep. The melody is warm and unhurried, moving easily with the water. "Ständchen" ("Serenade") is a night song to a beloved. Over soft, broken chords in the piano, the voice sings a long, pleading melody, and the piano answers each phrase like an echo. The music turns between minor and major, uncertain and then hopeful, before closing on a final plea. It became one of Schubert's best-loved songs.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) began losing his hearing in his late twenties. By his late forties he could no longer follow conversation, but he kept composing. In his final years, after the Ninth Symphony, he turned almost entirely to writing string quartets. The ***String Quartet in C-sharp minor***, Op. 131, completed in the summer of 1826, has seven movements meant to be played without pause. That same summer his nephew Karl, his ward, attempted

suicide. Beethoven dedicated the quartet to Baron Joseph von Stutterheim, the officer who then gave Karl a place in his regiment. Beethoven died the following March. He never heard the quartet performed.

This performance includes the first two and last two movements. The quartet opens with a slow fugue, a form in which a single melody is introduced by each instrument in turn and then woven together. The first violin begins alone, quiet and searching, and the others enter one by one. The lines overlap and thicken, but the music stays hushed and inward for long stretches. The second movement breaks the spell. It is light and dancing, in a bright major key, with an almost folk-like lilt. The sixth movement features a short, hymn-like Adagio that leads directly into the finale. This movement is the most forceful music in the quartet, with driving rhythms, sharp accents, and echoes of the fugue's opening melody, now urgent rather than searching. It ends on three emphatic major chords. By one often-repeated, but unconfirmed account, Schubert asked to hear the quartet in the last weeks of his life and afterward said, "After this, what is left for us to write?"

Schwanengesang (*Swan Song*)

Texts by Ludwig Rellstab; translations by Richard Wigmore first published by Gollancz and reprinted in the Hyperion Schubert Song Edition

"Liebesbotschaft" ("Love's message")

Rauschendes Bächlein, so silbern und hell,
Eilst zur Geliebten so munter und schnell?
Ach, trautes Bächlein, mein Bote sei du;
Bringe die Grüsse des Fernen ihr zu.

All' ihre Blumen im Garten gepflegt,
Die sie so lieblich am Busen trägt,
Und ihre Rosen in purpurner Glut,
Bächlein, erquicke mit kühlender Flut.

Wenn sie am Ufer, in Träume versenkt,
Meiner gedenkend, das Köpfchen hängt;
Tröste die Süsse mit freundlichem Blick,
Denn der Geliebte kehrt bald zurück.

Neigt sich die Sonne mit rötlichem Schein,
Wiege das Liebchen in Schlummer ein.
Rausche sie murmelnd in süsse Ruh,
Flüstre ihr Träume der Liebe zu.

Murmuring brook, so silver and bright,
do you hasten, so lively and swift, to my beloved?
Ah, sweet brook, be my messenger.
Bring her greetings from her distant lover.

All the flowers, tended in her garden,
which she wears so charmingly on her breast,
and her roses with their crimson glow:
refresh them, brooklet, with your cooling waters.

When on your banks she inclines her head
lost in dreams, thinking of me,
comfort my sweetheart with a kindly glance,
for her beloved will soon return.

When the sun sinks in a red flush,
lull my sweetheart to sleep.
With soft murmurings bring her sweet repose,
and whisper dreams of love.

Schwanengesang, "Ständchen" ("Serenade")

Leise flehen meine Lieder
Durch die Nacht zu Dir;
In den stillen Hain hernieder,
Liebchen, komm' zu mir!

Flüsternd schlanke Wipfel rauschen
In des Mondes Licht;
Des Verräters feindlich Lauschen
Fürchte, Holde, nicht.

Hörst die Nachtigallen schlagen?
Ach! sie flehen Dich,
Mit der Töne süssen Klagen
Flehen sie für mich.

Sie verstehn des Busens Sehnen,
Kennen Liebesschmerz,
Rühren mit den Silbertönen
Jedes weiche Herz.

Lass auch Dir die Brust bewegen,
Liebchen, höre mich!
Bebend harr' ich Dir entgegen!
Komm', beglücke mich!

Softly my songs plead
through the night to you;
down into the silent grove,
beloved, come to me!

Slender treetops whisper and rustle
in the moonlight;
my darling, do not fear
that the hostile betrayer will overhear us.

Do you not hear the nightingales call?
Ah, they are imploring you;
with their sweet, plaintive songs
they are imploring for me.

They understand the heart's yearning,
they know the pain of love;
with their silvery notes
they touch every tender heart.

Let your heart, too, be moved,
beloved, hear me!
Trembling, I await you!
Come, make me happy