

BEETHOVEN & JOY

May 5, 2023 • 8:00 PM

Featuring:

Michael Stern, conductor

Miriam Khalil, soprano

Andrea Hill, mezzo-soprano

John Tessier, tenor

Nathan Berg, bass

Timothy Shantz, chorusmaster

Kokopelli (Scott Leithead, conductor)

Òran (Kathleen Luyk, conductor)

Belle Canto (Heather Johnson, conductor)

Vox Hominis (Elaine Myhre, conductor)

Chronos Vocal Ensemble (Jordan Van Biert, Artistic Director)

Vocal Alchemy (Jordan Van Biert, Artistic Director)

Please hold your applause until the end of each piece.

JESSIE MONTGOMERY

Hymn for Everyone

(12')*

VIVAN FUNG

Prayer

(6')*

BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 "Choral"

(25')*

IV - Presto - Allegro assai

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

Hymn for Everyone
Jessie Montgomery
(b. New York, 1981)

First performed: April 28, 2022, in Chicago

This is the first work by Jessie Montgomery performed by the ESO. Jessie Montgomery is an acclaimed composer, violinist, and educator. She is the recipient of the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence, and her works are performed frequently around the world by leading musicians and ensembles. Her music interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, poetry, and social consciousness, making her an acute interpreter of 21st century American sound and experience. Her profoundly felt works have been described as “turbulent, wildly colourful and exploding with life.” (*The Washington Post*).

Her growing body of work includes solo, chamber, vocal, and orchestral works. Some recent highlights include *Shift, Change, Turn* (2019) commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, *Coincident Dances* (2018) for the Chicago Sinfonietta, and *Banner* (2014) – written to mark the 200th anniversary of “The Star-Spangled Banner” – for The Sphinx Organization and the Joyce Foundation, which was presented in its UK premiere at the BBC Proms on August 7, 2021.

Summer 2021 brought a varied slate of premiere performances, including *Five Freedom Songs*, a song cycle conceived with and written for Soprano Julia Bullock, for Sun Valley and Grand Teton Music Festivals, San Francisco and Kansas City Symphonies, Boston and New Haven Symphony Orchestras, and the Virginia Arts Festival (August 7); a site-specific collaboration with Bard SummerScape Festival and Pam Tanowitz Dance, *I was waiting for the echo of a better day* (July 8); and *Passacaglia*, a flute quartet for The National Flute Association’s 49th annual convention (August 13).

Since 1999, Jessie has been affiliated with The Sphinx Organization, which supports young African American and Latinx string players and has served as composer-in-residence for the Sphinx Virtuosi, the Organization’s flagship professional touring ensemble.

A founding member of PUBLIQuartet and a former member of the Catalyst Quartet, Jessie holds degrees from the Juilliard School and New York University and is currently a PhD Candidate in Music Composition at Princeton University. She is Professor of violin and composition at The New School. In May 2021, she began her three-year appointment as the Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Of her work *Hymn for Everyone*, Ms. Montgomery writes:

Hymn for Everyone is based on a hymn that I wrote during the spring of 2021 that was a reflection on personal and collective challenges happening at the time. Up until that point, I had resisted composing “response pieces” to the pandemic and social-political upheaval, and had been experiencing an intense writer’s block.

But one day, after a long hike, this hymn just came to me – a rare occurrence. The melody traverses through different orchestral “choirs” and is accompanied by the rest of the ensemble. It is a kind of meditation for orchestra, exploring various washes of colour and timbre through each repetition of the melody.

Prayer

Vivian Fung

(b. Edmonton, 1975)

First performed: June 22, 2020, presented from a number of locations during the pandemic lockdown

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Born in Edmonton, Vivian Fung began her composition studies with Violet Archer, and received her doctorate from The Juilliard School in New York, where her mentors included David Diamond and Robert Beaser. She currently lives in California. Her unique talent for combining idiosyncratic textures and styles into large-scale works, reflecting her multicultural background, led NPR to label her “one of today’s most eclectic composers.” Naxos Canadian Classics’ recording of her *Violin Concerto [No. 1]*, *Piano Concerto “Dreamscapes,”* and *Glimpses* earned Fung the 2013 JUNO Award for Classical Composition of the Year (for the *Violin Concerto*).

