THE SANTA BARBARA
SYMPHONY
Nir Kabaretti, Music & Artistic Director

# BEETHOVEN PIANO CONCERTO *Marathon*

FIVE WINNERS
FIVE CONCERTOS
ONE WEEKEND ONLY!

**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*.

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# *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

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# *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."



# SUNDAY

## Piano Concerto No. 1
## in C major, Op. 15 (cca. 1795, rev. 1801)

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

Although traditionally known as No. 1, the C-major concerto is actually Beethoven's second published work in the genre, written after the B-flat major work catalogued as No. 2. (The teenage Beethoven had also composed two concertos in Bonn, which remained unpublished.) The C-major and B-flat major works were published in the same year (1801) by two different publishers.

Every discussion of this concerto emphasizes the undeniable influence of Mozart. Yet Mozart could never have written this work. Besides a novel treatment of dissonances and a distinctly un-Mozartian melodic style, the work is longer and weightier than most Mozart concertos. The orchestra is also much larger; it includes both oboes and clarinets, not one or the other as typically in Mozart. Beethoven may have stayed by and large within the boundaries of the genre as defined by Mozart, but his way of working within those boundaries is entirely personal.

For one thing, Mozart would never have started his second subject in a remote key as Beethoven did. There is a clearly audible shift about a minute or two into the first movement, where a big orchestral *tutti* is followed by a silence, and then the violins start a lyrical melody in E-flat major instead of the expected G major; it is only gradually that the proper key is eventually reached.

The solo piano enters with a new lyrical melody, as it often does in Mozart's concertos. Soon, however, some novel modulations and the typical Beethovenian *sforzandos* (off-beat accents) reveal the hand of a new master. At the start of the development–the most

***Continued...***



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innovative section of the movement–the soft arpeggios of the piano are accompanied only by a few hushed string chords. The woodwind enters a little later, playing fragments from the main theme in contrapuntal imitation, only to drop out again, leaving the piano alone with the two horns. The piano plays an eerie-sounding, strikingly dissonant chord progression against the pedal note held by the horns; this progression leads to a fairly regular recapitulation. Beethoven wrote three different cadenzas for this movement (one left incomplete), preserving what must have been his own improvisations when he performed the concerto.

The second-movement "Largo" opens with a richly ornamented hymn-like tune of supreme beauty. The melody is followed by several variations; the movement ends with a coda that, interestingly, brings back some of the eerie sonorities from the first movement's development.

The final "Rondo" is one of Beethoven's most humorous movements. Its irresistible main theme, first introduced by the piano and then taken over by the full orchestra, is built from the repeats of tiny melodic cells, organized in asymmetrical phrases. The second theme probably influenced what later became the unofficial anthem for the Austrian province of Tyrol, sung to a patriotic text, but the exact relationship of that song to Beethoven remains unclear. The return of the rondo theme is followed by the central episode, an impulsive and energetic tune in the minor mode with more of those characteristic off-beat accents. Both the rondo theme and the second theme are then repeated. There is a short cadenza, after which Beethoven treats us to one of his favorite jokes: the long trill that ends the cadenza is suddenly deflected to a far-off key, in which the main melody is played with a somewhat parodistic effect. A regular recapitulation and a spirited coda end the concerto.



# SUNDAY

## Piano Concerto No. 2
## in B-flat major, Op. 19 (1795, rev. 1801)

**I. Allegro con brio**
**II. Adagio**
**III. Rondo: Allegro molto**

On December 15, 1800, Beethoven wrote a letter to his friend, the composer and music publisher F. A. Hoffmeister, who had recently moved from Vienna to Leipzig. Beethoven was offering Hoffmeister "a concerto for the piano, which I do not claim to be one of my best…However, it will not disgrace you to publish it." Maybe Beethoven was a bit harsh on this concerto, now known as No. 2; after all, it is a beautiful work and one on which he had worked, off and on, for an unusually long period of time.

The first sketches go back to the Bonn years, that is, before 1792, and the concerto, premiered in 1795, underwent further revisions until the time of publication–by which time, it is true, Beethoven's style had changed significantly. Yet back in 1795, this was one of the major works that helped Beethoven conquer the Viennese music scene just a few years after his arrival in the Imperial capital. The Mozartian concerto form is handled here with an originality and an imagination that is obvious, for instance, in the extended digression into the minor mode shortly after the beginning, and in the frequent insistence on the rising half-step, a novel and very effective way of increasing dramatic tension. In the solos, the lyrical element predominates, although there are plenty of virtuoso passages and quite a few moments of high energy. In 1809, the year of the "Emperor" Concerto, Beethoven wrote a cadenza for this movement, treating the main theme contrapuntally before bursting into brilliant figurations.

The second-movement "Adagio" begins softly, with a lyrical *cantabile* ("singing") melody, but, in typical Beethovenian fashion, the volume reaches *fortissimo* as early as measure 6. The simple melody is lavishly ornamented; there is a written-out quasi-cadenza, marked *con gran espressione*, at the end. Another instruction, *senza sordino* ("without damper"),

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which is also found in the *Moonlight* sonata, calls for the use of the right pedal, which didn't sustain the sound for nearly as long on Beethoven's piano as on the modern Steinway. Therefore, the passage has to be approached with special care on today's instruments.

