Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
January 17-18-19, 2025
99th Season / Subscription Program 5
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In this program, titled "Beethoven x3," we present three of the master's works, beginning with the dramatic *Leonore Overture No.3*. We then welcome a trio of soloists: violinist Gil Shaham, his sister, pianist Orli Shaham, and their colleague, cellist Sterling Elliot. Together, they play Beethoven's all-too-infrequently-performed "Triple Concerto." Rounding out the program is an early, but already groundbreaking work by Beethoven, his second symphony, a work written at the same time as one of the great crises in Beethoven's life.

This work, one of several overtures that Beethoven wrote for his only opera, *Fidelio*, stands alongside his symphonies as a masterpiece of orchestral writing.

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born: December 17, 1770 (baptism date), Bonn, Germany.
Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Leonore Overture No. 3, op. 72a

- **Composed**: 1806.
- **Premiere**: March 29, 1806, in Vienna.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: The orchestra has played this work on ten previous occasions beginning in 1936, and most recently in 2015.
- **Duration**: 14:00.

Background

Beethoven championed the ideals of heroism and freedom, nowhere more clearly than in in his only opera, *Fidelio*.

Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*—originally titled *Leonore*—reflects Beethoven's heroic ideals: it is a rather tangled story of Florestan, a young man wrongly and secretly imprisoned by the evil prison warden Pizarro. Florestan's wife Leonore spends most of the opera in disguise as a young man, Fidelio, who works at the prison as the jailer's assistant. In the end, as Pizarro is about to murder Florestan, Leonore—in hiding in Florestan's dungeon—leaps between them, pistol in hand, to protect her husband. The standoff is ended by the sudden arrival of the King's minister. Florestan is freed and reunited with Leonore, Pizarro is led away in chains, and the opera ends in rejoicing.

The opera and its overtures are also a case of Beethoven's willingness to revise and re-revise his music. The overture now known as *Leonore No. 2* was composed for the opera's premiere in 1805. This first performance was a dismal failure, and Beethoven staged an equally unsuccessful performance of the opera in 1806. The most important revision in the 1806 version was Beethoven's substitution of a new overture, *Leonore No .3*, a streamlined and dramatically remodeled version of *Leonore No. 2*. Beethoven wrote the overture known by the somewhat misleading title *Leonore No. 1* in 1807, in anticipation of a performance of the opera in Prague, which never took place. (In the 1970s, Beethoven scholar Alan Tyson discovered that the composer made a few preliminary sketches for a fourth *Leonore* overture, yet another reworking of *Leonore No. 2*!) After the failures of 1805 and 1806, and his abortive attempt to produce *Fidelio* in Prague, Beethoven put the opera on the shelf until 1814, when it was successfully produced with substantial dramatic and musical revisions. This 1814 version—the version of *Fidelio* we know today—had an entirely new overture (the *Fidelio Overture*), which abandoned the "Leonore" music altogether.

What You'll Hear

The music follows the dramatic arc of the opera, beginning with a prison lament; the body of the overture culminates in the grand rescue scene and ends in rejoicing.

Beethoven's *Leonore No. 3* is easily the best of the three earlier overtures, and it stands beside his symphonies as an orchestral masterpiece. At least one writer has suggested that the very strength of this overture contributed to the failure of the 1806 version of *Fidelio*—by completely overshadowing the first act of the opera! It is still, however, occasionally performed with th opera today: inserted as an interlude after the intensely dramatic rescue scene in Act II. *Leonore No. 3* begins with a slow introduction: Florestan's lament from Act II of the opera. Tension builds until the introduction of the first *Allegro* theme, a syncopated and energetic melody. The gentler theme that follows quickly gives way to a long section of development. A trumpet call and a hymn of thanksgiving refer to the opera's climactic moment, when Fidelio is saved by the courage of his wife, and the fortunate arrival of the minister. The *Allegro* theme is reintroduced, hesitantly at first, and then triumphantly. The overture ends with a massive transformation of this main theme.

Double and triple concertos and *Sinfonias concertante*—works featuring more than one soloist— were popular in early 19th-century Vienna, but Beethoven's *Triple Concerto* seems to have been the first to employ the combination of violin, cello, and piano.

