



BEETHOVEN PIANO

FIVE WINNERS

FIVE CONCERTOS

ONE WEEKEND ONLY!

CONCERTO

Marathon

SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 2026 | 7:30PM
SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 2026 | 3:00PM
THE GRANADA THEATRE

Program Notes



Beethoven: The Prometheus of Music

The young Johann Wolfgang Goethe wrote a revolutionary poem about the divine hero Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind. Boldly challenging the deity, Goethe's Prometheus claims the powers of the Creator for himself: "Here I sit, forming people after my own image: a race that shall be like me..."

More than any other artist—indeed, more than Goethe himself—, Beethoven embodies this vision of an extraordinary being "forming people after his own image." We may not even realize the extent to which Beethoven has defined what music is expected to be all about in Western civilization. He raised the issue of the artist's place in society in an entirely new way, because he was the first great artist to consciously set himself apart from society, sending society messages like Prometheus bringing the fire. For over 200 years, listeners have been convinced that there are such messages in Beethoven's music. It is common for commentators to perceive a special "meaning" beyond the notes, even when there is no programmatic, illustrative intent (as in the Sixth Symphony, for instance). When Mozart has the piano enter right at the beginning of his Piano Concerto No. 9, we are not inclined to read any special "meaning" into this delicious departure from convention. But the opening measures of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 are a different story altogether. Generations of listeners have felt that there is a mystery about that famous opening, and the difficulty of verbalizing those feelings certainly hasn't discouraged people from trying.

No composer before Beethoven had striven to communicate feelings on the same level of urgency. He touches us directly, and sometimes too directly. Tolstoy may have overstated the case in his short novel *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which Beethoven's music incites the protagonist to murder—but the energy he interpreted in such a negative way is undoubtedly there. The visceral power of the music is present in the titanic struggle of the Fifth and Ninth Symphonies and the transcendent beauty of the "Holy Song of Thanksgiving" from the String Quartet Op. 132. This tendency is palpable even in the early works—witness the slow movements of the piano sonatas, Op. 7 and of Op. 10, No. 3. The titan Prometheus inspired Beethoven's first stage work (a ballet, written in 1800–01), and one of the themes from that ballet became a prominent melody in the Third Symphony, the *Eroica*.

Continued...



Beethoven: The Prometheus of Music

Our knowledge of Beethoven's life and personality only serves to reinforce the symbolic significance of his work. His deafness and personal struggles, the story of the "Immortal Beloved" (a great love that was not to be), his rough exterior—all this is the stuff of which legends are (and have been) made, presented in films, novels, and other fictionalized accounts. In a word, Beethoven has fascinated the world like few composers ever have.

Beethoven's communication with his listeners was never more direct or more personal than in his piano concertos, which were, after all, written for himself to perform. The presence of an orchestra guaranteed that the setting was public, or at least semi-public, providing the artist with an opportunity to address his message to a world that was listening with keen anticipation. (The last concerto, the "Emperor," was the only one Beethoven did not perform himself. By this time, his deafness made concertizing impossible for him.)

In his 1999 book on Beethoven's concertos, Leon Plantinga writes: "In his concertos, Beethoven typically cast himself as leader; the concerto was for him mainly a youthful preoccupation intimately bound up with his prowess and ambition as a public pianist." With the piano as leader and the orchestra representative of a group of followers, the concerto form seems a perfect metaphor for the dichotomy between artist and society on which so much of Beethoven's music is based. All the heroes of his stage works, or other compositions inspired by literature, are born leaders: Prometheus, Coriolanus, Egmont, and Florestan are all striving to influence and change society. And the composer who, in his last symphony, set Schiller's words "Be embraced, you millions" to music counted himself among those heroes as well. Posterity, in any case, has always viewed Beethoven in that light.

