



Kevin Nardstrom

JOHANNES BRAHMS
SEVEN LIEDER

RODOLFO ACOSTA R.
PLAYAS

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Seven Lieder

Compiled and transcribed for viola and piano by **Kevin Nordstrom**

Meerfahrt (Sea Journey), Op. 96 No. 4

Blinde Kuh (Blind Man's Bluff), Op. 58 No. 1

O wüsst' ich doch den Weg zurück (Oh, if only I knew the way back), Op. 63 No. 8

Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer (Ever Softer Grows My Slumber), Op. 105 No. 2

Wir wandelten (We Wandered), Op. 96 No. 2

Nachtigall (The Nightingale), Op 97 No. 1

Regenlied (Rain Song), Op. 59 No. 3

Kevin Nordstrom, viola

Ming-Li Liu, piano

Recorded at Wright State University, Schuster Recital Hall

November 24, 2024

Kevin Nordstrom, Engineer

Mixed and Mastered by Zac Tiessen, ZT Music Studio

Rodolfo Acosta R. (b. 1970): Playas (2005)

Kevin Nordstrom, viola

Recorded at Ambleside Studios™

May 24, 2025

Kevin Nordstrom, Engineer

Mixed and Mastered by Zac Tiessen, ZT Music Studio



For me, **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897) is the greatest of composers, his life and work, his craft and artistry, the culmination of centuries of music-making and the very standard of artistic excellence. Across genres great and small, he created music of ineffable beauty that satisfies heart and intellect in equal measure. In short, I adore him, am deeply devoted to him as a player, music historian, and listener, and—though it may sound strange—regard him as something of a friend.

As an instrumentalist, my relationship with Brahms has been shaped largely through performing

his orchestral, chamber, and other works written to include or adapted for the viola. These pieces are superbly crafted and came into the world only after much toil and self-reflection, failed attempts and veiled successes. They consumed his energy, his time, and in many ways, his happiness.

What had not been much in my purview until recently was Brahms's vast output of vocal music. Apart from the German Requiem op. 45 and Two Songs for voice, viola, and piano op. 91, I was for many years hardly familiar with it, especially his songs for voice(s) and piano. When I finally turned to them as a listener and performer, I discovered a world both extensive and stunning—one filled with melodies of extraordinary grace, charm, and melancholy, which caress air and ear with effortless tenderness.

In my mind, the immediacy and lovely warmth of these many songs distinguish them from Brahms's larger instrumental works, which are more taxing for both performer and listener, just as they were for the composer himself. Songwriting rarely gave Brahms the same kind of trouble as his instrumental works; a symphony or sonata might take years to finish before he was satisfied, while a song—and sometimes an entire set of them—could come together with relative swiftness. He felt deeply at home with the voice, much like the predecessors he revered: Bach, Schubert, and Schumann. (Beethoven, for all his genius, never

possessed the same natural facility with vocal writing.) Here we find Brahms's melodic gift fully revealed and given free rein; here his genius serves a miraculous ability to merge music and narrative, elevating the simplest lines of poetry with a music of richly lyrical elegance and compositional clarity.

Clara Schumann often chided her dear friend Brahms for choosing poetic texts she found too ordinary, sometimes even tasteless. Yet it is precisely this simplicity and directness that makes his vocal music so approachable and touching, so human. Many of the poems tell stories of love—for a beloved, for home, for family, for fleeting memories—with all the bliss, longing, and heartbreak such stories naturally embrace. The same is true of the texts behind the Seven Lieder which I have compiled for this album. Drawn from different opuses spanning much of Brahms's career, my intent is that they be heard and taken as a kind of composite song cycle: a narrative of love shaped by the emotional arc of the original poems and the gorgeous music that animates them.

The following is a narrative scenario for the Seven Lieder, which I have created based on the original poems Brahms set:

(1) *Meerfahrt*, Op. 96 No. 4 — “Sea Journey”

A young couple, bride and groom, ride on a rough sea; their small, inadequate boat is carried past their destination—the symbolic island/altar of marriage—and through no fault of their own their opportunity for romantic fulfillment is missed.

(2) *Blinde Kuh*, Op. 58 No. 1 — “Blind Man's Bluff”

The mother of the bride-to-be calls angrily after her daughter, cursing the man who has taken her away into danger and certain loss.

(3) *O wüsst' ich doch den Weg zurück*, Op. 63 No. 8 — “Oh, If Only I Knew the Way Back”

Lost and afraid, separated from her loved ones, the girl laments her unintended fate. She longs for home, her mother's guiding hand, and the land she left behind.

