



VICTORIA  
SYMPHONY

Christian Kluxen, Music Director

CHRISTIAN KLUXEN  
Conductor

ALEX HETHERINGTON  
Mezzo-soprano\*

KENJI FUSÉ  
Viola†

November 27  
2:30 pm  
Royal Theatre

The Victoria Foundation is honoured to hold the Hugh Davidson Fund established through the will of the late Mr. Hugh Davidson. (1930–2014)

Hugh Davidson's passion for music and his support of contemporary composers and composition has been felt in our community through the private commissions of new works for performance by the Vancouver and Victoria symphonies.

**Songs From The House of Death**, written by Ian Cusson to poems by Joy Harjo, was commissioned by the Victoria Symphony and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra with the support of the Hugh Davidson Fund at the Victoria Foundation.

This season is underwritten in part by generous gifts from

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BEING ROBERT  
SCHUMANN:  
Symphony No. 4

*Felix Mendelssohn (1811–1847)*  
**Die schöne Melusine (The Fair Melusine), Op. 32**

*Ian Cusson (1981–)*  
**Songs From the House of Death (Poems by Joy Harjo)\***

“Songs From the House of Death;  
Or How to Make it Through the  
End of a Relationship”  
“I am a Dangerous Woman”  
“Creation Story”

INTERMISSION

*Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)*  
**Lachrymae – Reflections on a song of Dowland, Op. 48a†**

*Robert Schumann (1810–1856)*  
**Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Op. 120 (original version, 1841)**

Andante con moto – Allegro di molto  
Romanza: Andante  
Scherzo: Presto  
Largo – Finale: Allegro vivace

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**Being Robert Schumann:  
Symphony No. 4**

*There won't be a dry eye in the house.*

Now, that's not an entirely unusual response to Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 4 in D minor. Not only is this unconventional example of the symphonic form set in what some call "the heartbreak key," the sustained melancholy of its second movement, Romanza, is so despairing that experienced concertgoers already know to pack a handkerchief when Schumann 4 is on the bill.

To make sure that we feel this deeply, however, Victoria Symphony Music Director Christian Kluxen thinks it's important to understand what was going on in the German composer's life when he penned one of his most significant masterworks. Great love and great sorrow attended Schumann in equal measure from the 1830s onward, and Kluxen thinks that he has teased out some truths that have hitherto gone undiscussed.

When rehearsals started for the Victoria Symphony's Being Robert Schumann series, (which pairs Schumann's four symphonies with complementary works co-commissioned with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra), Kluxen quickly became convinced that "there's much more behind the music" than is generally appreciated.

"Which is true of all composers," he allows, "but here it's not just the story behind the music, but it is the mind behind the music. What makes him compose this way? Schumann's symphonies are strange because they are always unsettling. They are unsettled somewhere between will and doubt, between introversion and exaltation. They give you a feeling of not being done, that something could go on or that

something is not finished. But I think that this is where you can find the actual power of his music."

A clue, he says, can be found in the composer's mental state while composing music for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's stage play Faust, which occupied him fitfully from 1842 to 1853. While labouring over the score, he began to hallucinate strange presences in his room, people and objects that did not exist. "Goethe's Faust is obviously something that discusses reality," Kluxen says. "Is it happening or is it not happening? And at the same time Schumann was becoming mentally ill, or what we would now call mentally ill. But maybe it's just an alternative reality, right?"

Schumann's ambiguity about his own sexuality might also have played a part. Evidence for this is the tangled love triangle between Schumann, his wife Clara Wieck Schumann, and Johannes Brahms, although this didn't directly bear on the Symphony No. 4, which was written in 1841 (the version featured in this performance) and substantially revised a decade later. All brilliant musicians, Brahms and the Schumanns lived together for some weeks during 1853—which, for Kluxen, raises questions.

"When you see photos of Brahms from that time, he was incredibly handsome," the conductor says. "So imagine this beautiful and talented young man ringing the doorbell, and [in her letters] Clara said 'When he came into our house he sat down and we had a coffee and then when he started playing the piano I knew I could never leave this person.' Later in the day Robert Schumann comes home and meets Brahms and it was probably, again, love at first sight.

