

Yefim Bronfman

Sunday, February 22, 2026 at 3pm

This is the 1,502nd concert in Koerner Hall

Yefim Bronfman, piano

PROGRAM

Robert Schumann: *Arabeske* in C Major, op. 18

Johannes Brahms: Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, op. 5

- I. Allegro maestoso
- II. Andante espressivo
- III. Allegro energico
- IV. Intermezzo (Rückblick): Andante molto
- V. Allegro moderato ma rubato

INTERMISSION

Claude Debussy: *Images*, Book 2, L. 111

Cloches à travers les feuilles
Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût
Poissons d'or

Sergei Prokofiev: Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Major, op. 83

- I. Allegro inquieto
- II. Andante caloroso
- III. Precipitato

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

Robert Schumann

Born in Zwickau, Saxony, June 8, 1810; died in Endenich, nr. Bonn, Germany, July 29, 1856

Arabeske in C Major, op. 18 (1839)

Schumann's plans for a career as a virtuoso pianist were dashed by the age of 22 when he sustained permanent injury to two fingers on his right hand. Since he ruled teaching out of the question, he turned to royalties from music publishing and music journalism as a means of supporting himself. This brought him to Vienna early in October 1838, where he was to remain for six months, trying to build a future for himself and his fiancé, pianist Clara Wieck. He was also composing much piano music, including the short *Arabeske* of 1838-9. It is a graceful rondo, practical and imaginative. The piece is an early example of what was soon to become known as *hausmusik* – that is music geared towards performance in the home, as opposed to the somewhat more sophisticated music designed primarily for the salon and recital performance. Schumann's *Arabeske* lives comfortably in both performance spaces. The whimsical grace notes of its recurring main theme perfectly mirror the visual decoration suggested by the title. Schumann raises the music into the realms of the poetic with the gentle rhapsodic passage after the first minor-key episode and, again, in the evocative coda which is built on the same material.

Johannes Brahms

Born in Hamburg, Germany, May 7, 1833; died in Vienna, Austria, April 3, 1897

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, op. 5 (1853)

In the heady world of 19th century Romanticism, Johannes Brahms proved himself the exception by launching his career with three large-scale piano sonatas. After arriving unannounced at the Düsseldorf home of Robert and Clara Schumann, Clara was bowled over by the 20-year-old Brahms: "He played us sonatas, scherzos and so on, all of his own, all of them showing exuberant imagination, depth of feeling and mastery of form." Robert was no less struck: "His brilliant playing transformed the piano into an orchestra of lamenting and loudly jubilant voices," he wrote. Brahms stayed with the Schumanns that October, completing his third piano sonata under their appreciative, but considered encouragement. Schumann perceptively described the sonatas as "symphonies in disguise" – a prescient remark, as the F minor would be Brahms's last in the form. From then on, his large-scale ideas turned orchestral, while his piano writing evolved through variation form (on themes by Schumann, Handel, and Paganini) and, eventually, toward the inward, more intimately drawn forms of the intermezzo, capriccio, romanze, and ballade.

One of Brahms's early biographers, Richard Specht, saw the F Minor Sonata as a portrait of the artist as a young man – full of ardour, yet already shaped by formal command. Its five-movement design is unusual, but links between the Andante and the Intermezzo, and subtle reminiscences of all four previous movements in the finale, bind the whole together. Brahms evokes the orchestra throughout. Yet the fiery, craggy opening, ranging over the entire keyboard, is utterly pianistic in concept. No notes are wasted in the Allegro maestoso, which grows entirely out of the opening few bars. By contrast, the Andante is a tender, deeply personal nocturne, prefaced by a love poem from Sternau: "Evening approaches, and in the light of the rising moon, two loving hearts join in rapture."

The Scherzo returns to the fiery F minor passion of the first movement, with hints of the rustic Ländler. The Intermezzo (subtitled 'Retrospect') breaks with the classical tradition of the three or four movement sonata, offering a wintry, elegiac echo of the Andante, shadowed by a distant drum-roll. The rondo finale, with its vivid contrasts and contrapuntal bravura, drives this monumental sonata to a triumphant close.

Claude Debussy

Born in St. Germain-en-Laye, France, August 22, 1862; died in Paris, France, March 25, 1918

Images (Book Two), L. 111 (1907)

Debussy liked the word 'Image.' He used it twice for two sets of piano pieces, in 1905 and 1907. He also used it for the *Trois Images* for orchestra and for an early set of pieces, not published until 1977, and now known as the *Images (oubliées)*. "I love pictures (*images*) almost as much as music," he wrote to composer Edgard Varèse in 1911. His friend René Peter says in his memoir: "He may call his compositions pictures, sketches, prints, arabesques, masques, studies in black and white. But clearly, it is his delight to paint in music." The title *Image* gives Debussy a framework that is difficult to pin down in words. His titles are often reflections upon the music itself, rather than statements describing what the music is 'about.' Debussy valued his *Images* highly, telling his publisher, Jacques

Durand: "I think I may say without undue pride that I believe these pieces will live and will take their place in the piano literature ... either to the left of Schubert, or to the right of Chopin."