(4) *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*, Op. 105 No. 2 — “Ever Softer Grows My Slumber”

In despair she drifts into a regretful reverie and surrenders to an apparent death, welcoming it as gently and inevitably as life itself.

(5) *Wir wandelten*, Op. 96 No. 2 — “We Wandered”

In this dreamlike state she imagines being reunited with her lover, the two wandering together in blissful illusion—the happiness that should have been theirs.

(6) *Nachtigall, Op. 97 No. 1* — “The Nightingale”

The man, unaware of what has become of her, dreams that she has transformed into a beautiful nightingale. He follows the bird as if guided toward her fate.

(7) *Regenlied, Op. 59 No. 3* — “Rain Song”

He awakens from his visions, tears—her tears—falling like rain and swirling with his; memories flood him as a deluge, leaving him alone with his grief and longing.



Colombian composer and Bogotá native **Rodolfo Acosta R.** (b. 1970) is a leader in contemporary music, both through his own compositions and through his advocacy for new music and experimentation. His acoustic, electroacoustic, and experimental works have been performed around the world, earning much praise and acclaim.

Playas (2005) was composed for violist Sergio Trujillo and is Acosta's only work for solo viola to date. In conversations with him, Acosta has stated that *Playas* is completely determinant in nature, written at a time of great personal sadness and turmoil. He later

wrote to me: “(T)he tone of the piece moves back and forth between anger and sadness, and is usually languid and hopeless... although it is ultimately looking for serenity. The discourse is made up of scattered bits and pieces, memories and whatnot; like wistfully looking through old memories. The viola tries to find an expressive outlet but usually fails.”

At first glance, *Playas* may seem an unlikely work to pair with the

melancholy romance of Brahms's songs. But through my performances of the piece and conversations with its composer, I have become convinced that the music assembled here on this album—and the two composers—share much in common.

Brahms's and Acosta's music is deeply personal and rich in expression, evocative of the truest human emotions, attractive to player and listener alike. Both are master craftsmen whose timing of phrases and handling of gestures large and small commands awe and attention. Brahms found it difficult to express himself in conversation and writing, and often said that his music, both instrumental and vocal, spoke for him—that it conveyed the depths of his soul and his truest beliefs better than any words he could say or write. Rodolfo is, on the other hand, a delightful person and far clearer in verbal expression than Brahms ever was (Brahms was often misunderstood and could come off as cruel—one need only read some of his letters to imagine what conversation with him might have been like) and thus perfectly capable of expressing himself in plain words. Nevertheless, in Acosta's music I sense the same depth, vulnerability, expressive power and authority which carry so wonderfully in his music alone.

Despite the centuries and musical languages that separate them, both the *Seven Lieder* and *Playas* trace painful stories of love and loss, of resignation, memory, and a quiet longing that never fully resolves. And in a small but satisfying coincidence, they even echo one another in pitch: the Brahms begins in E minor, and Acosta brings his piece to rest on that same pitch—an unexpected tonal thread linking two distant worlds.

I believe that for an artist to be truly original and authentic, their work must act as a mirror to the soul, revealing truths about the world—their world—that no one else can express, yet which the willing player and listener may partake in with devotion, love, and joy. Brahms and Acosta have certainly achieved this, and in my collaboration with them, I perhaps have, in some way, done so too. It goes without saying that I have taken as much pleasure performing the music of both composers in public as I have in recording it here, and I will undoubtedly continue to do so. It is my hope that you will enjoy it equally as much.

Kevin Nordstrom

December 2025



Violist **Kevin Nordstrom** leads a vibrant and multifaceted career as a performer, teacher, and scholar. He has appeared as a soloist, recitalist, chamber musician, teacher and clinician throughout North, Central, and South America, Europe, and Asia, and has served on the string faculties of the University of Louisville, Wright State University, and Earlham College.

As a performer, Dr. Nordstrom specializes in late-Romantic, twentieth-century, and contemporary repertoire. He has earned recognition for his compelling interpretations of cornerstone works for the viola, especially sonatas by Paul Hindemith, while also contributing

significantly to the revival of overlooked pieces such as those by American composer Marion Bauer and French composer Charles Koechlin. Among his signature works are Joan Tower's *Wild Purple* and *Simply Purple* for solo viola, and her *Purple Rhapsody* viola concerto. Recent notable engagements include solo recitals at the International Performing Arts Center in Seoul, South Korea, and on the *Persona Contemporary and Exploratory Concert Series* in Medellín, Colombia.