As Scott Burnham has written in his insightful book *Beethoven Hero* (1995), "Beethoven's heroic style, while musically representing something like destiny, itself became the destiny of music." In fact, composers as diverse as Berlioz, Schumann, Wagner, Bruckner, and Mahler, in very different ways, all took that style as their

Continued...



Beethoven: The Prometheus of Music

starting point. The title of a 1929 biography by Robert H. Schauffler, *Beethoven: The Man Who Freed Music*, is symptomatic of the way the composer has been perceived over the years. Certainly, the influential heroic style of the Third, Fifth, and Ninth Symphonies, the *Appassionata* sonata or the “Emperor” Concerto is not the only one Beethoven worked in, and there is no reason to regard the “even-numbered” symphonies or the “Spring” sonata any less “Beethovenian.” In a deeper sense, Beethoven’s “heroism” was manifest not only when he actually wrestled with “Fate” but every time he raised the intensity of emotional communication to a level never reached before—and hardly ever equaled since.

There is an oft-repeated but fictitious story of Beethoven and Goethe walking together at the spa of Teplitz (Teplice, Czech Republic) and seeing the Imperial family approach. According to the story, Goethe stepped aside, took off his hat, and bowed to the royals, all of which Beethoven refused to do. Untrue as the story is, it confirms that the myth of Beethoven as a rebel goes back a long way; even the contemporaries felt that the defiant “Promethean” spirit, which no longer seemed to characterize the older Goethe (now a high court official in Weimar), lived on in his composer colleague.

The ultimate miracle, perhaps, is that no matter how familiar Beethoven’s works have become, they have never lost their revolutionary aura, and they still exude that rebellious heroism that has characterized them from the start. As Burnham writes: “It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a time when Beethoven’s music will not continue to exercise its paradoxically confounding and foundational force. Perhaps when that happens, the Western world will truly have passed into another age.”



SATURDAY

Overture to *Egmont* Op. 84 (1810)

Three years before Beethoven was born, the German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published an important theoretical work on theatre called the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. In it, Lessing wrote at length about the role of music in spoken drama, an area in which he felt substantial changes were needed. 18th-century aesthetics insisted not only on music's power to express human emotions but also its obligation to do so as fully as possible. According to Lessing, music for spoken plays should express the subject matter at hand, rather than only providing a background or distracting entertainment.

In the same year, 1767, Christoph Willibald Gluck wrote a preface to his opera *Alceste*, in which he said: "My idea was that the overture ought to indicate the subject and prepare the spectators for the character of the piece they are about to hear."

In the hands of Gluck, Mozart, and Beethoven, the genre of the overture became capable of dramatic expression to a degree never dreamed of by Lessing. Beethoven discovered entirely new possibilities in the overture, and when, between the second and third versions of his opera *Fidelio*, he turned to the spoken theatre to write *Egmont*, he incorporated incidental music into the drama as no one had ever done before.

The action of Goethe's tragedy *Egmont*, written in 1786, takes place in the 16th century, when Flanders was occupied by the Spanish. Count Lamoral van Egmont, scion of a noble family of Flanders, was appointed governor of the province by Spain's King Philip II (the stepfather and rival of Don Carlos in Schiller's tragedy and Verdi's opera). Seeing the suffering of his oppressed fellow countrymen, Egmont turned against the Spaniards and challenged the King to give freedom to the Low Countries. In response, Philip had Egmont executed in Brussels on June 4, 1568; this cruel act touched off a war of independence that eventually ended with the victory of the Flemish insurgents.

Continued...



SATURDAY

Overture to *Egmont* Op. 84 (1810)

This story of a foreign oppression challenged could never have been timelier than in the Vienna of 1809, occupied by Napoleon's forces. And surely no composer had treated the themes of oppression, struggle, and freedom as often and as gloriously as Beethoven, whose opera *Fidelio* was about the liberation of a freedom-fighter from unjust imprisonment and whose Fifth Symphony climaxed in a breathtaking transition from darkness to light.

