JAMES EHNES
VIOLIN
ANDREW ARMSTRONG
PIANO

Monday, September 7, 2026

Raven's Cry Theatre, Sechelt

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Thirty-five years ago, violinist James Ehnes and pianist Andrew Armstrong met in Winnipeg. They've been close musical collaborators ever since.

This concert is one stop on a tour that takes them to every province and territory in Canada to celebrate James's 50th birthday,

They're offering a program that showcases enormous virtuosity within a deeply dramatic emotional journey. Some of the music draws inspiration from folk traditions and Canada's northern landscape. A spontaneous selection of favourite encores will be announced from the stage.

James Ehnes is a legend in the violin world and one of Canada's most internationally acclaimed artists. Gifted with a rare combination of stunning virtuosity, serene lyricism and an unfaltering musicality, he is a favourite guest at the world's most celebrated concert halls.

A devoted chamber musician, James is the Artistic Director of the Seattle Chamber Music Society and the leader of the Ehnes Quartet.

He has an extensive discography and has won many awards for his recordings, including two Grammys, three Gramophone Awards and twelve Juno Awards, the most of any classical musician in history. Ehnes received the Artist of the Year award at the 2021 Gramophone Awards, acknowledging his contributions to the recording industry, including an online series called "Recitals from Home", released in June 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent closure of concert halls.

James was born in Brandon, MB, began violin studies at five and made his orchestra debut with L'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal at 13. He studied at the Meadowmount School of Music and The Juilliard School, winning the Peter Mennin Prize for Outstanding Achievement and Leadership in Music upon his graduation in 1997. He is a Member of the Order of Canada and the Order of Manitoba, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and an honorary fellow of the Royal Academy of Music, where he is a Visiting Professor. Since 2024, he has been Professor of Violin at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music.

Continued on next page

The artists (continued)

Andrew Armstrong is known for his passionate expression and dazzling technique and has delighted audiences across Asia, Europe, Latin America, Canada, and the United States.

He's performed more than 60 concertos with orchestras around the world and has appeared in solo recitals and in chamber music concerts with the Ehnes, Elias, Alexander, American, and Manhattan String Quartets, and at chamber music festivals around the US.

In Fall 2025, Andrew launched his first music festival in Tuscany Italy, working with magical venues from wineries, to castles, to truffle hunts.

Andrew directs and hosts six thriving chamber music series in the US, including A Little Night Music at Tuckerman Hall in Worcester, MA, the vibrant city where Andrew lives with his wife and three children.

Last year, Andrew released two albums: the solo album In Blue, featuring Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue and a duo album with James Ehnes playing Brahms's two viola sonatas and Schumann's Märchenbilder (Fairytales).

Together, James and Andrew have released several award-winning recordings including the complete Beethoven Violin Sonatas, the complete works of Béla Bartók for violin and piano and most recently the Brahms Sonatas for violin and piano.

The program

CHRISTIAN SINDING

1856–1941

Suite im alten Stil (Suite in the Old Style), op. 10

I. Presto

II. Adagio

III. Tempo giusto

JOHANNES BRAHMS

1833–1897

Violin Sonata No. 3 in d minor, op. 108

I. Allegro

II. Adagio

III. Un poco presto e con sentimento

IV. Presto agitato

INTERMISSION

CARMEN BRADEN

1985–

Imaginal

BÉLA BARTÓK

1881–1845

Rhapsody no. 1 sz. 86

The program notes

The Norwegian composer **Christian Sinding** was once seen as a potential successor to his famous countryman Edvard Grieg. After early lessons in Oslo, Sinding studied violin and composition at the Leipzig Conservatory. He lived for over 40 years in Germany and was heavily influenced by German Romanticism and the music of Wagner and Liszt. He wrote over 250 songs, dozens of chamber works, a handful of symphonies, and an opera. Today, if remembered at all, it's probably for the charming ditty for piano, *Frühlingsrauschen (Rustle of Spring)*.

Despite his popularity in Norway and Germany during his lifetime, Sinding fell into obscurity. He lived with dementia during his last years and eight weeks before his death, despite a lifetime of fighting for the rights of Jewish musicians, he joined the Norwegian Nazi Party (but left his membership card unsigned). After the war the Norwegian national broadcasting system boycotted people seen as Nazi sympathisers—Sinding among them. As a consequence, Sinding's post-war reputation fell into shadow.

His *Suite in the Old Style*, composed in 1889, brings together a sense of 19th-century Romantic lyricism and 18th-century Baroque virtuosity. This piece was once a popular showcase for famous violinists such as Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz. The opening presto is a non-stop cascade of notes recalling similar works by Antonio Vivaldi and Niccolò Paganini.

The slow second movement takes the form of an impassioned song, with the melody unspooling on the four strings of the violin (G, D, A and E) in succession. Once at the top, the piano joins in a lyrical duet.

