

Beethoven Eight

and the Stars of the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra

Saturday, January 19, 2019 • 7:30 p.m. • Mark C. Smith Concert Hall, Von Braun Center
GREGORY VAJDA, Music Director and Conductor • **HUNTSVILLE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**



CELEBRATING ALABAMA'S BICENTENNIAL

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770–1827)

Leonore Overture No. 3, op. 72b

Robert Schumann
(1810-1856)

Concert Piece for Four Horns and Orchestra, op. 86

- I. Lebhaft
- II. Romanze
- III. Sehr lebhaft

Gordon James, Angela DeBoer

Jennifer Kummer, and **Cynthia Chambless**, horn

INTERMISSION

John Adams
(b. 1947)

Absolute Jest (2012)

Alabama premiere

Julia Dina, violin I • **Christina Volz-Stomackin**, violin II

Charles Hogue, viola • **Jesse Christeson**, cello

Beethoven

Symphony No. 8 in F major, op. 93

- I. Allegro vivace con brio
- II. Allegretto scherzando
- III. Tempo di menuetto
- IV. Allegro con brio

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DORRIE AND JERRY NUTT

BLUE CROSS BLUE SHIELD OF ALABAMA

Program Notes

Beethoven

Leonore Overture No. 3, op. 72b

Fidelio, Beethoven's only finished opera, was a project especially dear to him—but he found the process of composing and finessing a large theatrical production to be fraught with exhausting collaborative difficulties. So often the pessimist, he referred to the result as “a shipwreck.” Even the title had been subject to scrutiny. Beethoven had wanted to call it *Leonore* after his lead character, but his partners insisted on a change to avoid confusion with another opera by Gaveaux. To make matters worse, *Fidelio* was premiered in Vienna during the French occupation of 1805. The audience consisted mostly of indifferent officers from the invading army; the production quietly closed after three nights.

Today we recognize *Fidelio* as a bold and imposing drama powered by some of the composer's most exquisite music, remarkable for placing a strong female heroine in the starring role. But its proportions are huge and its pacing quite deliberate, such that it continues to hold a reputation as a difficult experience for all but the most devoted fans.

Beethoven saw the opera through subsequent productions in 1806 and 1814, making substantial revisions in each case. He wrote four different overtures in an attempt to strike just the right dramatic balance. Though it is widely considered too hefty an introduction for the theater, the version known as “*Leonore No. 3*” has become a favorite in the hall. Here Beethoven distills the emotional essence of the story into the abstract: a man named Florestan has exposed the exploits of a corrupt nobleman and is secretly jailed while rumors of his death are spread around town. His wife Leonore, refusing to believe the gossip, disguises herself as a man named Fidelio in order to engineer a rescue.

The good guys win, and the overture gives us the gist of this. Trapped in his cell, the imprisoned Florestan remembers happier days, his daydream interrupted by turbulent music suggesting that a jailbreak is underway.

Offstage trumpets announce the arrival of one of the king's ministers come to save the day, rolling out the red carpet for a triumphant ending.

[ca. 16']

Schumann

Concert Piece for Four Horns and Orchestra, op. 86

Schumann was given to manic episodes of hyperactivity which punctuated long and frustrated dry spells. The year 1840 is known as his “Year of Song” because of the nearly 150 *Lieder* he penned during the period. Another burst came in 1848-49 with the opera *Genoveva* and a great abundance of solo, chamber, choral, and orchestral music, including two unusual *concertante* pieces written for the orchestra at Leipzig. One of these showpieces features a piano soloist, and the other a quartet of horns.

The title “Concert Piece” (*Konzertstück*) is used for both, presumably to indicate a more compact and informal design than a full-fledged concerto. Schumann's inspiration for a horn section showcase was likely the increasing prominence of the valve-horn, then a relatively new invention, which allows players greater versatility through the addition of mechanical keys used to adjust the pitch. Indeed the score specifies that the soloists are to play valve-horns, while the two supporting horn parts used inside the orchestra are written for the old valveless instrument.

This is a thrilling piece, one that places considerable technical and musical demands on the soloists; the first horn player's part is infamous for the stratospheric range it requires. Some of the musical material seems to be drawn from Schumann's early *Jagdlieder* (“Hunting Songs”) for male chorus and horn quartet, lending the work a sylvan quality. Because of the unusual instrumentation and the difficulty level, this music is a rarely heard treat. It is a veritable feast for the ears, representing Schumann in his most exuberant and colorful mood. The effect on the original audience must have been breathtaking.