“I have this theory, which of course we shall never know for sure, that Brahms had, on some level, an erotic relationship with Robert Schumann. And shortly after Brahms leaves their home, Robert Schumann has one of his numerous depressive outbursts, throwing himself off a bridge, attempting suicide. But he was rescued by some fishermen, and he said ‘I want to go to a mental institution because I am afraid of hurting Clara.’ And what does he mean by that? Maybe he means physically, but maybe he also means that now there is a big chance that it will become public that he is bisexual, and this will hurt Clara’s life and reputation one day when he is not there any more.”

Tellingly, Clara Schumann did not visit her husband in the asylum, where he died just two years later. However, Brahms did.

Of course, all this is highly speculative, but it’s something to think about while you’re dabbling at your eyes during the Romanza. It’s also a good excuse to program music by another member of the Schumanns’ circle, Felix Mendelssohn. The Fair Melusine was nominally based on a fairy tale about a mermaid who married a mortal, but when Robert Schumann asked his friend about his inspiration, Mendelssohn reportedly said that it was simply about “a misalliance.”

Hmmm.

Even more explicitly tearful is Benjamin Britten’s *Lachrymae*, with Victoria Symphony Principal Violist Kenji Fusé in the soloist’s role. It’s based on a song by the greatest British composer of the Elizabethan era, John Dowland, which, tellingly, ends with the line “I was more true to Love than Love to me.” Robert Schumann could easily

have voiced the same complaint.

The one new work on this program, “Songs from the House of Death,” will likely serve as a kind of corrective, being more fierce than tearful, and drawing on the words of American poet laureate Joy Harjo—a member of the Muscogee Nation—rather than the lamentations of upperclass European men. Composer Ian Cusson is himself Métis, having both Indigenous and Francophone forebears, and he worked closely with Hungarian-Canadian soprano Krisztina Szabó during the trilogy’s creation.

“We had agreed that we wanted a feminist perspective, and so Ian’s choice of the poet was very purposeful, obviously,” Szabó says. “Then we had a discussion about the poems and which ones I connected with personally, and from that we selected three. The first is called ‘Songs From the House of Death; Or How to Make it Through the End of a Relationship,’ the second one is ‘I am a Dangerous Woman,’ and the third one is called ‘Creation Story.’

“I was interested in something that spoke to me, personally, about my woman-ness, so to speak,” she adds. “So I loved ‘I am a Dangerous Woman’. It speaks to how women, just from being women, are considered dangerous. And with ‘Creation Story’ it was the text ‘I am ashamed. I never had the words to carry a friend to the stars correctly.’ There’s a depth of thinking about love and relationships within these poems that really spoke to me.”

Love, then, is the through line here, with all its joys, dangers, and confusions fully represented.

NOTES BY ALEX VARTY

## Songs from the House of Death; or How to Make It Through to the End of a Relationship

From the house of death there is rain.  
From rain is flood and flowers.  
And flowers emerge through the ruins  
of those who left behind  
stores of corn and dishes,  
turquoise and bruises  
from the passion  
of fierce love.

I run my tongue over the skeleton  
jutting from my jaw. I taste  
the grit of heartbreak.

The procession of spirits  
who walk out of their bodies  
is ongoing. Just as the procession  
of those who have loved us  
will go about their business  
of making a new house  
with someone else who smells  
like the dust of a strange country.

The weight of rain is unbearable  
to the sky  
eventually. Just as desire will  
burn a hole through the sky  
and fall to earth.

I was surprised by the sweet embrace  
of the perfume of desert flowers  
after the rain  
though after all these seasons  
I shouldn't be surprised.

All cities will be built  
and then destroyed.  
We built too near the house  
of the gods of lightning,  
too close to the edge of a century.  
What could I expect,  
my bittersweet.