The finale provides another opportunity for the violinist to show off their virtuosity—a cascade of double, triple, even quadruple stops—and a fiendishly difficult cadenza. In the coda, the violin climbs upward with great determination on a phrase with a repeated-chord motif, and after a long trill, the suite comes to a grand close.

Johannes Brahms loved violinists and they loved him back. Throughout his life, he had close friendships with some of the most important Hungarian virtuosos of the day. At age 20 he accompanied the great Eduard Reményi on tour and received a comprehensive education in the repertoire of the time. He was great friends with Joseph Joachim, who gave him advice on his violin concerto. He wrote his third sonata, the one you're hearing today, for the eminent Hungarian violinist Jenő Hübay,

It's a piece filled with drama, tenderness, and brilliant conversation between violin and piano. Written during summers by Lake Thun in Switzerland, it reflects Brahms at the height of his powers—confident, expressive, and unafraid of big emotions.

The sonata begins with a restless, storm-tinged first movement, where violin and piano trade phrases like two passionate storytellers. The mood shifts completely in the Adagio, one of Brahms's most beautiful slow movements: calm, glowing, and almost vocal in its singing lines. The third movement is quick and whisper-light, a moment of playful mystery before the finale bursts in. That last movement is fiery and urgent, driving forward with dramatic energy until the very end.

Award-winning musician **Carmen Braden** is a dynamic force in the world of new music, hailing proudly from Yellowknife NWT. Moving smoothly between genres of composing and songwriting, Carmen is recognized as an "acoustic ambassador of the Canadian Subarctic" (*Musicworks*). Carmen's work in theatre, dance, and film has been performed from Atlin, BC to Helsinki, Finland with a special focus on northern themes. She has released three albums to national acclaim, and her contemporary classical compositions are regularly commissioned and performed across Canada.

Carmen writes:

"How caterpillars become butterflies is crazier and more inspirational than I ever knew! Their bodies disintegrate inside the cocoon into a kind of goo and then are rebuilt into a new form that is bewilderingly different than the old. Special cells called "imaginal" cells are the catalysts for this transformation. They lie dormant in the caterpillar until the right phase of metamorphosis, then become the blueprints and building blocks forming the new butterfly wings, body, legs, antennae out of the caterpillar goo. How cool is that. So coo. Goo. The universal idea is that we all have our future potentials dormant inside us. And when something catalyzes a major transformation, there is a crazy dissolving of the old which is often hard and we fight against it. But then the incredible and tough and beautiful and surprising rebuilding happens. It's super humanly-relatable in terms of the mid-life crisis time!—or any kind of big life change…

I learned about imaginal cells as I turned 40 last year, perfect timing as I continue working through a now years-long disintegration and rebuilding of my musical directions. Musically in *Imaginal* there is a core melody woven throughout the piece that goes through many takings-apart and putting-back-togethers. The melody is from a song I wrote in the early writing stages to get me started.

I wrote *Imaginal* for violinist James Ehnes as he turns 50, travels Canada and the world to play beautiful music. Cuz if there's anything that'll hold us together in this crazy world, it's music, friends, curiosity and caterpillars.

Imaginal was commissioned by the Northern Arts and Cultural Centre (lead commissioner), the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Bravo Niagara, Calgary Pro Musica, Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra, Cecilia Concerts, Chamber Music Kelowna, Club musical de Québec, Coast Recital Society– Sechelt, Edmonton Chamber

The program notes (continued)

Music Society, The Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts, Manitoba Chamber Orchestra, Mount Allison University, The Royal Conservatory of Music, Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra, Scotia Festival of Music, Symphony Nova Scotia, and Whitehorse Concerts

Bartók was not only a gifted composer and an accomplished pianist but also a dedicated ethnomusicologist who travelled deep into the rural outback of his native Hungary and surrounding regions to make recordings of villagers singing and playing the traditional music of their local areas. The authentic, raw-edged musical culture of turn-of-the-century peasant life in the Austro-Hungarian Empire is captured in the many works that Bartók composed based on the melodies and rhythms collected on these ethnomusicological field trips.

His *First Rhapsody for Violin and Piano*, composed in 1928, is one of these. Structured in two movements in the slow-fast pattern of Hungarian folk music, this work blends the disparate worlds of Eastern European village fiddling and Western European concert life. The style of violin playing is heavily influenced by the capricious improvisatory showmanship of Gypsy fiddle-playing while the piano, resonant with dense tone clusters, jangles with the metallic timbre of a rag-tag village band.

The first movement presents a strutting rising-scale melody in the Lydian mode (think: C major scale with F# instead of F) over a plodding piano part rife with drone tones, often more a sonic drum-beat than a melodic line. A middle section offers lyric contrast with a plangent lament derived from a Transylvanian folk tune, full of rhythmic "snaps" in a quick short-long pattern.

The ending is a series of dance tunes that continually builds up excitement until the end. The violin in this movement is pushed to ever greater exertions of virtuosic showmanship in pursuit of its rhapsodic goals.

Program notes by Donald Gislason, Denise Ball, Carmen Braden and Al

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