

KEVIN CHEN PLAYS BEETHOVEN'S EMPEROR

March 23 & 24,* 2024 • 2:00 PM / 7:30 PM

Sponsored by ATB Wealth

*Sunday Classics presented by The Robbins Foundation

Featuring:

Mario Venzago, conductor – see bio on page 6.

Kevin Chen, piano – see bio on page 7.

To read the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra roster, see page 8.

ROSSINI

Il barbiere di Siviglia / The Barber of Seville: Overture (8')*

BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Opus 73 "Emperor" (38')*

I - Allegro

II - Adagio un poco mosso

III - Rondo: Allegro

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

WEBER

Invitation to the Dance, Op. 65 (9')*

SIBELIUS

Kuolema: Valse triste, Op. 44, No. 1 (6')*

ROSSINI

William Tell: Pas-de-six (6')*

J STRAUSS II

Annen-Polka, Op. 117 (4')*

JOS STRAUSS / J STRAUSS II

Pizzicato Polka (3')*

OFFENBACH

Orphée aux enfers / Orpheus in the Underworld: Overture (10')*

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

***Il barbiere di Siviglia* (“The Barber of Seville”): Overture**
Gioacchino Rossini

(b. Pesaro, 1792 / d. Passy, 1868)

Opera first performed: February 20, 1816, in Rome

Last ESO performance of the overture: May 2015

The overture with which we have come to indelibly associate Rossini’s comic masterpiece *Il barbiere de Siviglia* (“The Barber of Seville”), or its associations with Bugs Bunny massaging hair tonic on the bald pate of Elmer Fudd, has, musically, nothing to do with the actual opera. For good reason, too. Gioacchino Rossini wrote the overture for another opera – a drama, in fact – that had flopped. Completely unapologetically, and quite typically for him, Rossini merely appropriated what was a fine curtain-raiser and added it to his 1816 comic opera of the merry comings, goings, and machinations of Figaro and his fellows. When this new opera with the old overture became a hit, the overture became indelibly associated with it.

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op.73 “Emperor”
Ludwig van Beethoven

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

First performance: November 28, 1811, in Vienna

Last ESO performance: January 2017

The occupation of Vienna by Napoleon’s army in 1809 took a spiritual as well as physical toll on Beethoven. He took refuge with his brother, Kaspar, and on those occasions when cannon fire could be heard, he covered his head with a pillow, protecting his nearly-deaf but still highly sensitive ears. Following the Treaty of Vienna’s signing in October, when life began to return to normal, Beethoven’s pent-up artistic soul gave vent to an outpouring of music. He finished his *Op.74 String Quartet*, the “*Les Adieux*” *Piano Sonata*, and his *Fifth Piano Concerto*. It is no coincidence that all of these works are scored in E-flat Major, a key which, for Beethoven, had “heroic” or “triumphant” connotations (it is also the key of his “*Heroic*” *Third Symphony*). According to a report, it was a French soldier in the audience at the work’s premiere who proclaimed the concerto to be “the Emperor of concertos,” and the name has stuck.

The work’s unconventional opening was likely a shock to its first audiences. After a declamatory E-flat Major chord in the orchestra, the piano makes its entrance with an extended series of arpeggios. The orchestra then states the main first theme, answered boldly by piano. A second theme is also developed, and throughout the rest of the movement, each of these main ideas is explored thoroughly. The vast movement nears its end with a cadenza written out note-for-note by Beethoven.

The second movement is divided between two themes. The first is a quiet one for the strings – as simple and as beautiful as any melody Beethoven ever wrote. The piano enters, also quietly, with its own theme. Variations of these melodies make up the movement until, with a subtle drop of a semi-tone, the principal theme of the Rondo third movement is at first tentatively presented, then banged out joyously on piano, answered with equal exuberance by the orchestra. Listen toward the end of this happy conclusion, when the piano shares a rare duet with the timpani, leading to the rousing finish.

Aufforderung zum Tanz (“Invitation to the Dance”) (orch. Berlioz)

Carl Maria von Weber

(b. near Lübeck, 1786 / d. London, 1826)

First performed: the original piano score was composed in 1819. The Berlioz orchestration was first presented in 1841 during a performance of Weber’s opera *Der Freischütz*.

Last ESO performance: November 2004

The genesis of this unique work lies in the particular insistence by the Parisian opera audience for spectacle. French composer and conductor Hector Berlioz was one of the first champions of German composer Carl Maria von Weber’s ground-breaking 1821 opera *Der Freischütz*. But to “sell” this opera to the spectacle-loving Paris audiences, who had become accustomed to the ostentatious displays of Meyerbeer and others, ballets were inserted as showpieces. In the case of *Der Freischütz*, in preparing for an 1841 Paris performance, Berlioz turned to an 1819 piano work by Weber, *Aufforderung zum Tanz*, Op.65. Berlioz orchestrated it magnificently, and it worked not only in the context of his operatic production but became a stand-alone hit in the orchestral concert hall under its original name. Written six years before the Waltz King (Johann Strauss II) was even born, Weber anticipates Strauss’ method of stitching together several delightful waltz melodies, preceding them with a stately introduction and concluding them with a vivacious coda.

