

Program Notes

By Composer in Residence Bruce Brown
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Musical tastes differ, like all preferences, and no two people like exactly the same music any more than they might like the same foods or the same clothing.

So what makes a composer “great?” It becomes hard to deny when musicians, audiences and writers over many years, even centuries, have found music by certain composers extraordinarily beautiful, meaningful and rich, and they have studied it, played it and listened to it much more than music by other composers.

By that standard, and almost any other, the JSO’s “Bach, Mozart and Beethoven” concert will present three buoyant and uplifting pieces by composers who are certainly among the greatest who ever lived.

Brandenburg Concerto #3, BWV 1048

Beethoven and Mozart both revered Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) very highly. Beethoven, noting that the name Bach means “brook” or “little stream,” once said: “Not Bach but Ocean should be his name.” Mozart, after studying Bach’s motets, said: “Now there is music from which a man can learn something.”

Brahms admonished musicians to “study Bach: there you will find everything.” Pablo Casals called Bach “the greatest and purest moment in music of all time.”

Bach’s musical output is too monumental to summarize fully in a few short sentences. His *Well Tempered Clavier* and *Art of the Fugue* are compendiums of, seemingly, every imaginable technique for writing polyphonic music. He set out to write a cantata for every sermon text in the German lectionary. Tragically, almost half of them have been lost. The remaining ones gave us sublime melodies like *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring* and *Sheep May Safely Graze*.

On May 14, 1721, Bach gave six brilliant concertos as a birthday present to Christian Ludwig, the Margrave of Brandenburg. The Margrave had heard Bach play two years earlier and had asked Bach to write him some pieces. The nobleman may have forgotten the passing comment, but Bach hadn’t.

Scholars believe the *Brandenburg concertos* were written earlier and assembled for the occasion, but that doesn’t detract from their genius. They are very special examples of the *concerto grosso*, a uniquely Baroque genre that features a group of soloists instead of just one. They also illustrate a favorite stylistic characteristic of the time, “terraced dynamics,” in which louder passages alternate with softer, echoing sections.

The 3rd *Brandenburg Concerto* focuses on the beautiful sonorities and lively technical capabilities of the string section.

The Margrave apparently didn’t have enough musicians in his orchestra to perform the concertos. Bach’s autograph manuscript gathered dust in Christian Ludwig’s library until his death in 1734. Then his estate sold it for 24 *groschen* (about \$25). Fortunately for posterity, Siegfried Wilhelm Dehn discovered the score in the Brandenburg archives in 1849, and the concertos were published the following year.

Bach's hand-written copy had another close call during World War II. A librarian was transporting it to Prussia for safekeeping when his train came under heavy bombardment. He managed to escape into a nearby forest with the score clutched under his coat.

Piano Concerto # 23 in A Major, K. 488

Like Bach, many speak of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) with admiration bordering on awe. Richard Wagner said "The most tremendous genius raised Mozart above all masters, in all centuries and in all the arts." Tchaikovsky agreed, saying, "Mozart is the highest, the culminating point that beauty has attained in the sphere of music."

Robert Schumann asked, "Does it not seem as if Mozart's works become fresher and fresher the oftener we hear them?" And the humorist, Victor Borge, once said, "In my dreams of Heaven, I always see the great masters gathered in a huge hall in which they all reside. Only Mozart has his own suite."

Mozart's deep mastery makes his works flow with seeming effortless perfection, but if you study the music more closely, the depth and power of his imagination emerges in a way that can be almost astonishing.

Mozart began writing music at the age of five. He started performing for royalty a short time later. His twenty-seven piano concertos provide a remarkable record of his developing genius. He wrote the first when he was only eleven and the last just months before he died.

It's interesting to note that many of them were written during the wintertime. The theaters in Vienna closed during Lent. Attendance at concerts boomed, and Mozart always wanted to have a fresh concerto or two to perform. He was in great demand as a performer, often playing three or four concerts a week during this busy season.

Mozart's twenty-third concerto was completed on March 2, 1786, only three weeks before the twenty-fourth concerto.

Its key of A major was considered very special by many musicians at the time. Journalist C.F. Shubart wrote in 1874 that it brought to mind "declarations of innocent love, a satisfaction with one's state of affairs; hope of seeing one's beloved again when parting; youthful cheerfulness and trust in God."

This concerto does indeed possess all of those qualities, along with a deeper, yearning dimension that makes it particularly expressive.

Mozart didn't publish his 23rd concerto during his lifetime, but that fact shouldn't be taken as a sign that he disliked it. In one of his many letters to his father, he said it was one of "the compositions that I keep for myself or for a small circle of music-lovers and connoisseurs, who promise not to let them out of their hands."

The only way to hear it was to attend one of his concerts.

Symphony No. 8 in F major, Opus 93

It would be unfair not to share some quotes about Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)! Wagner said simply, "I believe in God, Mozart, and Beethoven." The great violinist Yehudi Menuhin called Beethoven "a colossus beyond the grasp of most mortals, with his totally uncompromising power, his unsensual and uningratiating way with music as with people."

Conductor Simon Rattle adds, "Beethoven was always too much. He's not slightly anything - he's very everything." And writer William F. Buckley Jr. made an interesting

observation: “Life can’t be all bad when for ten dollars you can buy all the Beethoven sonatas and listen to them for ten years.”

Beethoven’s eighth symphony sometimes suffers a bit unfairly in comparison to powerful seventh and astonishing ninth. The ebullient eighth recalls the older, classical style he inherited from Mozart and Haydn, but it still, unmistakably, reveals Beethoven’s forward-looking brilliance.

Beethoven hadn’t written a symphony in four years when he wrote the seventh and the eighth in a remarkable, four-month burst of creativity. The eighth appeared during summer and fall of 1812 and was first performed on February 27, 1814.

One of the unique aspects of this symphony is that it doesn’t have the customary slow movement. The opening movement is strong, with an air of contentment. The playful second derives from a canon Beethoven wrote for his friend Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, the inventor of the metronome. Repeating notes in the woodwinds make it easy to imagine the insistent ticking sound that has tormented so many music students. The movement ends with humorous abruptness, as if a youthful aspiring musician could take no more! The third movement is a minuet, perhaps as an homage to Haydn, Mozart and even Beethoven’s younger self. The Finale is full of drama and humor, along with some of Beethoven’s most imaginative writing.

It’s sometimes said that Beethoven didn’t know when to stop, and he might have even been poking a little fun at himself in this symphony. Near the end, the tonic chord – the ‘home base’ in the key – is heard no less than 45 times.