Lessing had written in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*: "The overture must only indicate the general tendency of the play and not more strongly or decidedly than the title does. We may show the spectator the goal to which he is to attain, but the various paths by which he is to attain it must be entirely hidden from him." In fact, the Overture to *Egmont* describes the goal (victory) through a transition from darkness to light, not unlike those in the earlier Fifth Symphony and the "Leonore" Overture No. 3.

The overture consists of three sections: a slow introduction, followed by a dramatic *Allegro* and a triumphant coda. The introduction is based on two themes: a *forte* chordal passage played by the strings and a doleful melody given to the woodwinds. A short transition leads into the passionate *Allegro*, written in a heroic style with reminiscences of the Fifth Symphony. The chordal passage from the introduction reappears as the *Allegro's* second theme. Another dramatic transition ushers in the coda (concluding section), in which the fanfare of the horns and trumpets proclaims the triumph of the cause of freedom.

Goethe's tragedy ends as Egmont confronts his executioners without fear; as the curtain falls, Goethe's stage direction calls for a *Siegessymphonie* (symphony of victory) to be played by the orchestra; and that is exactly what Beethoven composed here.



SATURDAY

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37 (1802-03)

- I. Allegro con brio**
- II. Largo**
- III. Rondo: Allegro**

The C-minor concerto occupies a transitional position among Beethoven's five piano concertos. In some ways, it harks back to the two earlier works, but at the same time, it foreshadows what was yet to come. It is just as heavily indebted to Mozart as are its predecessors; in fact, it even appears to be slightly more conservative in its handling of sonata form, modulations and orchestral timbres than the C-major concerto (No. 1). Nevertheless, the choice of C minor places this work in an impressive series of compositions in which Beethoven established that key as his "tragic" tonality. He had used C minor in numerous works since his arrival in Vienna in 1792. The Piano Trio, Op. 1, No. 3; the String Trio, Op. 9, No. 3; the "Pathétique" Sonata, Op. 13; and the String Quartet, Op. 18, No. 4, are invariably among the strongest within their respective genres. The melodic material and the orchestration were clearly influenced by Mozart's concerto in the same key (K. 491), especially in the first and third movements. But Beethoven invested the key of C minor with profound personal meaning, as he continued to do in such later masterpieces as the Fifth Symphony or the last piano sonata (Op. 111).

The opening "Allegro con brio" movement starts with a military motif played by the strings in unison. Out of this almost banal material, Beethoven created an elaborate movement in which each component is subjected to extensive thematic development. The lyrical second theme closely resembles the analogous melody in the C-major concerto. The entire movement is based on the contrast between those two opposing characters. One of the most remarkable moments comes at the end when, after the cadenza, the pianist continues with sixteenth-note passages against the timpani playing part of the main theme. (Beethoven was to write another extraordinary duo for piano and timpani at the end of his Fifth Concerto, the "Emperor").

Continued...



SATURDAY

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37 (1802-03)

- I. Allegro con brio**
- II. Largo**
- III. Rondo: Allegro**

(Continued)

The melody of the second-movement “Largo” (in the key of E major, quite remote from C minor) is quite simple in itself, but the lavish ornamentation it receives makes it shine with special splendor. The enchanting parallel thirds in the pianist’s second solo entrance further add to the magic, as do the repeated sudden modulations into distant keys (such as back to C, the main tonality of the concerto). The movement ends with a short cadenza and a soft, lyrical coda for piano, horns, and flutes, cut short by a single *fortissimo* chord.

The third movement starts with an ingenious harmonic device connecting the Largo’s E major to the C minor of the Rondo, making the transition between the two distant keys almost imperceptible. The Rondo itself combines a playful rhythmic scheme with a melody emphasizing the diminished seventh, an interval traditionally expressing dramatic tension (the same combination of light and serious effects is also found in the finale of Mozart’s C-minor concerto). The main theme is briefly developed as a fugue, followed by a surprising modulation which briefly thrusts us back into the Largo’s E major. After re-establishing the home key, Beethoven proceeds with the recapitulation, culminating in a short cadenza. The concerto ends with a *Presto* coda, set apart by a change of meter (from 2/4 to 6/8) and another change of key (from C minor to C major).