Even death who is the chief  
of everything  
on this earth (all undertakings,  
all matters of human  
form) will wash his hands,  
stop to rest under  
the cottonwood before taking you  
from me  
on the back of his horse.

Nothing I can sing  
will bring you back.  
Not the songs of a hundred horses  
running  
until they become the wind  
Not the personal song of the rain  
who makes love to the earth.

I will never forget you. Your nakedness  
haunts me in the dawn when I cannot  
distinguish your  
flushed brown skin from the burning  
horizon, or my hands.  
The smell of chaos lingers in the clothes  
you left behind. I leave you  
there.

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**Joy Harjo** is an internationally renowned performer and writer of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. She served as the Poet Laureate of the United States from 2019–2022. The author of nine books of poetry, including the acclaimed *An American Sunrise*, several plays and children's books, and two memoirs, *Crazy Brave* and *Poet Warrior*, her many honours include the Ruth Lily Prize for Lifetime Achievement from the Poetry Foundation, the Academy of American Poets Wallace Stevens Award, two NEA fellowships, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. As a musician, Harjo has produced seven award-winning music albums including her newest, *I Pray for My Enemies*. She is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, Board of Directors Chair of the Native Arts & Cultures Foundation, and is the first Artist-in-Residence for Tulsa's Bob Dylan Center.

## I Am a Dangerous Woman

The sharp ridges of the clear blue  
windows  
motion to me  
from the airport's second floor.  
Edges dance in the foothills  
of the Sandias  
behind security guards  
who wave me into their guncatcher  
machine.

I am a dangerous woman.

When the machine buzzes they say  
to take off my belt,  
and I remove it so easy  
that it catches the glance  
of a man standing nearby.  
(Maybe that is the deadly weapon  
that has the machine singing.)

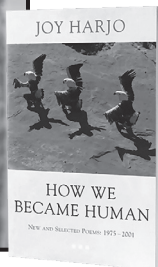
I am a dangerous woman,

but the weapon is not visible.  
Security will never find it.  
They can't hear the clicking  
of the gun inside my head.

## Joy Harjo



Photo by Matika Wilbur



## The Creation Story

I'm not afraid of love  
or its consequence of light.

It's not easy to say this  
or anything when my entrails  
dangle between paradise  
and fear.

I am ashamed  
I never had the words  
to carry a friend from her death  
to the stars  
correctly.

Or the words to keep  
my people safe  
from drought  
or gunshot.

The stars who were created by words  
are circling over this house  
formed of calcium, of blood

this house  
in danger of being torn apart  
by stones of fear.

If these words can do anything  
if these songs can do anything  
I say bless this house  
with stars.

Transfix us with love.

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“Songs From the House of Death,”

“I Am A Dangerous Woman,”  
and “The Creation Story,”

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from *How We Became Human:  
New and Selected Poems: 1975–2001*.

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**Christian Kluxen, Music Director**

Now in his sixth season as Music Director of the Victoria Symphony

in Canada, and fifth season as Chief Conductor of the Arctic Opera and Philharmonic in Norway, Christian Kluxen is regarded as one of the most exciting conductors to emerge from Scandinavia. Born in Copenhagen in 1981 to Danish-German parents, Kluxen has a natural affinity towards the Germanic and Scandinavian repertoire, particularly the works of Beethoven, Brahms, Richard Strauss, Nielsen and Sibelius. Throughout his two positions in Canada and Norway he is being recognized for his sincere and transparent leadership, innovative programming and his bold, imaginative and energetic interpretations.

Recent and forthcoming guest engagements include Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne—to which he was immediately re-invited following his debut in 2022—Odense Symphony, Turku Philharmonic and Norrköping Symphony. On the operatic stage, Kluxen has conducted extensive tours of *Don Giovanni* and *Madama Butterfly* with the Danish National Opera, followed by his Berlin conducting debut with *Die Zauberflöte* at Komische Oper. In 2017, he led highly successful performances of *Die Fledermaus* with Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, and *Ariadne auf Naxos* with Arctic Opera and Philharmonic. In 2019, he led two full productions of Bizet's *Carmen*; in Denmark at Opera Hedeland and in Norway with Arctic Opera and Philharmonic.

