

# Four Last Songs

**Gustavo Gimeno**, conductor  
**Rachel Willis-Sørensen**, soprano

---

**Gustav Mahler/orch. Colin Matthews**  
"Nicht zu schnell" from Piano Quartet

---

**Richard Strauss**  
*Vier letzte Lieder (Four Last Songs)*  
I. Frühling (Spring)  
II. September (September)  
III. Beim Schlafengehen (While Going to Sleep)  
IV. Im Abendrot (At Sunset)

---

Intermission

---

**Ludwig van Beethoven**  
Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60  
I. Adagio – Allegro vivace  
II. Adagio  
III. Menuetto: Allegro vivace  
IV. Allegro ma non troppo

*Program 4*

**Thursday,  
November 12, 2026  
7:30pm**

**Saturday,  
November 14, 2026  
7:30pm**

For *Four Last Songs* text  
and translation, turn to  
page 30.

**Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)/  
orch. Colin Matthews (b. 1946)**

## **“Nicht zu schnell” from Piano Quartet**

*Composed c.1876; orchestrated 2009*

**12 min**

In September 1875, the 15-year-old Mahler relocated from the rustic Moravian hamlet of Iglau to Vienna, the musical capital of Europe, a city over which he was destined to cast an imposing shadow. He studied for three years at the prestigious Vienna Conservatory—an institution that had been founded in 1819, with the highly respected composer Antonio Salieri as its first director. Mahler’s teachers included Julius Epstein (piano), Robert Fuchs (harmony), and Franz Krenn (composition). He supplemented the tiny allowance his father sent him by giving piano lessons to fellow students.

Despite his frequent absences from class, and his nonconformist views, he won several prizes—two for piano playing (including Schubert’s Sonata in A Minor) and one for composition (the first movement of a piano quintet, 1876).

The student orchestra, under the school’s director, Joseph Hellmesberger, rehearsed part of a Mahler symphony, one of a few from that period that have disappeared. Mahler was too poor to hire a copyist to prepare professional-quality parts for the orchestra to play, and the many errors in the ones he created by himself angered Hellmesberger to the point where he flung the score to the floor and shouted, “Your scores are full of mistakes! Do you think that I am going to conduct a thing like that?” On Mahler’s final day at the conservatory, the scherzo from a second piano quintet of his was performed.

Concerning his several unfinished works of that student period, Mahler told a confidante, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, “It was

not only that I was impatient to begin a new piece, but rather that before I finished my work it no longer challenged or interested me, as I had gone beyond it.” In another conversation with her, he stated that his compositions to that point “lacked all originality.”

He overstated the case in regards to the richly emotional Piano Quartet movement that you will hear at these concerts. It possesses genuine worth beyond curiosity value. The chief model was clearly the three mighty, magnificent quartets that Johannes Brahms, who towered over Vienna’s musical life of the time, composed from 1859 to 1875.

**—Program note by Don Anderson**

### **ABOUT THE ORCHESTRATION**

Colin Matthews was commissioned by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra to orchestrate the first movement of the Piano Quartet. Matthews said, “Mahler’s first primary subject at the conservatory was piano. That instrument predominates in the quartet and features a much more virtuoso style than that of the strings. In my orchestration, I had to thin out the overwrought texture of the original. I also put some of the melodic lines in different registers because the middle register was too prevalent in the Piano Quartet.” Matthews also added tempo and dynamic indications, as these are scarce, and in some cases altogether missing, in Mahler’s manuscript. The resounding result is a full-blooded Mahlerian orchestral work with savagely seething climaxes.

## Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

### **Vier letzte Lieder** **(Four Last Songs)**

Composed 1948

25 min

Like his eminent predecessors Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms (as well as his contemporaries Hugo Wolf and Gustav Mahler), Strauss made major contributions to the repertoire of German art songs (*lieder*). He composed some 200 of them in all. They cover an enormous range of moods and emotions, from light and innocent to erotic and searingly dramatic.

He wrote many of the early songs for a specific singer—Pauline de Ahna, the soprano who became his wife in 1894. “She sang my songs,” he wrote, “with an expression and a poetry such as I have never heard since.”