Concerto for Violin, Cello, Piano, and Orchestra in C Major, Op. 56 (Triple Concerto)

- **Composed**: 1804-07.
- **Premiere**: The formal premiere was in Vienna on May 10, 1808, and featured violinist Ferdinand Seidler, cellist Anton Kraft, and pianist Marie Bigot.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: The three previous MSO performances of the work featured Thomas Moore, violin, Warren Downs, cello, and Howard Karp, piano (1976), Tyrone Greive, violin, with Downs and Karp (1994), and the Eroica Trio (2001)
- **Duration**: 37:00.

Background

The relatively difficult cello part Beethoven composed this work seems to have been inspired by Anton Kraft, a Bohemian virtuoso who is the resident in Vienna.

In August 1804, Beethoven wrote to his publisher that he had composed "something new"—a "*concertante*" for violin, cello, and piano. *Concertantes*—works for two or more soloists—were certainly nothing new in Vienna at the time: they were in fact extremely popular, and appeared often on concert programs. At least part of his boast was true, though. This seems to have been the first work that included this particular grouping of soloists. The *Triple Concerto* was composed at the same time as Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3* ("Eroica"), and the early history of these works was closely interwoven: both were completed under the patronage of Prince Lobkowitz, one of Beethoven's most generous benefactors, and when the *Triple Concerto* was finally published in 1807, it was dedicated to Lobkowitz.

The Prince also made his private orchestra available for trial performances of both the *Triple Concerto* and the *Eroica*. The first trial performance of a preliminary version of the concerto probably took place at the Lobkowitz Palace sometime in the late spring or early summer of 1804, with Beethoven taking the piano part. There may have been additional performances of the complete work there in late 1804 and 1807. The first informal public performance seems to have taken place in Leipzig in April 1808, and the formal Vienna premiere took place in the Augarten a month later on May 10 of that year. The piano soloist for this Vienna concert was

not—as long supposed—Beethoven's piano student Archduke Rudolph, but was probably Marie Bigot, a well-known Viennese pianist. Rudoph did perform the concerto in public a year later, though. The phenomenally difficult cello part seems to have been inspired by the Bohemian cellist Anton Kraft, a member of the Lobkowitz orchestra. Kraft (or possibly his son Nikolaus) probably took part in this Augarten performance as well. Kraft, who had who had previously served in the orchestra of Prince Esterházy, under the direction of Joseph Haydn, was also the inspiration for Haydn's D Major cello concerto.

What You'll Hear

The concerto is laid out in three movements:

- A large sonata-form *Allegro.*
- A lovely *Largo* movement that primarily features the cello.
- A relaxed rondo that features a *polacca* (a Polish dance) as its main theme.

The concerto is in three movements. The lengthy opening movement (*Allegro*) begins in a conventionally Classical way, with an extended orchestral introduction. There are successive solos by the cello, violin, and piano, each stating the movement's main theme. There is a marchlike transition, and the second theme is introduced in a similar fashion. The exposition closes with rather stormy music, dotted figures in the cello beneath a very florid violin line. Rather than developing themes and motives in his typical manner, Beethoven allows much of the development section to proceed as a good-natured three-way conversation among the soloists. Instead of the usual solo cadenza at the end of the recapitulation, Beethoven gives all three soloists some flashy lines in the coda to round off this opening movement. The slow movement (*Largo*) is devoted to a single flowing melody, which is carried principally by the cello. This leads without a pause into the closing movement, marked *Rondo alla polacca*, or "rondo in the manner of a *polacca*." The *polacca* (which picked up the more dignified French name "*polonaise*" later in the 19th century) was a lively triple-meter Polish folk dance that had become popular in Vienna. The main theme of this movement has this dancelike character, although with a distinctively aristocratic cast. Alternating with this *polacca* melody are several equally elegant themes.

This outwardly cheerful work was written while Beethoven was going through one of the great crises of his life: the realization that he was going deaf.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 36

- **Composed**: The *Symphony No.*2 was completed in Heiligenstadt in 1802.
- **Premiere**: April 5, 1803 in Vienna,
- **Previous MSO Performances**: 1926,1928, 1986, and 1999.
- **Duration**: 14:00.