The most striking feature of the finale's main theme is its rhythm, with a short eight-note on the downbeat followed by a longer quarter-note marked *sforzando* (accented). The peculiarity of this irregular accent is increased even further when the eighth-note is shifted from the downbeat to the preceding upbeat–a subtle but very noticeable difference. Otherwise, the finale is a fairly regular sonata-rondo in which this bouncy rondo theme alternates with a more placid second subject and a fiery central episode in G minor.



# SUNDAY

## Piano Concerto No. 5
## in E-flat major, Op. 73 (1809)

**I. Allegro**
**II. Adagio un poco moto**
**III. Rondo: Allegro, ma non troppo**

One of the most grandiose monuments of Beethoven's musical heroism is his fifth and final piano concerto, known in English-speaking countries as the "Emperor." The nickname seems appropriate, even if it was not given by the composer himself. There are several stories about its origin; according to one, a French soldier from Napoleon's army occupying Vienna jumped to his feet after hearing the work and exclaimed: "L'empereur!" He may have been impressed by the concerto's majestic proportions, or else he was reminded of French revolutionary marches by certain themes in the work. In either case, he was right on target, as a soldier should be.

In an influential study published in the 1950s, musicologist Alfred Einstein examined what he called "Beethoven's Military Style." Einstein showed that Beethoven had adopted this manner from Giovanni Battista Viotti, a Parisian composer of Italian birth (1755-1824), known mainly for his violin concertos.

> One may characterize [the military style] as an idealized quickstep: rapid four-four time, progressing boldly with growing intensity, with dotted eighth-notes and up-beat patterns, with ever-pulsating rhythm–although above this rhythm, some cantabile, "feminine" melodies hover, and triplets and virtuoso figurations soar upward.

This description fits the main theme of the "Emperor" Concerto's first movement to a T. It appears after a most extraordinary opening, in which a brilliant piano cadenza (not to be improvised but fully written out) is punctuated by orchestral chords that outline the most familiar of all harmonic progressions ("one-four-five-one"). The orchestral exposition that follows abounds in "military" dotted-eighth patterns. Yet later on, the themes take on a

***Continued...***



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softer, more lyrical character. A second theme, originally all rhythm and angularity, is transformed into a continuous, smooth eighth-note motion played in the piano's highest register and in a distant tonality. It is a moment of great mystery, cut short by an abrupt return to the initial form of the theme.

The piano writing is more brilliant than in any of the earlier concertos; it includes, in the development section alone, virtuosic sixteenth-note passages in both hands simultaneously, dashing octave runs, and expressive melodic motifs, often in very close succession. The recapitulation, which begins with a somewhat shorter replay of the opening piano cadenza, has another, even more stunning, cadenza-like passage at the end. Yet, although it is introduced by the powerful chord (the so-called "six-four") that always precedes cadenzas, what we hear is not an *ad-libitum* interpolation that can be freely added by the performer. This becomes clear as soon as two horns quietly join the piano, and other instruments follow a little later. In fact, Beethoven's instruction in the score, written in Italian, the international language of music at the time, reads: *Non si fa una Cadenza, ma s'attacca subito il seguente* ("Don't play a cadenza; instead, proceed directly with the following").

In this work, Beethoven assumed such total control over every aspect of the composition that it became impossible to leave anything to chance. (Also, this was the only piano concerto that he was unable to perform himself because of his deafness, and apparently, he didn't trust his pupil Carl Czerny enough to let him improvise his own cadenza.) However, this non-cadenza does fulfill the formal function of the traditional cadenza; it allows the performer to display her or his technical prowess, in a bravura section built upon some of the movement's most important themes.

***Continued...***



# SUNDAY

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**I. Allegro**
**II. Adagio un poco moto**
**III. Rondo: Allegro, ma non troppo**

The second movement opens with a chorale-like melody played by muted strings; the tonality is a distant B major—a key that has already been touched upon in the first movement. The piano responds to the chorale with an expressive second theme that moves faster than the orchestra's chorale. The two motions are then combined as the chorale melody is taken over by the piano, its slow quarter-notes accompanied by the faster triplets derived from the second theme. After a further variation where the motion intensifies, the music comes to a halt on the note B. Beethoven simply lowers this note by a half-step to B flat, to prepare the return of E-flat major in the last movement.

There is no pause between the second and third movements; in fact, the continuity is assured through the appearance of the finale theme in a slow tempo at the end of the second movement, played haltingly. It is another gesture that mimics improvisation: it sounds as if the pianist were experimenting with a melody and finally "discovering" the rondo theme, which then bursts forth, full of energy.

In a Mozart or early Beethoven rondo, the character of this theme would remain the same throughout; here, however, the exuberant melody becomes more subdued in the course of the movement and touches on many distant keys before returning in its original, exuberant form. The penultimate moment is particularly memorable for a suspenseful duo between the solo piano and the solo timpani. This surprising episode is followed by only a few energetic measures to conclude this incomparable concerto.

*Notes by Peter Laki*