He lived through two world wars. During the second, to find relief from the intense depression that the horrors taking place around him were bringing, he composed several pieces in which he paid homage to the joyous, elegant spirit of his favourite composer, Mozart. They included his Horn Concerto No. 2 (1942), two sonatinas for wind instruments (1943–1945), Oboe Concerto (1945–1946), and Duett-Concertino (clarinet, bassoon, and strings, 1947). One piece did give eloquent voice to his profound despair over the destruction of his homeland and the culture in which he had spent his life—*Metamorphosen* (1945), his emotionally bleak “study for 23 solo strings.”

Toward the end of 1946, four years after he had composed his most recent songs, he came across “Im Abendrot” (“At Sunset”), a poem by Joseph von Eichendorff (1788–1857). Its mood suited his world-weary, post-war frame of mind perfectly. The characters, an elderly couple gazing into the sunset, reflected his and Pauline’s situation like a glove. He completed his setting on May 6, 1948.

An admirer had recently sent him a volume of poems by Hermann Hesse (1877–1962). From it he chose four pieces, possibly intending to join them together with “Im Abendrot” to form a song cycle. He completed only three of them: “Frühling” (“Spring”) on July 18, 1948; “Beim Schlafengehen” (“While Going to Sleep”) on August 4; and “September” on September 20.

He died without hearing them in concert. He left no indication that he intended them to be performed together, and therefore no sequence of presentation. His publishing company, Boosey & Hawkes, decided that they formed a cycle. At the première, the songs were sung in the following order: “Beim Schlafengehen”, “September”, “Frühling”, and “Im Abendrot”. When they came into print in 1950, Ernst Roth, senior editor for Boosey & Hawkes and a close friend of Strauss’s, decided upon a different, more emotionally satisfying sequence—the one followed for these performances—which has been the norm ever since. He also gave the songs the collective title by which they have been known since that time. Strauss dedicated “Im Abendrot” to Roth.

These mellow, achingly beautiful and voluptuously orchestrated works represent—consciously so—Strauss’s musical last will and testament. In them he again put aside the realistic horrors of mid-20th-century life. This time he returned to the ripely Romantic style of his own early music (supplemented by vast intervening experience), rather than paying tribute once again to the Classicism of Mozart. The songs express regret but only to a certain degree. As author Michael Kennedy has put it, “this is no winter of discontent, but an autumn harvest of fulfillment.”

“Spring”, the first song, pays rapturous, nostalgic tribute to that glorious season of the year, one that seems full of hope after the chill of winter. The cycle of seasons continues in

“September”, the second song. As summer turns inexorably to autumn, text, atmosphere, and music darken and decay, as the poet begins to accept the inevitable end of all things. A solo passage for horn—the instrument Strauss’s father, Franz, played brilliantly, and so often the younger Strauss’s favourite colour—adds a final benediction.

“While Going to Sleep”, the third song, continues the poet’s journey toward the afterlife. Strauss features another of his most beloved instrumental voices: solo violin.

“At Sunset” completes the voyage. After the soprano has sung the final words, “ist dies etwa der Tod?” (“is this perhaps death?”), Strauss quotes the “transfiguration” theme from *Death and Transfiguration*, a tone poem he had composed 60 years previously. As he lay on his deathbed, he said to his daughter-in-law, Alice, “Dying is just as I composed it in *Death and Transfiguration*.” Pauline died less than a year later, nine days after the first performance of the *Four Last Songs*.

—Program note by Don Anderson

---

## Text & Translation

Music by Richard Strauss. Text by Hermann Hesse (I, II, III) and Joseph von Eichendorff (IV).

### I. Frühling

In dämmrigen Grüften  
träumte ich lang  
von deinen Bäumen und blauen Lüften,  
von deinem Duft und Vogelsang.

Nun liegst du erschlossen  
in Gleiß und Zier  
von Licht übergossen  
wie ein Wunder vor mir.

Du kennst mich wieder,  
du lockst mich zart,  
es zittert durch all meine Glieder  
deine selige Gegenwart!

### II. September

Der Garten trauert,  
kühl sinkt in die Blumen der Regen.  
Der Sommer schauert  
still seinem Ende entgegen.

Golden tropft Blatt um Blatt  
nieder vom hohen Akazienbaum.  
Sommer lächelt erstaunt und matt  
in den sterbenden Gartentraum.

### I. Spring

In shadowy crypts  
I have dreamt long  
of your trees and blue skies,  
of your fragrance and birdsong.

Now you lie revealed  
in glistening splendour  
drenched in light  
like a miracle before me.