A dedicated advocate for new music, Dr. Nordstrom collaborates closely with living composers at all stages of their careers. Several solo and chamber works have been written for him by Alyssa Morris, including her *Puccini Fantasy* for Viola and Piano (2021), a virtuosic and expressive work he has performed widely and recorded on his album *Works for Viola by American Women Composers*. Additional works include *The Big Questions* for oboe, viola, and piano (2024), as well as a forthcoming viola concerto. Dr. Nordstrom has also performed extensively the music of Colombian composer Rodolfo Acosta R., including *Playas* for solo viola (2005), *vi tu cara, y sentí vértigo y lloré* for solo improviser (2011), and *Archipiélagos de la esperanza* for viola and cello (2003).

As a chamber musician, Dr. Nordstrom performs regularly with the

Aurelian Trio and in a duo with his violinist brother, Dr. Stephen Nordstrom. With both ensembles, he explores cornerstone repertoire while actively championing and commissioning works by composers from across the Americas—including Manuel Ponce, Heitor Villa-Lobos, and Allan McCullough—as well as music by Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir and Estonian composer Mirjam Tally.

As a scholar, Dr. Nordstrom presents frequently at conferences and contributes articles to professional journals. A committed member of the College Music Society (CMS), he has lectured on and performed music by György Ligeti, Charles Koechlin, Marion Bauer, Lillian Fuchs, Alyssa Morris, and Joan Tower at both regional and national meetings. His dedication to advancing string education has led to clinic presentations for the Texas, Pennsylvania, and Ohio Music Educators Associations, as well as multiple appearances at American String Teachers Association (ASTA) National Conferences. His writings appear in the *American String Teacher* journal and the *Journal of the American Viola Society (JAVS)*, where he has also served on the editorial board. Within CMS, he has held leadership roles including Program Chair and Treasurer for the Great Lakes Chapter.

Dr. Nordstrom studied at the University of North Texas, the University of Southern California, and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. His principal teachers include Dr. Kathryn Steely, Dr. Susan Dubois, Donald McInnes, Masao Kawasaki, and Dr. Catharine Carroll-Lees. He performs on a fine 1893 viola by the distinguished American luthier Jerome Bonaparte Squier, along with bows crafted by Richard Grünke, Martin Devillers, Emile Blondelet, and Douglas Raguse. Beyond his musical life, Kevin is an avid golfer, reader, cooker of food and connoisseur of drink, and—above all—a devoted family man.



Taiwanese pianist **Ming-Li Liu** has been praised for her charismatic and passionate performances across the United States and Taiwan. In 2023, she won the concerto competition at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) and performed Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 with the CCM Orchestra. She was also a prizewinner at the Wideman International Piano Competition, the Taiwan Solo Piano Competition, the Soochow University Concerto Competition, and the Rong-Hsing Piano Competition.

In addition to her solo achievements, Liu is establishing herself as a distinguished chamber musician and collaborative pianist. As part of various chamber groups, she has

won prizes at the United States International Duo Piano Competition, the MTNA-Stecher and Horowitz Two Piano Competition, the Gershwin International Music Competition, and the Taiwan Chamber Music

Competition. As a sought-after collaborative pianist, she has performed at prestigious events such as the Indianapolis Violin Competition and the Naumburg Competition, and was named "Best Collaborative Pianist" at the Winstead Woodwind Competition. She has collaborated with renowned artists including Nobuko Imai, Natasha Brofsky, Masumi Rostad, Olga Kaler, members of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Ariel Quartet, the Kronos Quartet, the Formosa Quartet, and the Poiesis Quartet, as well as musicians from New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

Liu has also attended the Music Academy of the West and the Bowdoin Music Festival as a collaborative piano fellow, and served as the Collaborative Piano Coordinator and staff pianist at the Ascent Music Festival.

Liu is currently a Doctor of Musical Arts candidate in Piano Performance at CCM, where she also earned dual Master of Music degrees in Piano Performance and Collaborative Piano under the guidance of Ran Dank, Daniel Shapiro, and Sandra Rivers, supported by a full scholarship and a graduate assistantship in collaborative piano.

Johannes Brahms (portrait) (1889), C. Brasch (Berlin). Source: Wikimedia Commons, file JohannesBrahms.jpg.
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