

72nd Concert Series 2025-26



is pleased to present

Benett Tsai, cello

with

Noreen Polera, piano

Sunday, April 12, 2026 3:00 p.m.
Sleepy Hollow High School, Sleepy Hollow, New York

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Friends of Music Concerts, Inc. is an award-winning, non-profit, volunteer organization now in its 72nd season of showcasing artists chosen from among the finest in today's diverse world of chamber music. Additionally, our Partnerships in Education program in the public schools and free student admission to our concerts give young people enhanced exposure to and appreciation of classical music.

In order to help sustain what one of our artists called this “legendary series,” we would welcome people who can join the volunteers listed above. Contact Susan Harris, President, at susanrharris1@icloud.com or call 914 329 7318.

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Program

Trois Pièces for Cello and Piano

Modéré

Sans vitesse et à l'aise

Vite et nerveusement rythmé

Nadia Boulanger

(1887-1979)

Cello Sonata in C Minor, Op. 6

Allegro ma non troppo

Adagio

Allegro appassionato

Samuel Barber

(1910-1981)

Capriccio per Siegfried Palm

Krzysztof Penderecki

(1933-2020)

In the Style of Albéniz

Rodion Shchedrin

(1932-2025)

Intermission

From Jewish Life, B. 54

Prayer

Supplication

Jewish Song

Ernest Bloch

(1880-1959)

Papillon, Op. 77

Gabriel Fauré

(1845-1924)

Cello Sonata in D minor, Op. 40

Moderato

Moderato con moto

Largo

Allegretto

Dmitri Shostakovich

(1906-1975)

Benett Tsai appears by arrangement with Young Concert Artists, www.yca.org.

The post-concert reception is generously sponsored by FOMC board member Keith Austin and treasurer Marc Auslander. To inquire about sponsoring a reception, please contact Executive Director Martin Kagan at mkagan@friendsofmusicconcerts.org or at 646-522-1661.

Next concert

Sunday, April 26, 2026, at 3:00 pm. Sleepy Hollow High School, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

Stefan Jackiw, violin, with **Kevin Ahfat**, piano

Program: Works by Pärt, Handel, Prokofiev, Tao, Brahms.

Program notes

Trois Pièces for Cello and Piano

Nadia Boulanger

Primarily remembered today as an illustrious teacher, Boulanger was one of the great overall musical talents of the 20th century. Based in Paris, she also composed, conducted, played piano and organ, and wrote music criticism. She was the first woman to conduct the New York, Boston and Philadelphia orchestras.

“Nadia Boulanger knew everything there was to know about music; she knew the oldest and the latest music, pre-Bach and post-Stravinsky. All technical know-how was at her fingertips: harmonic transposition, the figured bass, score reading, organ registration, instrumental techniques, structural analyses, the school fugue and the free fugue, the Greek modes and Gregorian chant,” recalled Aaron Copland.

Her great talent as a teacher was to insist on discipline and nurture individual creativity. She was a mentor to many leading composers and musicians of the 20th century, from Maurice Ravel to Leonard Bernstein to Quincy Jones – but not George Gershwin, since she said lessons might ruin his jazz-tinged style.

“Three Pieces” was composed in 1911 for organ, then transcribed by Boulanger for cello and piano in 1914. *Modéré* (moderate) sends rippling piano notes under long lines of melody from the cello. *Sans vitesse et à l’aise* (without speed and at ease) has a songlike quality; one could easily write lyrics to the wistful main theme. *Vite et nerveusement rythmé* (fast and nervously rhythmic) snaps out of a reverie with a wild dance that might conjure up woodland imps cavorting around a fire.

Cello Sonata in C Minor, Op. 6

Samuel Barber

This work was composed in 1932 during a trip to Europe as Barber was finishing his studies at the Curtis Institute of Music. Dedicated to Barber’s composition teacher, Rosario Scalero, it premiered in 1933 in New York with the composer at the piano and his friend and colleague Orlando Cole as cellist. Together with “Music for a Scene from Shelley,” Op. 7, this sonata won both a Pulitzer travel stipend and the Rome Prize of the American Academy in Rome in 1937.

Written in the key of C minor, it features voluptuous and turbulent themes, reminiscent of Brahms, according to one critic.

Barber was one of the major American composers of the 20th century. A musical prodigy, he studied composition, piano, conducting and voice (he was a professional baritone) at the Curtis Institute. He had a Westchester County connection, living in Mount Kisco for years with his partner, composer Gian Carlo Menotti. Among Barber’s best-known works are “Adagio for Strings,” the operas “Antony and Cleopatra” (which opened the Metropolitan Opera’s new house at Lincoln Center) and “Vanessa,” and the concert piece “Knoxville: Summer of 1915.” He twice was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Capriccio per Siegfried Palm

Krzysztof Penderecki

The classic definition of a “capriccio” in music describes a work that is generally fast, intense, and often virtuosic. However, the word itself in Italian might describe a listener’s reaction to this piece: capo (hair), riccio (hedgehog), i.e. one whose hair is standing on end like a hedgehog.

