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Joseph Joachim and Beyond

CMS's Opening Night Begins a Violin-Focused Season

By John Sherer



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CMS violinists performing at Alice Tully Hall.

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (CMS) kicks off its 2025–26 season, which foregrounds the chamber music repertoire of the violin, with a tribute to one of history's greatest contributors to the instrument: Joseph Joachim. This German prodigy was one of the leading violinists of the 19th century, and he maintained close working relationships with some of the most prominent composers of his day. Many of the period's most beloved violin concertos were written for him—notably those by Johannes

Brahms, Robert Schumann, and Antonín Dvořák. CMS's opening night concert, *The Composer's Violinist: Joseph Joachim*, takes place Sunday, October 19, 2025, at 5:00 PM in Alice Tully Hall.

While he is often remembered today for his work as a soloist, particularly in those famous concertos, his contributions to the genre of chamber music are equally impressive. The string quartet he founded, a group known as the Joachim Quartet, was

one of the world's first "celebrity quartets," a brand-name ensemble that toured extensively throughout Europe, held annual residencies in prestigious venues, played on fine Stradivari instruments, and championed major works covering the entire history of the string quartet genre, from Joseph Haydn and W. A. Mozart through then-contemporary composers like Brahms. In fact, this group did much to define what we now think of as the "standard repertoire" of the 18th and 19th centuries—in addition to the works of those just named, canonical pieces by Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn, and Robert Schumann. The Joachim Quartet is also credited with pioneering the all-string-quartet recital; previously, it was much more common for quartets to share a program with other types of chamber music. Under Joachim's leadership they performed complete cycles of the Beethoven quartets (a rarity in those days), and they presented the complete chamber music works of Brahms.

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As a performer, Joachim had a remarkably modern sensibility that is more or less *de rigueur* among performers of classical music today. Sometimes described as an "ascetic" soloist, he was lauded for his commitment to keeping the composer's intentions first, subordinating his own personality to the notes on the page rather than indulging in flashy virtuosity for the



Julian Rhee and Yura Lee are among the many CMS violinists taking part in a season celebrating their instrument's history. Yura Lee will be featured in recital with pianist Angus Webster on October 30 in CMS's Rose Studio.



Violinist Aaron Boyd will give lectures on the history of the violin and moderate a panel on the influence of Fritz Kreisler.

sake of pleasing the crowds. He was also well regarded as a composer, although many of his works are rarely performed today. He wrote violin concertos for himself as soloist, and although they have much musical merit, their technical challenges are so great that they have mostly faded into obscurity. That said, his chamber music works are still occasionally performed.

CMS's opening night honors Joachim and the extraordinary musical circle in which he played a critical role. The concert begins with a work by another composer whose music has gained renewed attention in recent years: Clara Schumann's *Three Romances for Violin and Piano*, Op. 22. One of the most famous pianists of her time, Clara Schumann was for far too long remembered primarily as Robert Schumann's wife, but in truth she was an excellent composer in her own right. This lyrical piece was dedicated to Joachim, and he and the composer

played it on many tour appearances. The concert then turns to another violin-and-piano work, this one by Clara's husband; Robert's *Sonata in D minor*, Op. 121, was premiered by Joachim and Clara. After these works by the Schumanns is Joachim's own *Romance for Violin and Piano*, a rarely performed gem that showcases the expressive potential of the instrument. Taking turns in the spotlight in these pieces are CMS violinists Stella Chen and Lun Li, with Gilles Vonsattel at the piano. Chen and Li will then be joined by other CMS string players (Paul Neubauer and James Thompson on viola, and Co-Artistic Director David Finckel as well as Paul Watkins on cello) in Brahms's *Sextet No. 2 in G major*, Op. 36.

Much more violin history is in store throughout the rest of the season. Violinist Benjamin Beilman performs a recital with pianist Gloria Chien on November 23; the program includes

works by violin virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe (whose 1740 Guarneri del Gesù violin Beilman plays) and Béla Bartók, as well as César Franck's darkly lyrical showpiece dedicated as a wedding present to Ysaÿe. For those who want to explore more of the history of the violin, CMS's Winter Festival (February 20 through March 8, 2026) traces violin repertoire and performance practices from the Baroque through the Romantic age to the 20th century, ending with an all-star tribute to violin legend Fritz Kreisler. The concerts feature no fewer than 14 violinists from the CMS roster playing a wide variety of repertoire.

Moreover, a new lecture series pairs several concerts with a deep dive into violin history. The first event, during the Baroque Festival in December, follows the development of the violin from its advent to the Baroque period, when composers and performers brought the instrument to its first high point. The remaining events accompany the Winter Festival: a second lecture

traces the flowering of expression in the Classical and Romantic periods, followed by two round-table discussions (one on violin performance and composition today, and the other focusing on the music and influence of Kreisler). Lecturers and hosts include violinist Aaron Boyd, a frequent presence on CMS stages and an expert on violin history, as well as popular radio host Fred Child. The series will also feature guest panelists such as violin maker Samuel Zygmuntowicz (whose instruments are played by many CMS artists), composer and Juilliard's Dean and Director of the Music Division David Serkin Ludwig, and Amy Biancolli, author of *Fritz Kreisler: Love's Sorrow, Love's Joy*. Tickets for the lecture series, as well as for all 2025–26 concerts, are now on sale at ChamberMusicSociety.org.

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CMS's Winter Festival explores a wide range of violin repertoire, from J. S. Bach through Fritz Kreisler.