Kuolema, Op.44: No. 1 – Valse triste

Jean Sibelius

(b. Tavastehus, 1865 / d. Järvenpää, 1957)

First performed: The play, with incidental music by Sibelius, was first performed on December 2, 1903, in Helsinki

Last ESO performance: February 2018

As with other great nationalist composers, Jean Sibelius turned often to the legends and literature of his native land for inspiration. Arvid Järnefelt (brother of composer Armas Järnefelt, and Sibelius’ brother-in-law) wrote a play called *Kuolema* (“Death”) in 1903. Sibelius wrote incidental music for it. In one scene, the central character Paavali sits near the bedside of his dying mother. She tells him she has had a dream in which she has gone to a grand ball. She falls asleep with this happy thought, her son dozing nearby. Death appears to claim her, but in her semi-conscious state, she mistakes the grim visage for her long-dead husband, and she rises to dance with him.

The music for this scene has become known as the *Valse triste* (“Sad Waltz”), and this tender, yet haunting melody has become one of Sibelius’ best-known works. The strings of the orchestra are joined by only a single flute, a clarinet, two horns, and a harp.

Guillaume Tell (“William Tell”): **Pas-de-six**
Giacchino Rossini (see above)

Opera first performed: August 3, 1829, in Paris
Last ESO performance of the Pas-de-six: October 2006

In its original form, Gioacchino Rossini’s final opera was tailored to the Parisian audience, with a French libretto based on Schiller’s telling of the legend of the Swiss hero – which explains why it was first performed as *Guillaume Tell*. Rossini was at the peak of his compositional powers, and this opera nearly perfectly marries the Italian *bel canto* style at which he was supreme master, and the French style of spectacle, ensemble, and drama.

As mentioned with the Weber work above, a necessity for operas presented to French audiences was dance. Rossini integrated a number of ballet sequences in his opera, and the Pas-de-six takes place early on. It is from the wedding scene in Act I, in which the bridal party dances as part of the festivities. Its stentorian opening yields to a lightly-textured dance in several sections – its levity and good cheer a dramatic foil for the heroic struggle of much of the opera. Rossini would live another 40 years after composing *William Tell* but spent much of his time enjoying the success and celebrity his career had brought him.

Annen-Polka, Op.117
Johann Strauss II
(b. Vienna, 1825 / d. Vienna, 1899)

First performed: July 26, 1852, in Vienna
Last ESO performance: May 1994

Johann Strauss II may be the composer we know as the “Waltz King,” yet his skill was hardly limited to dances in three-quarter time. Like his father, the younger Johann Strauss became the head of a music-making empire, with several of his brothers in supporting but important roles, supplying orchestras and music for the balls that dominated the night life of Vienna in the second half of the 19th century. He also became fabulously rich and had success at virtually every kind of music he wrote, from operettas to dance music of all kinds.

It was not just waltzes, of course, that fueled the balls of Vienna. Quadrilles, galops, and marches were popular, as were polkas. The *Annen-Polka* is a relatively early work, composed when Strauss was 27. It was written for one of the numerous celebrations marking the Festival of St. Anne in Vienna, and was premiered in the Prater, a huge outdoor park in Vienna.

Pizzicato Polka

Josef Strauss

(b. Vienna, 1827 / d. Vienna, 1870)

Johann Strauss II (see above)

Composed: 1869

Last ESO performance: March 2007

The famous *Pizzicato Polka* was co-composed by Johann Strauss junior and his younger brother Josef. Like his older (by two years) brother, Josef defied his famous musician father by pursuing a career in music. Johann senior wanted none of his children to become musicians – but several of them did anyway, eventually eclipsing their father’s fame. Josef, however, while a successful part of the Strauss music-making empire, was always sickly, and died at the age of 43 after a dizzy spell (he was prone to these) caused him to strike his head at a concert in Warsaw. He was rushed home to Vienna, where he died soon after.

“Pizzicato” is the term used to indicate the playing of stringed instruments by plucking, rather than bowing the strings. This lighthearted and popular work is in two distinct parts, the second of which is highlighted by the presence of an insistent chime on the triangle.

Orphée aux enfers (“Orpheus in the Underworld”): **Overture** (arr. Binder)

Jacques Offenbach

(b. Köln, 1819 / d. Paris, 1880)

Operetta first performed: October 21, 1858, in Paris

Last ESO performance of the overture: October 2006

The great musicals of American theatre owe a major part of their origin to the European form known as “operetta.” As opposed to opera, operetta used mostly spoken dialogue rather than singing throughout, and its stories were often much lighter, and comedic, in nature. They could also be quite satiric – one thinks of the great works of Gilbert & Sullivan and German-born (he was christened Jakob Offenbach) French composer Jacques Offenbach. One of his greatest operettas is *Orpheus in the Underworld*, which savagely lampoons the hypocrisy and mores of Paris at the end of the 19th century. Its merry overture is most famous for the concluding section – the rousing, high-kicking Can-Can.