The first piece in Book Two of Debussy's *Images* is the evocative "Cloches à travers les feuilles" (Bells [heard] through the leaves). Its whole-tone scale, on which Debussy's entire musical structure is built, together with bell overtones and multi-layered textures, summon impressions of distant tolling bells, heard beyond a landscape of rustling leaves. The title of the exotically coloured second Image – "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût" (And the moon sets over the temple that was) – is believed to have been proposed by its dedicatee, Louis Laloy, after the piece was composed. The music suggests serenity and stillness, coloured by echoes of the gamelan. The technically demanding third "Image – Poissons d'or" (Goldfish) – is believed to have been inspired by a Japanese lacquer painting, showing two darting goldfish in rippling water. Its synthesis of trills, tremolos, and a toccata-style of keyboard writing produces vivid illustrative effects, as pianistic bravura transcends technical challenges.

Sergei Prokofiev

Born in Sontzovka, Russia, April 11/23, 1891; died in Moscow, Russia, March 5, 1953

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Major, op. 83 (1939-42)

The descriptive tempo markings inquieto (restless), caloroso (warm), and precipitato (impetuously) reflect both the turbulent nature of Prokofiev's most popular piano sonata and the uncertain times in which he composed it. He completed the work in 1942 in Tbilisi, Georgia, where he and other Soviet artists had been evacuated to escape the Nazi advance during the 'Great Patriotic War.' This sonata is one of his three "War Sonatas" – Nos. 6, 7, and 8 – which he composed between 1939 and 1944. Working simultaneously on all 10 movements of these sonatas, Prokofiev now returned to the piano sonata genre after a 16-year hiatus, producing some of his most compelling work.

The three movements of Sonata No. 7 convey the hopes and aspirations of a nation struggling for victory. Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter, eager to premiere the sonata, learned it in just four days. He described its impact: "The sonata immediately throws one into the anxious situation of a world losing its equilibrium. Disorder and uncertainty reign. Man observes the raging of death-dealing forces. Full of the will for victory, he makes a headlong running attack, clearing away all obstacles. He will become strong through the struggle, expanding into a gigantic and life-affirming force."

The ferocious first movement contains some of Prokofiev's most uncompromising music. Its nervous intensity and bitonality contrast with the warm lyricism of the slow movement, which unfolds with a simple, disarming melody reminiscent of *War and Peace*, Prokofiev's concurrent opera. The theme is also closely related to Schumann's song "Wehmuth" (Sadness). In the moto perpetuo finale, a thrilling seven-beats-to-the-bar rhythm propels the sonata to a decisive conclusion – described by fellow composer Miaskovsky, also evacuated to Tbilisi, as 'superbly wild.'

- Program notes copyright © 2026 Keith Horner

Yefim Bronfman

Piano

Internationally recognized as one of today's most acclaimed and admired pianists, Yefim Bronfman stands among a handful of artists regularly sought by festivals, orchestras, conductors, and recital series. His commanding technique, power, and exceptional lyrical gifts are consistently acknowledged by the press and audiences alike.

Following summer festival appearances in Vail, Tanglewood, and Aspen, the 2025-26 season begins with an extensive recital and orchestral tour in Asia including China, Japan, and South Korea. In Europe Bronfman can be heard with orchestras in London, Kristiansand, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, Dresden, and on tour with Israel Philharmonic. A special trio project with Anne-Sophie Mutter and Pablo Ferrández continued with performances in Switzerland, Spain, Germany, and France in the fall of 2025. With orchestras in North America he returns to New York, Rochester, Cleveland (in Miami), Pittsburgh, Kansas City, and Montreal. In recital, Bronfman can be heard in Prague, Milan, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Orange County, Charlottesville, and this afternoon in Toronto.

Born in Tashkent in the Soviet Union, Yefim Bronfman immigrated to Israel with his family in 1973, where he studied with pianist Arie Vardi, head of the Rubin Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University. In the United States, he studied at The Juilliard School, Marlboro School of Music, and the Curtis Institute of Music, under Rudolf Firkusny, Leon Fleisher, and Rudolf Serkin. A recipient of the prestigious Avery Fisher Prize, in 2010 he was further honoured as the recipient of the Jean Gimbel Lane prize in piano performance from Northwestern University and in 2015 with an honorary doctorate from the Manhattan School of Music.

Yefim Bronfman made his Royal Conservatory debut on April 1, 2010, and this is his third performance in Koerner Hall.