You recognize me,  
you entice me tenderly,  
all my limbs tremble at  
your blessed presence!

### II. September

The garden is mourning,  
cool rain seeps into the flowers.  
Summertime shudders,  
quietly awaiting its end.

Golden leaf after leaf falls  
from the lofty acacia tree.  
Summer smiles, astonished and feeble,  
in the dying garden dream.

Lange noch bei den Rosen  
bleibt er stehn, sehnt sich nach Ruh.  
Langsam tut er die  
müdigewordnen Augen zu.

### **III. Beim Schlafengehen**

Nun der Tag mich müd gemacht,  
soll mein sehnliches Verlangen  
freundlich die gestirnte Nacht  
wie ein müdes Kind empfangen.

Hände, laßt von allem Tun  
Stirn, vergiß du alles Denken,  
alle meine Sinne nun  
wollen sich in Schlummer senken.

Und die Seele unbewacht  
will in freien Flügen schweben,  
um im Zauberkreis der Nacht  
tief und tausendfach zu leben.

### **IV. Im Abendrot**

Wir sind durch Not und Freude  
gegangen Hand in Hand;  
vom Wandern ruhen wir  
nun überm stillen Land.

Rings sich die Täler neigen,  
es dunkelt schon die Luft,  
zwei Lerchen nur noch steigen  
nachträumend in den Duft.

Tritt her und laß sie schwirren,  
bald ist es Schlafenszeit.  
Daß wir uns nicht verirren  
in dieser Einsamkeit.

O weiter, stiller Friede!  
So tief im Abendrot.  
Wie sind wir wandermüde –  
ist dies etwa der Tod?

For just a while it tarries  
beside the roses, yearning for repose.  
Slowly it closes  
its weary eyes.

### **III. While Going to Sleep**

Now that the day had made me so tired,  
my dearest longings shall be accepted  
kindly by the starry night  
like a weary child.

Hands, stop all your work,  
head, forget all your thoughts;  
all my senses now  
will sink into slumber.

And my unfettered soul  
wishes to soar up freely  
into night's magic sphere  
to live there a thousand-fold more deeply.

### **IV. At Sunset**

We have through sorrow and joy  
gone hand in hand;  
from our wanderings, let's now rest  
in this quiet land.

The valleys slope around us,  
the air is growing dark,  
two larks soar upwards  
dreamily into the light air.

Come close and let them fly,  
soon it will be time for sleep.  
Let's not lose our way  
in this solitude.

O vast, tranquil peace!  
So deep in the evening's glow.  
How weary we are of wandering –  
is this perhaps death?

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)**

## **Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60**

*Composed 1806*

**32 min**

Around 1802, the year he first acknowledged his growing deafness, Beethoven professed dissatisfaction with his music to date, and vowed to seek a “new path” into a radically transformed style. In the decade that followed, this “new path” brought him to one innovative masterpiece after another. His output was particularly astonishing in 1806, when he completed the Fourth Symphony, the Piano Concerto No. 4, the Violin Concerto, and the three string quartets of Op. 59, among other things.

At first glance, the Fourth Symphony might seem like a retreat from the “new path” into the safer, more familiar territory of the late 18th-century symphony, but in fact Beethoven’s newly won and personal stylistic priorities are very much in evidence here. This is Haydn seen through the prism of the “Eroica”. Each movement, while superficially adhering to late 18th-century conventions of form and expression, is disrupted, disturbed, and deepened in unexpected, sometimes shocking ways.

The listener is jolted right at the start, by a suspenseful slow introduction full of dissonant harmonies, surprise modulations, stark bare chords, and slowly tiptoeing arpeggios. Nothing about this introduction is conventional: the textures and rhetoric are strange, and the main key is never prepared. And apparently it is all a joke. Beethoven suddenly shoves the music (that’s the best way to put it) into B-flat major, and, with the full orchestra ablaze, dispels the gloom by launching into a boisterous “Allegro vivace”. The transition is brief but remarkable;

the “Allegro vivace” is hurled out of the “Adagio”, like a huge top pumped up and sent spinning. Beethoven maintains the thrilling rhythmic momentum thus created through the whole first movement, and insistently develops the motifs that straddle the transition.

The second movement, unusually slow and worked out in full sonata rondo form, is not merely lyrical and tranquil: from the ninth bar on, Beethoven plumbs dark emotions and psychological depths. (Listen for various outbursts of militaristic clangour, and a surprisingly fierce, dissonant, operatic episode in the middle of the movement.)