Kluxen's concerts have been broadcast live in Denmark, the UK, Sweden, Norway and Canada. He has received several prestigious awards and prizes, and in 2016 he was nominated by the International Opera Awards as "Young Conductor of the Year."



**Alex Hetherington**

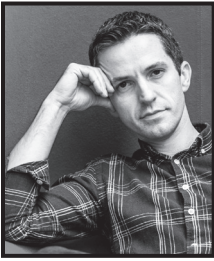
*Mezzo-soprano*  
Mezzo-soprano Alex Hetherington is in her first year of

residency in the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio and is quickly establishing herself as a skilled interpreter of operatic and concert repertoire, with a specialty in contemporary music. She recently graduated with a Master's in Opera Performance from the University of Toronto, and in recent years has won a Dora Mavor Moore Award, the University of Toronto Concerto Competition, and the Jim and Charlotte Norcop Prize in Song.

Operatic credits include *Mercédès* in *Carmen* (Canadian Opera Company), Riley in *R.U.R. A Torrent of Light* (Tapestry Opera), Rosina in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Carmen* in *La tragédie de Carmen* (UofT Opera), Nicklausse in *The Tales of Hoffmann* (Toronto City Opera), as well as The House in Tapestry Opera's recording of *Rocking Horse Winner*, which premiered on CBC Music's *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*.

Hetherington has performed in concert with the National Arts Centre Orchestra (Alto Soloist, Mozart Requiem), Canadian Art Song Project (dawn always begins in the bones),

and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (Tilly, The Bear). She is also a composer, with works performed by the Gryphon Trio and Esprit Orchestra. Upcoming performances include Lieberson's *Neruda Songs* with the UTSO, and the role of the Slave in the COC's production of *Salome*.



**Ian Cusson**

*Composer*

Ian Cusson is a composer of art song, opera, and orchestral work. Of Métis (Georgian

Bay Métis Community) and French Canadian descent, his work explores Canadian Indigenous experience including the history of the Métis people, the hybridity of mixed-racial identity, and the intersection of Western and Indigenous cultures.

He studied composition with Jake Heggie (San Francisco) and Samuel Dolin, and piano with James Anagnoson at the Glenn Gould School. He is the recipient of the Chalmers Professional Development Grant, and grants through the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Ian was an inaugural Carrefour Composer-in-Residence with the National Arts Centre Orchestra for 2017-2019 and was Composer-in-Residence for the Canadian Opera Company for 2019-2021. He is a Co-artistic Director of Opera in the 21st Century at the Banff Centre and the recipient of the 2021 Jan V. Matejcek Classical Music Award from SOCAN and the 2021 Johanna Metcalf Performing Arts Prize. Ian is an Associate

Composer of the Canadian Music Centre and a member of the Canadian League of Composers.

He lives in Oakville with his wife and four children.



**Kenji Fusé**

*Viola*

Kenji Fuse continues to engage audiences as a soloist, chamber musician, and

the principal violist of the Victoria Symphony.

*Monday Magazine's* 2011 Classical/New Music Performer, he has given the premieres of many works, including the BC premiere of the Viola Concerto of Jacques Hetu. In 2005 he was delighted to present three performances of his own Viola Concerto under the baton of his friend, the superstar conductor Yannick Nezet-Seguin, which the Times-Colonist called "delectable...a splendid performance."

He recently performed Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 with his colleague Kay Cochran, and his 2018 performance of Berlioz' *Harold in Italy*, conducted by Victoria Symphony Music Director Christian Kluxen, received a thunderous standing ovation.

Kenji also enjoys coaching the viola section of the Greater Victoria Youth Orchestra, and mentoring young musicians. He has taught at the Victoria Conservatory of Music, the University of Victoria, and at the Comox Valley Music Camp. He holds degrees from the University of Toronto and Royal Conservatory of Music, where he studied with Lorand Fenyves and Steven Dann.

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