Background

Most of the symphony was written while Beethoven was on retreat in the village of Heiligenstadt

For some time prior to composition of his *Symphony No.2*, it had been apparent that Beethoven was going deaf. As early as 1796, he had complained of hearing difficulties, and by 1802 he had sought advice from several of the best doctors in Vienna. Finally, one Dr. Schmidt suggested that a retreat in the quiet countryside might be just the thing to cure his encroaching deafness. Beethoven moved to the small village of Heiligenstadt, just outside of Vienna, in April of 1802, and stayed there for nearly half a year. While he was taking the cure, Beethoven was enormously productive, completing the *Symphony No. 2* and several smaller works by the early fall, but by October, he was in a deep depression. On October 8, he wrote a letter known to posterity as the Heiligenstadt Testament—a last will and testament addressed to his brothers. In this rambling, revealing document, alternating between self-pity, anguish, and resolve, Beethoven laments his deafness and clings desperately to music as his salvation.

Several of Beethoven's biographers have described the Heiligenstadt Testament as a kind of momentary catharsis. Within weeks after writing the letter, he was back at work in Vienna, and the next ten years—his "heroic decade"—was the most productive period of his life. There is certainly little in Beethoven's *Symphony No.2*, completed a month or so before the Heiligenstadt Testament, to show that it was composed during one of the great crises of his life. Despite his condition, which he describes as "…an infirmity in the *one sense* which ought to be more perfect in me than in others," the work has an optimistic and generally happy tone throughout. It is Classical in style, resembling in many ways the late works of Haydn. However, it also hints at what is to come in the works of the next decade. In his excellent Beethoven biography, Maynard Solomon describes the *Symphony No.2* as "the work of mature master, who is settling accounts—or making peace—with the high-Classic symphonic tradition before embarking on an unprecedented musical voyage."

What You'll Hear

The symphony is in four movements:

- A broad sonata-form movement that begins with a long slow introduction.
- A lovely, songlike *Larghetto.*
- A lively *Scherzo*.
- A fast-paced, good-humored finale in rondo form.

The work begins in the manner of a Haydn symphony, with a lengthy slow introduction (*Adagio molto*), which has the breadth of a full movement—in the end however, it leads subtly into the body of the movement (*Allegro con brio*). The exposition lays out two main ideas, an agitated melody heard in the lower strings, and a sprightly march played by the woodwinds and violins. The movement proceeds conventionally in sonata form, though Beethoven's development section is longer and more intense than in earlier Viennese symphonies, making full use of both main themes.

The *Larghetto* is one of Beethoven's longest and most lyrical slow movements—Berlioz later called it a "pure and forthright song." Again, Beethoven uses sonata form to organize his material. The main theme is a long arching melody stated by the violins, and then embellished. The secondary theme, also stated by the strings and then amplified by the winds, is no more hurried than the first.

In the *Symphony No.2*, Beethoven breaks with long-standing Viennese tradition regarding third movements, and uses a *Scherzo* in place of the usual *Minuet*. (Or at least he breaks with the tradition of *naming* the third movement as a *Minuet*—the blazing "Minuet" of his *Symphony No.1*, completed two years earlier, was hardly a courtly dance!) The movement has a three-part form—two mock-furious outer panels, surrounding a trio that features a humorous oboe/bassoon duet.

The finale (*Allegro molto*) is perhaps the clearest foreshadowing of what would come in his later Romantic works. This a Rondo movement with all of the power and rough good humor that are so much a part of his later symphonies, particularly the seventh. The main theme, which returns many times in the course of the movement, begins with what one writer has aptly called a "musical somersault." This cheerful character continues through continues through several contrasting sections, and a brief, but high-spirited coda.

MSO Historical Note

Beethoven's *Symphony No.2* was among the pieces played at our very first concert, on December 14, 1926. The orchestra, then known as the Madison Civic Symphony, under the direction of Sigfrid Prager, played three additional orchestral pieces, by Bizet, Grainger, and Berlioz. A soprano soloist, from New York City, Esther Dale also sang an opera aria and several art songs accompanied by Dr. Prager at the piano.

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