In this work, the cello takes an unusual turn right at the start as a percussion instrument, then chases off into realms of sound and rhythm that push the technical and expressive qualities of instrument and player. For the open-minded listener, following this work’s journey, with its hair-raising surprises and

subtle mounting tension, can deliver unforeseen rewards.

Siegfried Palm (1927-2005) was a German cellist who was known for his interpretations of contemporary music. Many 20th-century composers like Kagel, Ligeti, Xenakis and Zimmermann wrote music for him. He was also president of the University for Music and Dance in Cologne, Germany and artistic director of the Deutsche Oper Berlin.

Palm recorded the piece, written in 1968 and dedicated to him, and so have many other cellists, clearly intrigued by the boundary-jumping aspects of the “Capriccio.”

Penderecki was a Polish composer and conductor. His best-known works include “Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima,” Symphony No. 3, “St. Luke Passion” and “Polish Requiem.” He composed five operas, eight symphonies and other orchestral pieces, a variety of instrumental concertos, choral settings of mainly religious texts, as well as chamber and instrumental works.

In the Style of Albéniz

Rodion Shchedrin

Several nationalities had a hand in the creation of this piece – Spanish, Russian, Croatian.

Dramatic like a flamenco dance, “In the Style of” strongly evokes Spanish musical themes and rhythms, with the cellist’s pizzicato (string-plucking) technique echoing a guitar’s sound. Originally written for piano based on “Tango No. 2” by Isaac Albéniz (1860–1909), it was arranged for cello and piano by Croatian cellist and teacher Valter Dešpalj (1947-2023).

Albéniz was a renowned Spanish pianist and many of his compositions evoked his country’s folk music themes. He became a key figure in Spain’s musical life, with his masterpiece being the technically demanding piano suite “Iberia.” Albéniz reportedly nearly destroyed the manuscript, fearing it was actually impossible to play.

Shchedrin (pronounced shu-DREEN) and his wife, the great ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, were prominent 20th-century Russian cultural figures. His prolific output included ballets, operas, concerti and symphonies.

From Jewish Life, B. 54

Ernest Bloch

Bloch wrote “From Jewish Life” in 1924 for the cellist Hans Kindler. According to critic Neil W. Levin, *Prayer: Andante moderato* has the flavor of a fervently sung prayer, or a hymn of petition, in a traditional Ashkenazi synagogue. *Supplication: Allegro non troppo* could be heard as representing either a passionate religious supplication in an hour of particular need or a frenzied pleading connected to some aspect of ordinary daily life. The descending sequence of *Jewish Song: Moderato* recalls the character of a typical Eastern European Jewish folksong.

Bloch was a Swiss-born American composer who had a hand in the creation of two major U.S. music schools: the Mannes School of Music and the Cleveland Institute of Music. Several of his compositions, including the “Suite Hébraïque” for viola and orchestra, “Baal Shem” for violin and piano, and “Schelomo” for cello and orchestra, reflect his commitment to his Jewish heritage.

Papillon, Op. 77

Gabriel Fauré

Fauré detested the title of this work (“Butterfly”), imposed by Parisian publisher Julien Hamelle. Composed around 1884 and published in 1898, the title was simply “Piece for Violoncello” in its early

years of life, but after Hamelle pushed for “Papillon,” Fauré reportedly replied: “Butterfly or dung fly – call it whatever you want.”

It’s easy to follow Hamelle’s thought process – the cello’s dancing figures are reminiscent of fluttering creatures – or even a buzzing bee, though Fauré’s piece predates Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee” by 15 years. The piano underscores the cello’s flightiness with lyrical melodic lines, interspersed with percussive chords. “Papillon” was a favorite encore piece by the great cellist Pablo Casals.

Composer, organist, pianist and teacher, Fauré is a giant among French composers. His “Pavane,” “Requiem,” “Sicilienne,” nocturnes for piano and the songs “Après un rêve” and “Clair de lune” are staples of the concert repertoire.

Cello Sonata in D minor, Op. 40

Dmitri Shostakovich

The work’s first movement, marked *Moderato*, begins in “sonata form:” a theme, development and recapitulation in the home key. Introduced by the cello, the rising and falling motif is accompanied by swift arpeggios on the piano. The second theme reverses the order, with the piano introducing the theme and the cello following. The cello’s passionate melodies are punctuated with pizzicati on the stringed instrument and staccato notes on the piano.

The second movement, *Allegro*, is in “moto perpetuo” style, or “perpetual motion,” characterized by rapid, urgent notes, then contrasted with a lighter section in dance rhythm that also contains percussive effects and glissando slides down the strings.