The label “Menuetto” at the head of the third movement bows to 18th-century convention, but is misleading, for this is a true Beethovenian scherzo. (The additional marking, “Allegro vivace”, and the composer’s own metronome marking, utterly contradict the conventional label.) This scherzo, incidentally, is in five parts, with the scherzo-trio pair repeated an extra time, transforming the usual ABA form into a longer ABABA.

The finale, in sonata form, is based on the opening perpetual-motion theme (strings), from which emerge wisps of melody and, eventually, a tuneful second subject (woodwinds). Here, too, Beethoven bursts the bounds of Classical convention. This is no relaxed, dancing finale, as one might expect. It is not so much playful as manic, and the high spirits are disrupted by noisy, dissonant explosions. The long coda surges and subsides, drives and droops, as though reluctant to come to an end; when it does end, finally, all ambiguities are swept away by a short, hearty guffaw.

—Program note by Kevin Bazzana

---

***For a biography of Gustavo Gimeno, please turn to page 8.***



## **Rachel Willis-Sørensen, soprano**

These performances mark Rachel Willis-Sørensen's TSO début.

American soprano Rachel Willis-Sørensen is known for her portrayal of Verdi heroines, performing roles such as Leonora, Elisabetta, and Desdemona as part of her seasons that also include Mozart, Strauss, Puccini, and Wagner, among other composers. In recent seasons, she has performed at leading opera houses around the world—both in operas and in concert—and is a regular guest at the Metropolitan Opera, Wiener Staatsoper, and Royal Ballet and Opera. She has released two acclaimed solo albums for Sony, and in 2025 was honoured with the Beverly Sills Artist Award.

Willis-Sørensen's 2026/27 season showcases a range of major house returns, concert performances, and two notable role débuts. She opens the season at the Royal Ballet and Opera, returning as Donna Anna (*Don Giovanni*), before making her role début as Fausta in Massenet's rarely performed *Roma*, presented in both Monte Carlo with the Monte-Carlo Philharmonic Orchestra and at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. She makes her house début with the Canadian Opera Company as Ariadne (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), returns to the Wiener Staatsoper as Mimi (*La bohème*), and reprises one of her signature roles, Rosalinde (*Die Fledermaus*), at the Bayerische Staatsoper. She continues her long-standing relationship with the Metropolitan Opera and the works of Richard Strauss as the Marschallin (*Der Rosenkavalier*). The season culminates with her début in the title role of *Tosca* at San Francisco Opera. On the concert stage, Willis-Sørensen performs Bernstein's *Kaddish* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and Strauss's *Four Last Songs* in Toronto, Rome, Paris, and Vienna. She also appears in recital at the Staatsoper Berlin and the Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse. Among the season's highlights is the world première of a song cycle by acclaimed composer Jeff Beal, written especially for Willis-Sørensen.

Previous engagements include the title roles of *Thaïs* at the Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse, *Arabella* at the Metropolitan Opera, and *Norma* at the Staatsoper Berlin; Elisabeth (*Don Carlos*) with Lyric Opera of Chicago and Grand Théâtre de Genève; Antonia (*Les contes d'Hoffmann*) at Opéra national de Paris; Marguerite (*Faust*) as part of the Royal Opera House's tour of Japan; and many others.

Equally at home on the concert stage, she is especially known for her interpretation of Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, including notably a performance at Buckingham Palace for a birthday celebration of Charles, then Prince of Wales. She made her Carnegie Hall solo recital début in April 2024 and has appeared with such orchestras as the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, San Francisco Symphony, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, and Basque National Orchestra.

In 2021, Willis-Sørensen signed a multi-record deal with Sony Classical. Her début album, *Rachel*, was released in 2022, and her second CD, *Strauss: Vier letzte Lieder*, was released in 2023. She is also featured in several duets on Jonas Kaufmann's album *Wien*.

Willis-Sørensen holds Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from Brigham Young University and is an alumna of the Houston Grand Opera Studio. She won first prize at the 2014 Operalia competition in Los Angeles and at the 2011 Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition, and she was a winner of the 2010 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. She was a member of the ensemble at the Semperoper Dresden for three years. An active presence on social media, she can be found on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok @rachelwillissorensen, and on X @RWSing.