[ca. 19']

Adams

Absolute Jest (2012)

Alabama premiere

John Coolidge Adams, born in Massachusetts in 1947, emerged as one of the leading composers of his generation

in part because of his eagerness to engage directly with American pop culture and politics (*Nixon in China*, *Doctor Atomic*, *The Dharma at Big Sur*), and because of the imaginative synthesis of influences both old and new embodied by his work. Usually considered a post-minimalist, Adams prefers to think of himself as a “post-style” eclectic drawing sundry inspiration from Bach, dance bands, fluid mechanics, and logic circuits, for starters.

The idea for *Absolute Jest* came to Adams after attending a performance of Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella*; this 1920 ballet is almost entirely based on old Neapolitan melodies by Pergolesi, Gallo, and other composers of the Baroque. “Hearing this,” Adams writes, “I was suddenly stimulated by the way Stravinsky had absorbed musical artifacts from the past and worked them into his own highly personal musical language....I had loved the Beethoven string quartets since I was a teenager, and crafting something out of fragments of them was a totally spontaneous act for me.”

Adams remarks that snippets of Beethoven quartets (op. 131, op. 135, and others), symphonies (Nos. 8 & 9), and even the C major “Waldstein” Piano Sonata “come and go like cameo appearances” while the music works out different ways of juxtaposing and combining them—this is what Adams means by “jest,” an exercise in witty invention rather than a slapstick joke. The medium of string quartet and orchestra is acoustically and logistically tricky, a problem the composer ameliorates by lightly amplifying the soloists. *Absolute Jest* went through substantial revision after its San Francisco premiere in March 2012 before settling into the final version heard this evening. [ca. 25’]

Beethoven Symphony No. 8 in F major, op. 93

“A little symphony in F,” Beethoven called his Eighth, contrasting it with the larger “Pastoral” Symphony No. 6 written in the same key. While this one is among the most compact of the nine, it is also an amazingly inventive essay whose abiding mood is one of relaxed humor as the composer bends his considerable wit to a cheerful retrospective of Viennese style.

Beethoven wrote his Symphony No. 8 in 1811–12, while visiting his brother Johann in the idyllic upcountry town of Linz. The relationship between the siblings was uneasy at best and vitriolic at worst, with Ludwig tending to meddle overmuch in Johann’s marital business, perhaps out of jealousy. (Once Johann, proud of his gentleman status, left Ludwig a calling card inscribed JOHANN BEETHOVEN, LAND OWNER; on its reverse, the composer hastily scrawled LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN, BRAIN OWNER, and then returned it.)

If things were not well between the brothers, it does not show in this music overflowing with an almost tawdry country charm. The first movement is a rustic dance in triple meter, written in terse sonata-allegro form. The second, a dainty *allegretto* frequently interrupted by brief outbursts, was long thought to be based on a silly ditty Beethoven wrote to poke fun at his friend Maelzel’s invention, the metronome; modern scholarship has cast doubt on this idea. For his third movement, Beethoven eschews his usual impulsive scherzo in favor of a classic minuet after the manner of Haydn and Mozart. But this is no ordinary ballroom routine: its interior portion offers a beautifully orchestrated melody led by a pair of horns, while the minuet’s principal theme delights in ungainly, thumping accents which suggest the overly deliberate steps of a tipsy, eager novice.

As would become his custom in his adventurous last years, Beethoven saves the real musical entrée for last rather than front-loading the symphony as tradition dictated. The finale is almost as long as the other movements combined, and has been admired by generations of composers for its ingenious development of a seemingly unremarkable theme.

Occasionally, the Eighth Symphony has been characterized as a sleepy and nostalgic work. This is sometimes based on inappropriate comparison with the massive, iconoclastic Ninth which followed fully twelve years later under quite different circumstances. Sir George Grove thought of the Symphony No. 8 as a privileged window on its creator’s delightfully droll inner monologue. It is not the most acutely serious of the master’s symphonies, true—but perhaps we misjudge one of history’s most beloved BRAIN OWNERS if we imagine him to have been acutely serious all the time.

[ca. 29’]