The third movement, *Largo*, opens with a wistful, rising melody from the cello, later joined by the piano. Commentators note the melancholy, brooding nature of this movement, which ends with a barely-audible, hold-your-breath pianissimo from the cello. In contrast, the fourth, *Allegro*, opens on a bright, happy tone and features a rondo (“a little round,” i.e. a theme that comes around again).

Shostakovich stands as a prime example of an artist both resisting and attempting to accommodate an oppressive political environment, in this case, the old Soviet Union. Music approved by the authorities supported “socialist realism” themes, deemed accessible and patriotic. Shostakovich composed work that was aimed at official approval, alternating with work that expressed his own soul. In the late 1930s and, again, when he was “denounced” in the late 1940s, he kept a bag packed in case of a midnight arrest. His symphonies and chamber works have entered the standard repertoire.

The cello sonata was composed in 1934, a time of turmoil for Shostakovich. (Was there ever a time in his adult life that wasn’t turbulent?) He had fallen in love with a young student at a Leningrad festival featuring his opera, “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk,” which received praise at its premiere and was popular for two years. The love affair resulted in a separation and divorce from his wife, Nina, yet they remarried late in 1934 and had a daughter in 1936.

As for the cello sonata, he completed it within a few weeks and gave its premiere in Moscow on Christmas Day. The composer played the piano part with his close friend, Viktor Kubatsky, on cello, and the piece is dedicated to him. In 1936, however, an article appeared in the Pravda newspaper denouncing “Lady Macbeth,” causing yet another slide in the composer’s fortunes. On the day the article appeared, Shostakovich was in the northern seaport of Archangelsk, playing the Cello Sonata with Kubatsky.

— Solange De Santis

About the Artists

Benett Tsai is “most certainly a star on the rise. An outstanding young cellist in complete command of his craft and his own unique musical vision.” -- *The Violin Channel*

Tsai’s music-making has been described as “electrifying...flawless freshness” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and “charismatic, heartfelt playing full of fluid intensity” (*Sydney Arts Guide*). Named a VC Artist on the Violin Channel, he gained recognition at the 2022 Grand Prix Emanuel Feuermann in Berlin, where he received both the Third Prize and Special Prize for the Best Haydn Concerto as the youngest entrant.

Soon after, he joined the roster of Young Concert Artists for management upon winning First Prize and the Stern Young Artist Award at the 2023 YCA Susan Wadsworth International Auditions in New York. His subsequent recital was listed by New York Classical Review as one of the best debuts in 2024, and he is currently part of the Lausanne-based Classeek Ambassador Programme for the 2025/26 season. He is a Friends of Music Concerts YCA Performance Award winner.

Since his mainstage debut at the age of 13, Tsai has performed as a soloist and chamber musician. He has appeared with orchestras in Berlin, Maryland, Anchorage and Australia.

Among other venues worldwide, Tsai has been presented in recitals at The Kennedy Center (Washington D.C.), Berliner Philharmonie, Shanghai Oriental Arts Center, Kaufman Music Center (New York), City Recital Hall (Sydney), and Melbourne Recital Centre. He has also made appearances at the Verbier Festival, Rose Theater at Lincoln Center with Emanuel Ax, Musica Viva Australia, and the Morgan Library & Museum (New York). Notably, he was featured in the 2020 film, *The Way Forward*, where he played with pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet.

Highlights of the 2025/26 season include a return to Shanghai Oriental Arts Center, in addition to further concerts at La Jolla Music Society, Colgate University Orchestra, Classical Arts Society of Washington and Classeek Concert Hall. Joining YCA on Tour, he is performing chamber music across North America, with engagements at Kravis Center for the Performing Arts, Calgary ProMusica, UAB Alys Stephens Center, Ithaca College and the Sarasota Artist Series Concerts.

Born in 2003, Tsai began playing the cello at the age of five under the guidance of his uncle and teacher, Thomas Tsai. He currently studies with Clive Greensmith at the Colburn School in Los Angeles, where he earned a Bachelor of Music degree. His other significant mentors include Ralph Kirshbaum, Steven Isserlis, and his pianist father, Joshua Tsai.

Noreen Polera ranks among the most highly regarded and diverse chamber artists performing today. She maintains a career that has taken her to every major American music center and abroad to Europe, Russia, and Asia. Recent performances include those at Alice Tully Hall, Zankel Hall and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, 92nd Street Y, Jordan Hall and Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. She has appeared at the Caramoor, Bard, Grand Teton, and Cape Cod music festivals, and has performed with the chamber music societies of Philadelphia and La Jolla.

Polera has collaborated with leading soloists, including David Shifrin, Matt Haimovitz, Carter Brey, Yo-Yo Ma and Leonard Rose. Winner of the accompanying prize at the VIII International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, she regularly collaborates with laureates of the Queen Elisabeth, Tchaikovsky and Naumburg international competitions.



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