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February 17, 18 & 19, 2024

Weill Hall, Green Music Center

Conductor Emeritus, Jeffrey Kahane, conductor
and piano

2023-2024 Classical Series underwritten by

Anderman Family Foundation

Running time is approximately 120 minutes with intermission

Today's Program

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major for piano and Orchestra,
Opus 58

INTERMISSION

NOKUTHULA NGWENYAMA

“Primal Message”

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 1 in F Minor

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PROGRAM NOTES

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Concerto No. 4 in G major for Piano and Orchestra,

Opus 58

COMPOSER: born December 17, 1770, Bonn, Germany; died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

WORK COMPOSED: 1805-06. Dedicated to Beethoven's patron, friend, and pupil, Archduke Rudolph

WORLD PREMIERE: First performed in March 1807 at a private concert at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz in Vienna. The public premiere took place on December 22, 1808, as part of an all-Beethoven benefit program at the Theater an der Wien, with the composer at the piano

INSTRUMENTATION: solo piano, flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 34 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Imagine settling into your seat in the Theater an der Wien on a cold December night in 1808. You are there for the premiere of Ludwig van Beethoven's latest piano concerto, and although you have come to expect the unexpected from Beethoven, you are fairly

certain what you will hear: a standard piano concerto format, consisting of three movements with clearly defined key relationships. The soloist will play brilliantly, especially in the cadences, and the concerto will end triumphantly.

When Beethoven takes his seat at the piano, all your preconceptions are shattered. He begins to play. Unaccompanied. At first, you wonder if he is simply warming up (the hall is miserably chilly), but when the orchestra enters, in a completely unexpected key, you realize you are witnessing something unprecedented: a total reinvention of the piano concerto as a genre.

So begins Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, arguably the most innovative of the five he wrote. With this work, Beethoven challenged himself to re-imagine all of the piano concerto's standard conventions, from harmony to form to the role of the soloist. "With Beethoven ... there is a sense of striving for diverse solutions to each problem," notes biographer Maynard Solomon. "Each of Beethoven's works from c. 1802 onward has a strikingly individual character. In a deepening of the trend that began in

1806 with the Fourth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, and the Violin Concerto, he now seemed to imbue many of his works with a sense of inner repose that no longer required turbulent responses to grand challenges.”

Beethoven’s self-confidence reveals itself in surprisingly intimate writing, particularly for the piano. The Allegro moderato begins softly, and Beethoven maintains the calm, resolute quality of the solo part throughout most of the Andante as well; there is none of the bold, brash “Look at me!” quality of the Third and Fifth Symphonies. The Andante slides into the Rondo without pause, blurring the usually clearly delineated three-movement structure. Expectations are further confounded when the Rondo begins with the orchestra, rather than the soloist, and in the “wrong” key besides. Eventually, Beethoven gives us a bravura energetic finale.

The Fourth Piano Concerto premiered with several other works, including both Beethoven’s Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, and the Choral Fantasy. In addition, listeners heard the concert aria “Ah, perfido,” and the “Gloria” and “Sanctus” from the Mass in C major. The four-hour concert challenged the endurance of even the most

ardent Beethoven fans. To make matters worse, the orchestra was badly under-rehearsed and the hall poorly heated.

Composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt, who attended the premiere, later wrote, “There we sat from 6:30 till 10:30, in the most bitter cold, and found by experience that one might have too much even of a good thing.”

NOKUTHULA NGWENYAMA

“Primal Message”

COMPOSER: born June 16, 1976, Los Angeles, CA

WORK COMPOSED: originally written for string quintet, 2018.

Ngwenyama arranged “Primal Message” for orchestra in 2020

WORLD PREMIERE: Xian Xing led the Detroit Symphony on November 5, 2020

INSTRUMENTATION: percussion, harp, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 11 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

“Mother of Peace” and “Lion” in Zulu, Nokuthula Ngwenyama (No-goo-TOO-lah En-gwen-YAH-ma) has garnered recognition as an orchestral soloist, recitalist, chamber musician, and composer. Also known as ‘Thula’ (TOO-lah), her performances provide “solidly

shaped music of bold mesmerizing character” (Gramophone). Her music has been performed by the Detroit Symphony, London Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Phoenix Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, New Jersey Symphony, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Toronto Symphony, KwaZulu Natal Philharmonic and the Orquesta Nacional de Madrid, amongst others.

Ngwenyama first gained international prominence when she won the Primrose International Viola Competition at age 16. The following year, she won the Young Concert Artists International Auditions, which led to her debuts at the Kennedy Center and the 92nd Street ‘Y.’ As a recipient of the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant, she has performed as soloist and in recital around the world.

Describing her piece “Primal Message,” originally written for string quintet in 2018, Ngwenyama says it’s “based on the idea of communicating the things we learn to communicate with each other: our intelligence, our emotions, our goodness.” In a 2018 interview for “Oregon ArtsWatch,” she said, “Primal Message was

good for exploring us, and how we communicate. ... Primal essence – both the intelligent and emotional, all of it. How do you get in touch with that? And how do you communicate that? And have it be a message of beauty, and compelling enough for another life form to be like, “Whoa, that’s kind of cool that someone tried to put that math in there and do this and make it a song.”

