

Outi Tarkiainen

The Ring of Fire and Love

First performance: 2021

Approximate duration: 9 minutes

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Finnish composer Outi Tarkiainen's (born 1985) piece explores three natural phenomena. "Ring of Fire" is a term used to describe a belt of volcanos around the Pacific Ocean where most of the world's earthquakes occur. The same term describes the moment in a solar eclipse when only the outer ring of sunlight radiates from behind the moon. But the third use of the term is the one with which Tarkiainen was most personally familiar. She writes, "The same expression is also used to describe what a woman feels when, as she gives birth, the baby's head passes through her pelvis. That moment is the most dangerous in the baby's life, its little skull being subjected to enormous pressure, preparing it for life in a way unlike any other. *The Ring of Fire and Love* is a work for orchestra about this earth-shattering, creative, cataclysmic moment they travel through together."

Tarkiainen gave birth to her child in 2019 and was inspired to compose this piece of music. *The Ring of Fire and Love* alternates between big, bombastic sections and quieter, more reflective moments. In those calmer moments, the harp performs a steady beat while meditative melodies are played by flute and *muted trumpet*. When a *mute* is placed in the *bell* of a trumpet (the flared opening at its end), the volume is decreased and the *timbre* or tone quality is changed, creating a warmer sound. These quieter moments featuring the harp, flute, and muted trumpet sound like moments of quiet reflection during the experience of something awe-inspiring, whether that be a solar eclipse or the birth of a child.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Concerto No. 24

Allegro

Larghetto

Allegretto

Finale: Allegro tempestoso

Saleem Ashkar, piano

First performance: 1786

Approximate duration: 31 minutes

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A *concerto* is a work for solo instrument with orchestra. The soloist—in this case the pianist—performs at the front of the orchestra in a work that showcases the soloist's and their instrument's abilities. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) wrote 27 piano concertos. He was a pianist and would play the solo piano part in performance, often conducting the orchestra at the same time. At this concerto's *premiere* (its first performance), some parts of the piano solo hadn't been fully written out. At some points in the score, Mozart had only sketched the outlines of the melodies and harmonies that he wanted the pianist to perform. Luckily, Mozart was the pianist and could fill in the gaps on the spot.

Mozart's 24th Piano Concerto is special for a few reasons. First, it is one of only two of his concertos that are in a minor key. That makes it sound more dramatic and emotive than a lot of his other works. Second, this concerto has a large instrumentation when compared to the standard of the day. Back then, clarinets weren't commonly used in orchestras, but Mozart added them to this piece. It is also long. Mozart lengthens the first movement, adding more and more melodies or *themes* in places where it was normal to repeat a melody that was already played.

Many people consider this work to be Mozart's best piano concerto. Even Brahms and Beethoven were impressed with it. When Beethoven first heard it, he remarked to a friend that "we shall never be able to do anything like that."

Johannes Brahms

Symphony No. 1

Tempo molto moderato; Allegro moderato

Andante mosso, quasi allegretto

Allegro molto

First performance: 1876

Approximate duration: 30 minutes

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A *symphony* is a piece of music for large orchestra that usually includes four contrasting *movements* or independent sections. Some of the most famous symphonies of all time were written by Ludwig van Beethoven. His Ninth (and last) Symphony was first performed in 1824.

Even during Johannes Brahms' lifetime (1833–1897), people believed that he would be the next Beethoven. This felt like a lot of pressure to the self-critical Brahms. He once said to a friend, "I shall never write a symphony. You have no idea how someone like me feels when he hears such a giant marching behind him all the time." But when Brahms heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for the first time in 1854, when he was just 21 years old, he decided he had to try. He started work on his First Symphony that year but didn't complete it until 22 years later.

Like most symphonies, Brahms' First Symphony includes four movements that constitute a sort of inside-out sandwich. The "meaty" movements—the longest and most complex—are on the outside (the first and fourth movements). And the inner movements are shorter and lighter. A year after its first performance, a famous conductor of the time dubbed the work "Beethoven's Tenth."

Brahms' First Symphony will be performed on February 22, 2025, at the Touhill Performing Arts Center at UMSL with David Afkham conducting.

Activities to Enrich Student Learning

- 1.** *The Ring of Fire and Love* was inspired by natural phenomena in outer space (solar eclipse), on the earth (earthquakes), and in the human body (childbirth). Have you ever experienced something in the natural world that amazed you and left you with a sense of awe? Think of something you've witnessed in the natural world. If you were to create a short piece of music to describe that event and your emotions in response to it, what would it sound like? What musical elements would you choose to communicate that experience?
- 2.** Brahms felt a lot of pressure because people expected him to be the next Beethoven. We know from his biography and the documents that he left behind that Brahms was a perfectionist. He frequently destroyed work he didn't think was good enough, he composed very slowly, and he was scared to share his music with the public too soon. Can you relate to how Brahms felt? Have you ever felt overwhelmed by other peoples' expectations? How do you deal with that sort of pressure?
- 3.** Brahms' First Symphony has been called "Beethoven's Tenth" for two reasons: many people feel that Brahms continued the progress Beethoven started in how symphonies were composed, and Brahms composed melodies in the first and last movements of this symphony that sound a lot like Beethoven's. In the first movement, a melody sounds like the short-short-short-long melody of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. In the last movement, a hymn-like melody sounds like the "Ode to Joy" of Beethoven's Ninth. The conductor who made the comment about "Beethoven's Tenth" was likely suggesting that Brahms paid *homage* to Beethoven. (To *pay homage* to someone means to do something to honor them.) But Brahms took it as an accusation of *plagiarism* (stealing someone else's creative ideas). There are many examples in modern times of musicians borrowing and manipulating other musicians' ideas. When do you think someone crosses the line from paying homage to another musician to stealing their ideas?
- 4.** Learn from the pros! Discuss how the experience of seeing and hearing the SLSO has informed your own music-making. What did you see or hear the SLSO musicians doing that you could strive toward, both individually and as an ensemble? What do you think it would take for you to perform with a professional music ensemble one day?
- 5.** Following the concert, complete the following statements: "I noticed...", "I enjoyed...", "I wonder..."

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