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Philharmonia Orchestra

Homage and Reformation

Renee Gilliland, conductor

Thursday, April 16, 2026, 7:30 p.m.

Grusin Hall

PROGRAM

Sinfonietta No. 1, B-flat Major (A memória de Mozart)

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

I. Allegro justo
II. Andante non troppo
III. Andantino

Adagio and Fugue, K. 546, C minor

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Intermission

Symphony No. 5, Op. 107, D Major (Reformation)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

I. Andante - Allegro con fuoco
II. Allegro vivace
III. Andante
IV. Chorale: Andante con moto - Allegro vivace

PROGRAM NOTES

Sinfonietta No. 1, B-flat Major (A memória de Mozart)

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

Heitor Villa-Lobos, Brazil's greatest composer of concert music, received initial training and inspiration from his father. Raúl Villa-Lobos worked for the national library and was also an avid amateur musician. In his early years, Heitor Villa-Lobos also learned to play the cello and guitar. His love for the latter instrument led him to explore the world of Rio de Janeiro's street musicians. Villa-Lobos also made some money by playing cello in theaters, movie houses, and hotels.

As a young man, Villa-Lobos journeyed throughout Brazil, where he immersed himself in the country's rich and varied folk music tradition. Eventually, Villa-Lobos also traveled extensively in Europe, where he met and befriended many of the greatest classical composers and musicians of his time, including Darius Milhaud, Maurice Ravel, Vincent d'Indy, Manuel de Falla, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and Artur Rubenstein. By the mid-1920s, Heitor Villa-Lobos had established himself as one of the young shining lights in concert music.

During the following decade, Villa-Lobos also became active in the cause of national music education in Brazil. In 1931, Villa-Lobos was appointed Superintendent of Musical and Artistic Education for Rio. His work in education extended to people of all ages and backgrounds.

Villa-Lobos was for the most part a self-taught musician. His works offer a striking and original synthesis of the traditions of both the European masters and the folk music of his native land. Perhaps that synthesis is best exemplified by his Nine Bachianas brasileiras (1930-1945), which Villa-Lobos described as an “homage to the great genius of Johann Sebastian Bach,” a man he considered “a kind of universal folkloric source, rich and profound…(a source) linking all peoples.”

The early Sinfonietta No. 1 (1916) presents a different side of Villa-Lobos’s craft. Villa-Lobos dedicated the work “To the Memory of Mozart.” The Sinfonietta No. 1 employs a small orchestral ensemble similar to one of Mozart’s time. Villa-Lobos based his composition on two (unidentified) themes by Mozart. The Sinfonietta offers a nostalgic appreciation of Mozart’s era and musical world. The work is in three movements. Two brief and lively outer movements (Allegro giusto, Andantino) frame the extended slow-tempo movement (Andante non troppo) that is the musical and emotional center of the work.
—Note by Ken Meltzer

Adagio and Fugue, K. 546, C minor

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
It’s a given that every composer profits from the study of Bach. This was true even during the late-18th century, when audiences rejected his dense “learned” style in favor of the lighter galant. Mozart’s own exposure to the Baroque master was indebted to Baron Gottfried van Swieten during his early days in Vienna. As he recounted in a 1782 letter to his sister: “Baron van Suiten [sic], whom I visit every Sunday, gave me all the works of Handel and

Sebastian Bach to take home with me after I had played them through to him. When Constanze heard the fugues she fell quite in love with them. She will listen to nothing but fugues now…. Having often heard me play fugues off the top of my head, she asked if I had ever written any down, and when I said I had not, she scolded me very thoroughly for not having written anything in this most artistic and beautiful of musical forms….” The 26-year-old’s lighthearted tone masks a more profound emotion; as Alfred Einstein pointed out more than 50 years ago, Mozart’s study of Bach’s fugues represented “a revolution and a crisis in his creative activity,” internalized through string arrangements of Bach fugues and reflected in major compositions - directly in the Requiem and the “Jupiter” Symphony, more diffusely in the increasingly polyphonic conception of many works from his last decade.

The C-minor Fugue was first composed in December of 1783 for two pianos (K. 426) then re-arranged for strings, with an introductory Adagio, in June 1788 - the prolific summer during which he also penned his last three symphonies. The Adagio alternates a dotted-rhythm reminiscent of a French overture with a more lyrical passage. A French overture normally begins a more extended multi-movement work; in this case, its use serves to establish a period flavor and a sense of occasion. The theme of the Fugue is strongly rhythmic, with little of Mozart’s melodic charm - and yet it has the uniquely Mozartean quality of suggesting a character through gesture and nuance. The “crisis in creative activity” was not for naught.
—Note by Susan Key

Symphony No. 5, Op. 107, D Major (Reformation)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

October 31, 1517, is traditionally held to be the day that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of All Saint's Church in Wittenberg, an act that signaled the start of the Protestant Reformation. In this 500th anniversary year, it is worth revisiting Felix Mendelssohn's fifth symphony, composed in 1830 to mark the tercentenary of the Augsburg Confession.

Though bearing the number 5, the work was actually the second of Mendelssohn's mature symphonies, written before both the more popular Scottish and Italian Symphonies (numbers 3 and 4, respectively) and the more obscure Lobegesang (Hymn of Praise, number 2). The fact that the fifth was not published until 1868, twenty-one years after the composer's death, explains its current position in the accepted sequence.

Despite his ample experience with symphonic form—one of the great musical prodigies, he had written thirteen symphonies for strings, between the ages of twelve and fourteen—Mendelssohn, like many composers who struggled in the shadow of Beethoven, appears to have been uneasy with his mature symphonies. He revised and then withheld from publication even the most popular of them, the Italian, continually revising the piece and attributing to the process some of the bitterest moments of his career.

