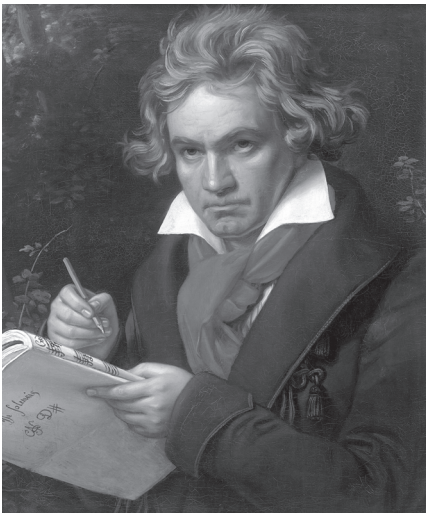
Program Notes



This weekend's Beethoven concerto cycle highlights three types of artist: soloist, conductor, and composer, and the PSO is providing the very best for you on each front. I had the very good fortune of crossing paths with two of the three stars very recently.

I worked with **Inon Barnatan**, our piano soloist, for the first time last year in my role as cover conductor at the National Symphony Orchestra down in Washington.

The scheduled soloist on Brahms' massive second piano concerto was to be Yefim Bronfman. However, Bronfman had to step away due to a temporary health issue, and Mr. Barnatan was called in at the last minute to take over and make his debut with the National Symphony Orchestra led by its new Music Director, Gianandrea Noseda.

Inon was spectacular. The Brahms is a 50-minute concerto, and he received ovation after ovation for his remarkable rendition, all the more impressive given the short notice for the performance.

Mr. Barnatan is technically superb, and he voices his playing in nuanced ways that are very expressive and allow each individual line of the composition to be heard distinctly. Yet somehow, they blend together in beautiful ways. This combination of special abilities will be particularly appropriate for the diverse set of musical challenges offered by the Beethoven concerti.

I met our conductor for these performances, **Marcelo Lehninger**, in Honolulu just recently! We were lucky to have Maestro Lehninger join us in Hawaii as he performed with the Hawaii Symphony Orchestra on two concerts over the course of our opening week. Mr. Lehninger did a wonderful job connecting with the orchestra, and his remarks to an audience of all ages resonated with and energized the crowd. His dynamic interpretations of the various works including Beethoven's fifth symphony were outstanding, and his approach to collaboration with the soloist was incredibly exciting to see.

I think it quite a wonderful synergy that these two young, rising stars (both born in 1979) of the classical world were ones with whom I had come into close contact recently. It is certainly a special pairing being presented to you this weekend. Now, let's move to our third featured artist of the weekend.

Beethoven and His Piano Concerti

In order to contextualize the compositions of **Ludwig van Beethoven,** I often imagine him as a jeweler, specializing in pieces most unique.

Compare him to one of the few composers considered his equal: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. While Beethoven penned nine symphonies and five piano concerti, Mozart composed roughly five times that amount in both genres, with forty-one symphonies and twenty-seven piano concertos to his name. Why this great discrepancy?

Mozart was a magician from the time he began composing at the age of five. His writing flowed effortlessly, and there are famous accounts of the prodigious artist being able to craft works with complete fluency, composing fully formed pieces with no pauses for consideration and no editing needed. Mozart was not trying to craft works of great distinction. He relied on innate abilities to create a vast catalog containing works that reflected the best of the classical style. Of course, as Mozart matured so too did his works, and the great masterpieces began to emerge.

Many of Mozart's early symphonies, concerti and even operas, however, remain rarely performed. To continue my previous simile—Mozart began as an artist who was able to produce vibrant pieces of sterling silver. Each beautiful, but, perhaps, similar to others in his oeuvre.

In contrast, Beethoven worked painstakingly, and sometimes for years, on each of his symphonies and concerti—all unique in their gem-like qualities. Because of this, every music student learns each note of all nine of his symphonies, and each stands completely on its own, unable to be confused with any other work. The same is true of these concerti.

Beethoven wrestled with these pieces for years and sometimes even decades. For example, the concerto no. 2 was actually the first to be written but not the first to be published. Beethoven began work on the piece in 1787 and completed

it five years later. He then rewrote two movements in 1795, redrafted the whole piece in 1798, revised that and sent it to publishers in 1801, and finally completed the cadenza after eight additional years of fine-tuning. Quite a different approach than his predecessor.

Much like his first symphony, Beethoven's first piano concerto is an experiment in perfecting elements of the classical version of the form, while infusing it with experiments unique to Beethoven's particular sense of harmonic curiosity. Although the form of the piece would have mirrored that of the typical Mozartian concerto, the radical harmonic shifts predict a style of greater Romanticism.

The previously mentioned second concerto furthers this sense of harmonic playfulness, and, as noted above, contains a cadenza from Beethoven's middle period that is notably Romantic in style. The primary example of this harmonic "joking," is in the finale, where the composer sets the C section in an unexpected minor and then, Beethoven "corrects" this by returning the piece to the incorrect key of G major, before the orchestra finally wrenches us back to our home key of B-flat. The piece is also notable in that it was the first piece for which Beethoven himself performed as a piano soloist in public, playing the keyboard part at the work's premiere in 1875.

The third concerto was also withheld from publication for four years, prompting the composer to pen the following in a letter about the piece, "musical policy necessitates keeping the best concertos to oneself for a while." The work was considered quite daring at the time. At many times, the piano operates completely independently from the orchestra. Thwarting of harmonic expectation reaches its maximum here, with the slow movement being set in E major (4 sharps), the opposite from the home key of the work, C minor (3 flats).

The fourth and the fifth concertos are a relative pair in their opposition of approach. The fourth is understated and in many ways philosophical. Melodically and harmonically the piece often feels improvisatory and therefore, deeply personal. In contrast, the fifth, nicknamed "The Emperor," is bold and direct. The piece begins with no introduction, and both the piano and orchestra strike boldly together between virtuosic solo interjections. The heroism of the piece will grant to us an appropriate energy for the finale of our cycle, and to our weekend of celebrating this set of groundbreaking works.

~ By John Devlin
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