SATURDAY

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (1805-06)

- I. Allegro moderato**
- II. Andante con moto**
- III. Rondo: Vivace**

The first three Beethoven concertos represent a gradual line of evolution, gradually moving away from the Mozartian models and culminating in No. 5, the magnificent “Emperor” Concerto in E-flat major. No. 4 seems to fall outside that line. It is every bit as revolutionary as the “Emperor,” which it preceded by three years; yet it is unique in its mixture of cheerfulness and lyricism, with occasional touches of mystery. The first movement is gentle yet extremely powerful. The finale is playful and witty yet has its dream-like moments. And in between, there is an “Andante con moto” that doesn’t resemble anything Beethoven ever wrote before or after the Fourth Concerto.

The first surprise occurs in the very first measure of the concerto. The usual orchestral introduction is preceded by a piano solo consisting of a few simple chords played almost as if in a dream. The orchestra enters in a different key, eventually finding its way back to G major. From here on, the succession of themes follows the established conventions, but there are many irregularities in the tonal plan and its harmonic elaboration. One of the many unexpected modulations in the movement leads to an expressive melody played *pianissimo* in the highest register of the instrument. It makes use of notes that were available only on the newest instruments; it is interesting to observe that Beethoven contrasted the extremely high range of the melody with a left-hand accompaniment that is extremely low. The effect is magical.

The second-movement “Andante con moto” is an impassioned dialogue between the piano and the strings that seems to cry out for a programmatic explanation. In a 1985 article, musicologist Owen Jander interpreted the movement as “Orpheus in Hades,” with

Continued...



SATURDAY

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (1805-06)

- I. Allegro moderato**
- II. Andante con moto**
- III. Rondo: Vivace**

Orpheus pleading with the Furies of the Underworld for the life of his wife, Eurydice. Having won Eurydice back, Orpheus broke his vow not to look at her on their way home and lost her forever.

Jander backed up his claims with some biographical evidence. An acquaintance of Beethoven's, composer Friedrich August Kanne, was working on an opera based on the Orpheus myth around the time Beethoven composed his concerto. Kanne, who wrote both the libretto and the score of his opera, included a passage where Orpheus and the chorus of the Furies alternate in one-line speeches very much in the manner of Beethoven's piano-string dialog. He also represented the final tragedy in ways that, as Jander has demonstrated, are comparable to the truly extraordinary effects in the second half of Beethoven's movement.

Beethoven used some special pianistic devices here that, like the high tessitura in the first movement, were first made possible by the new instrument for which the concerto was conceived. He instructed the pianist to play the entire second movement with the *una corda* pedal, that is, activating only one of the three strings available for each tone. Unlike modern pianos, the fortepiano of Beethoven's time was able to produce a noticeable shift from one to two and three strings, and this shift greatly enhances the dramatic effect of the movement.

In a gesture Beethoven was particularly fond of, the third-movement *Rondo* starts in the "wrong" key: for several measures, C major is suggested before the "correct" G major is

Continued...



SATURDAY

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (1805-06)

- I. Allegro moderato**
- II. Andante con moto**
- III. Rondo: Vivace**

established in a clearly audible tonal “switch.” The cheerful mood of the movement is occasionally tempered by more serious moments, but the ending, culminating in a vigorous Presto, is one of the happiest Beethoven ever wrote.

Like the first movement, the third makes room for a cadenza. Beethoven noted in the score: “The cadenza should be short.” In 1809, he wrote down an example of what he had in mind, perhaps at the request of his pupil, Archduke Rudolph, to whom the concerto was dedicated.

Notes by Peter Laki