In her own program note, Ngwenyama writes, “It’s 1974. What should we put in humanity’s first message in a bottle sent 25,000 light-years away? Astronomers Francis Drake (Drake equation), Carl Sagan (Contact), and others created the historic Arecibo message, in which 186 seconds of interstellar radio waves sent a friendly map, our then-understood DNA structure, and transmitting technology in binary anthropomorphic organization to globular M13 in our galaxy’s Hercules cluster.

“The ideas conveyed by Steven Johnson’s “New York Time Magazine” article ‘Greetings E. T. (Please Don’t Murder Us)’” from June 28, 2017; encouragement from the Phoenix Chamber Music Society and Chamber Music Northwest, and early days with

partner John Clements awakened imaginings about what a 'primal message' might sound like. This assumes other possible life forms hear and feel sound like we do. Opening off-world communication through transverse waves explores existential conveyance under a frayed veil of decorum through form, melody, and numbers. "Primal Message is a fantasia that relies upon primal relationships – duo vs. trio textures, modulations ... rhythmic layering, melodic structure ... It invites examination of our collective evolution through a drive to express, tying us in concert with universal celebration."

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 1 in F Minor, Opus 10

COMPOSER: born September 25, 1906, St, Petersburg, Russia;
died August 9, 1975, Moscow, U.S.S.R

WORK COMPOSED: 1924-25

WORLD PREMIERE: Conductor Nikolai Malko led the Leningrad Philharmonic on May 12, 1926

INSTRUMENTATION: 3 flutes (2 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, alto trumpet
(Shostakovich's score originally designated a tromba contralta,

an instrument introduced by Rimsky-Korsakov, similar to a valved trombone), 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, piano, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 28 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Dmitri Shostakovich grew up surrounded by music. Both his parents and his older sister Mariya were talented musicians, and Shostakovich himself began studying piano at age nine, although he was more interested in improvising than traditional lessons. At 13, he entered the Petrograd Conservatory, where he excelled. In 1956, Shostakovich remembered, “I grew up in a musical family. My mother, Sophia Vasilievna, studied at the Conservatory for some years and was a good pianist. My father, Dmitri Boleslavovich, was a great lover of music and sang well. There were many music lovers among the friends and acquaintances of the family, all of whom took part in our musical evenings. I also remember the strains of music that came from the neighboring apartment of an engineer who was an excellent cellist and passionately fond of chamber music. With a group of his friends, he often played quartets and

trios by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Borodin, and Tchaikovsky. I used to go out into the hallway and sit there for hours, the better to hear the music. In our apartment, too, we held amateur musical evenings. All this impressed itself on my musical memory and played a certain part in my future work as a composer.”

In this context, the emergence of Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 1, which he completed as a graduation exercise from the Leningrad Conservatory, is more comprehensible, if no less remarkable. The symphony, Shostakovich’s first large orchestral work, announced the then 19-year-old composer as a major new voice in Soviet music; audiences and critics alike received it with great enthusiasm. Nikolai Malko, who conducted the first performance, recalled, “Such a feeling is usually apparent when something really outstanding and exceptional is performed. It is not a casual success warmed by casual conditions, but a genuine, spontaneous recognition.”

Overall, this symphony is infused with a restless uneasiness that both reflected the instability of the Soviet Union after the October Revolution and also foreshadowed the terrors of WWII and the

repressive realities of life under Stalin. Additionally, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1 contains all the qualities of his mature sound: tongue-in-cheek humor and moments of savage mockery cheek-by-jowl with more intimate passages; an extraordinary facility for orchestration unusual in such a young composer; and a total command of his own compositional voice. Shostakovich's technical mastery and youthful self-confidence permeate all four movements, making Symphony No. 1 sound like the product of a mature composer, rather than a 19-year-old's graduation thesis.

The Allegretto opens with a cheeky comment from a muted trumpet, to which the bassoon galumphingly responds. A bold restatement for solo clarinet follows, and Shostakovich reiterates this quirky scrap of an idea as he also develops and expands on it.

Shostakovich's sardonic inclinations, heard particularly in his lightning-fast phrases for winds and brasses, are liberally sprinkled throughout. At the close of the Scherzo, the frenetic pace is cut short by three strong chords in the piano, echoed a few measures later by the full orchestra.

In the Lento, Shostakovich presents a brooding musical

soundscape. The solo oboe's melancholy statement is repeated by solo violin and then elaborated by solo cello. This interlude reveals a more intimate, serious aspect of the young composer. The full orchestra, led by strings and horns, continues inexorably into the heart of the movement, which at times evokes the expansiveness of a Mahler or Tchaikovsky symphony. Such intensity is perhaps expected of an adolescent composer, but the depth with which Shostakovich exploits textures and timbres belie his years.

A quiet roll from the snare drum grows in volume and menace, linking the third and fourth movements. The closing *Allegro molto* begins sedately but quickly escalates, combining the concentrated passion of the third movement with flashes of the mockery heard in the first two movements. A hair-raising brass fanfare and a rare solo appearance by the timpani signal the symphony's unexpected conclusion.

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than

20 years, and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media).

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