Though he himself was baptized as a Reformed Christian at the age of seven, his personal religious beliefs remain the subject of debate. He was the grandson of Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, and it is clear that he was proud of the connection. When at the age of twenty he received widespread approbation for reviving the St. Matthew Passion by (Protestant) Johann Sebastian

Bach, he remarked, “To think that it took . . . a Jew’s son to revive the greatest Christian music for the world!”

A whiff of anti-Semitism would haunt him throughout his career, and, along with Jewish opera composer Giacomo Meyerbeer, he became a preferred bête-noire of Richard Wagner. It has been suggested by some sources that anti-Semitism may have played a role in the symphony being excluded from the celebrations for which it had been commissioned. Whether or not that was the case, it is indisputable that Mendelssohn had been delayed several times in the work’s composition through a combination of professional and health-related issues, including a bout with measles that he contracted from his sister Rebecka.

Though he flourished in the Romantic age—a contemporary of Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner, who pushed beyond traditional forms—Mendelssohn for the most part adhered to classical principles and structures. Aspects of his symphony are evidently reflective of a narrative about the emancipating effect of Protestantism over Catholic doctrine, but the work is first and foremost an abstract symphony in the fullest classical sense.

The first movement conveys the drama of conflict, even as it references the “Dresden Amen” (a motif also employed in Wagner’s Parsifal), which is heard twice, a radiant rising scale played by the strings. Mendelssohn being Mendelssohn, the tension is relieved by the second movement, a cheerful interlude, and the third, a wistful arioso. For the finale, again mindful of the purpose of his commission, the composer turns to Luther’s Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God). The hymn is put through various permutations before bringing the symphony to a triumphant close. —Note by Ross Amico

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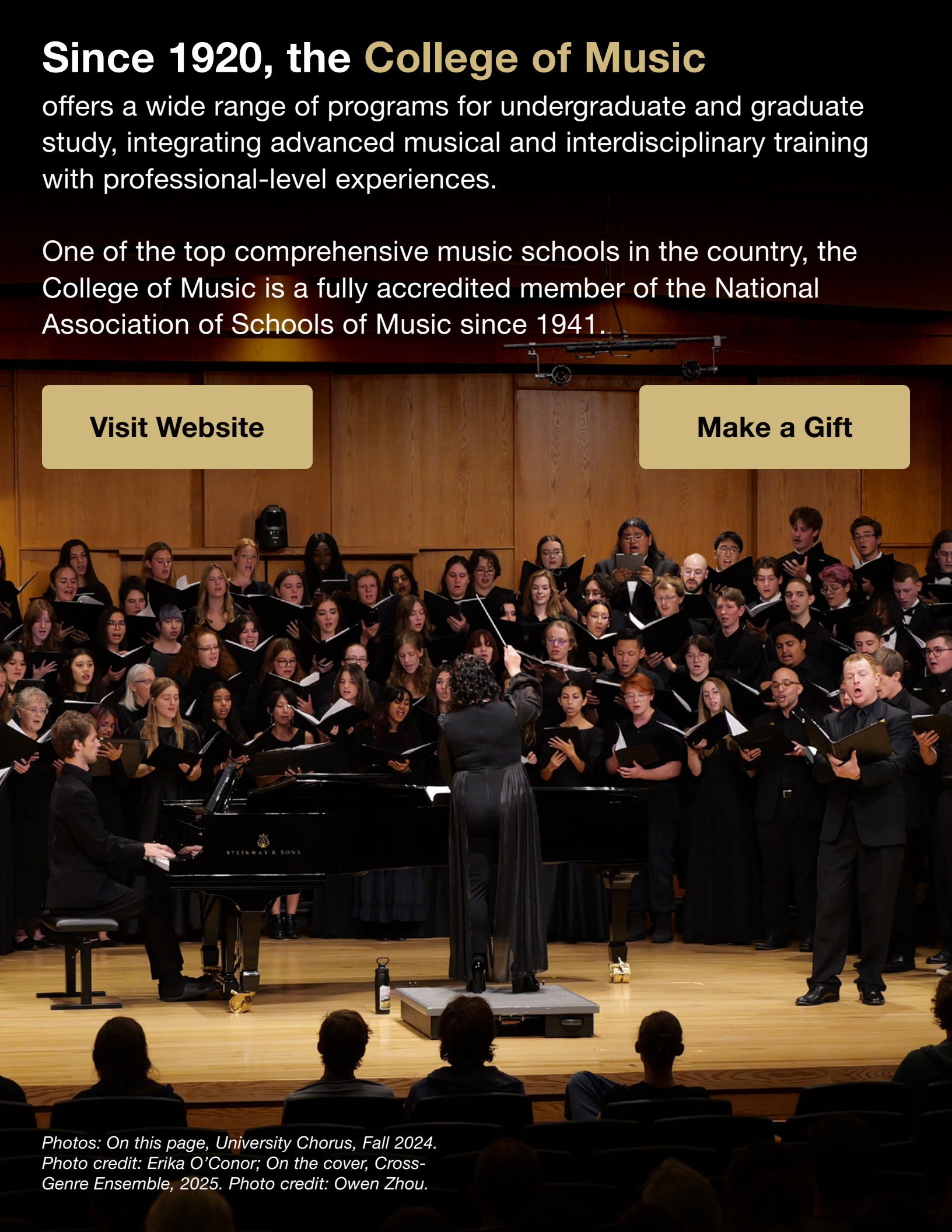

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