Vivian Fung has a deep interest in exploring cultures through travel and research. She traveled to Southwest China in 2012 to study minority music and cultures, continuing research that previously inspired *Yunnan Folk Songs* (2011), commissioned by Fulcrum Point New Music in Chicago with support from the MAP Fund. As a composer whose trips often inspire her music, Fung has also explored diverse cultures in North Vietnam, Spain, and Indonesia. She toured Bali in 2004, 2008, and 2010, and competed in the Bali Arts Festival as an ensemble member and composer in Gamelan Dharma Swara. With a grant from the Canada Council, she and Royce Vavrek will travel to Cambodia in 2023 to continue research for a new opera based on her family’s experience surviving the Cambodian genocide.

Ms. Fung has received numerous awards and grants, including the 2015 Jan V. Matejcek New Classical Music Award for achievement in new music from the Society of Composers, Authors, and Music Publishers of Canada (SOCAN), a Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, the New York Foundation for the Arts’ Gregory Millard Fellowship, and grants from ASCAP, BMI, American Music Center, MAP Fund, American Symphony Orchestra League, American Composers Forum, and the Canada Council for the Arts. She is an associate composer of the Canadian Music Centre and served on the board of the American Composers Forum.

Of her work *Prayer*, Ms. Fung writes:

Prayer is, in essence, an aberration, for under no other circumstance in the past (or probably in the future) have I worn my heart on my sleeve as transparently as I have with this piece. In times of crisis and peril, we have but the reliance of faith – from the profound faith in humanity, faith in love, and faith that we will persevere and get through this with dignity, to the mundane faith that I would complete the piece within the extraordinary conditions that faced me, with a young child at home 24/7, a bronchial infection, and a very tight timeline (ultimately, a matter of days) to complete the piece in a manner feasible for COVID remote performance requirements. In the end, I chose a chant from my composer heroine Hildegard von Bingen as inspiration for my prayer. It goes:

O Shepherd of our souls, O primal voice, whose call created all of us; Now hear our plea to thee, to thee, and deign to free us from our miseries and feebleness.

I wish to thank my family – my husband, parents, and son – as well as my neighbours, the Lees, who have all made composing this piece possible.

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op.125 “Choral”

Ludwig van Beethoven

(b. Bonn, 1770 / d. Vienna, 1827)

First performance: May 7, 1824, in Vienna

Last ESO performance: January 2010

“The last symphony of Beethoven is the redemption of music from out of her peculiar element into the realm of universal art. It is the human evangel of the art of the future. Beyond it no further step is possible, for upon it the perfect art work of the future alone can follow: the universal drama for which Beethoven forged the key.” – Richard Wagner

Friedrich Schiller’s poem *An die Freude* (“To Joy”) was, for Beethoven, the very summation of his own personal feelings towards brotherhood and humankind. Throughout almost all of his adult life, his sketchbooks show that he periodically reminded himself that he was determined to set it to music. In 1822, while immersed in the writing of the *Missa solemnis*, Beethoven secured a commission from the Philharmonic Society of London for a symphony. He originally intended to compose one with a strictly instrumental final movement, feeling that what he called his “German Symphony,” with a choral ending set to Schiller’s words, would be unsuitable for an English audience. Yet the two projects eventually merged.

The fourth movement begins with a loud dissonance, a frantic rush, then measured restatements of the principal themes of each of the preceding movements. There is another loud chord, followed by that most famous theme, which we know as the “Ode to Joy.” But it begins in a barely-heard whisper on the cellos, then restated by more instruments, then more, until it is grandly declaimed by the tutti. The dissonance of the opening returns, halted by a lone voice, which calls out, “O Freunde, nicht diese Töne! Sondern laßt uns angenehmere anstimmen” (O friends, no more these sounds! Let us sing more cheerful songs).

At times mysterious, at other times unrestrainedly happy, other times angelic, or reverent, or powerful, the words of Schiller’s poem are treated at every turn by Beethoven with exacting care and astute judgement – the final response of a man who first noted down ideas for this 1822 work as far back as 1793. The *Ninth Symphony* stands as one of music’s great endings, and great beginnings. An ending because not only was it the final symphony Beethoven wrote, it was the last symphony he could have written, completing as it did his long-held ambition. A beginning because from the moment the work was first heard, it was the yardstick by which all symphonies, particularly those by German composers, would be judged.

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