Program notes © 2024 by D.T. Baker

Biographies

Mario Venzago

Conductor

Mario Venzago was, until summer 2021 and for 11 years, the Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Bern Symphony Orchestra. Before, he has led as Principal Conductor or General Music Director the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, the Basque National Orchestra in San Sebastian, the Basel Symphony Orchestra, the Graz Opera und Graz Philharmonic Orchestra, the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Frankfurt (now Bremen), the Theatre and Philharmonic Orchestra of the City of Heidelberg and the Musikkollegium Winterthur. From 2010 to 2014 he was Principal Conductor of the Royal Northern Sinfonia, from 2010 to 2019 Artist in Association of the Finnish Tapiola Sinfonietta and from 2000 to 2003 Artistic Director of the Baltimore Summer Fest, as successor to Pinchas Zukerman and David Zinman.

The season 2022/23 will take him to the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Taiwan Philharmonic Orchestra, Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra, Bern Symphony Orchestra, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, Bochum Symphony Orchestra, Niedersächsisches Staatsorchester, to Schweizer Jugend-Sinfonie-Orchester for a tour of Switzerland and many others.

Mario Venzago has conducted the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, the orchestras in Philadelphia and Boston, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, the Filarmonica della Scala and the NHK Symphony Orchestra. He is a regular guest conductor with internationally renowned orchestras such as the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, the Konzerthausorchester Berlin and the Frankfurter Museumsorchester. He has given concerts with the world's most famous soloists, and collaborated with directors such as Ruth Berghaus, Peter Konwitschny and Hans Neuenfels.

Several of his CDs have won international prizes such as the Grand Prix du Disque, the Diapason d'or and the Edison Award. His recordings of the operas "Venus" and "Penthesilea" and of all choral works by Othmar Schoeck with the MDR choir and symphony orchestra received great international recognition and prestigious awards, as did his first film, "My Brother the Conductor" by Alberto Venzago, which was shown in cinemas across Europe and brought out on DVD. The project "The other Bruckner" with the recording of all ten symphonies, whose individual releases were acclaimed by international critics, was released at CPO. A collaboration with Sony Classical led to the spectacular recording of Franz Schubert's "Unfinished" symphony with the Kammerorchester Basel, completed and conducted by Mario Venzago, and the recording of all serenades and symphonies by Johannes Brahms. The most recent CD projects have been recordings of Othmar Schoeck's opera "Schloss Dürande" in a new version with the Berner Symphonieorchester and the cantata "Vom Fischer und syner Fru" with the Musikkollegium Winterthur (both Claves). Most recently, in 2022, Prospero released his recording of Schubert's reconstructed 7th Symphony with Bern Symphony Orchestra. His recording of the Suite from Bernard Herrmann's "Wuthering Heights" with Singapore Symphony Orchestra is scheduled for release on Chandos Records in June 2023.

In addition to his activity as a conductor, Mario Venzago recently has increasingly devoted himself to his passion for composing. In 2021 he premiered his Violin Concerto with Soyoung Yoon and the Bern Symphony Orchestra. Currently, various works by Mario Venzago are in preparation for publication by Universal Edition, including two operas.

Kevin Chen

Piano

Kevin Chen currently studies with Professor Marilyn Engle. At 17 years of age, he is already a prodigiously accomplished pianist and composer, an international first prize winner outperforming pianists many years older from around the world.

At age eight, Kevin took first prize in the Canadian Music Competition and First Class Honours with Distinction in the Royal Conservatory Performers ARCT exam. National recognition as one of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Top 30 Hot Canadian Classical Musicians under 30" and as one of "100 Remarkable Canadians" in the Maclean's magazine followed while Kevin was still less than ten years old.

Kevin's successes in competitive performance have gained significant momentum and international attention and appreciation. These include first prize in the Concours de Genève (November 2022); first prize in the Franz Liszt International Piano Competition in Budapest, Hungary (September 2021) as the youngest competitor and youngest-ever winner; first prize in the Mozart International Piano Competition in Lugano, Switzerland (August 2020); first prize in the Hilton Head International Piano Competition in Hilton Head, South Carolina (March 2020); and first prize in the International Piano-e-Competition in Minneapolis, Minnesota (July 2019).

Kevin's success in composing for orchestra and piano is reflected in commissions, acclaimed public performances, and five published works. Kevin has been performing with orchestras since the age of seven, including the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, Vancouver Island Orchestra, Okanagan Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Hilton Head Symphony Orchestra, Hungarian National Orchestra, and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande.

Meet the Musicians

Michael Stern, Artistic Advisor

Cosette Justo Valdés, Resident Conductor and Community Ambassador

William Eddins, Music Director Emeritus, Conductor

Violin I

Robert Uchida, Concertmaster

The John & Barbara Poole Family Concertmaster Chair

Eric Buchmann, Associate Concertmaster

Broderick Olson

Ewald Cheung

Joanna Ciapka-Sangster

Laura Veeze

Anna Kozak

Aiyana Anderson-Howatt

Anita Walsh

Violin II

Dianne New – Principal

Susan Flook – Assistant Principal

Heather Bergen

Yue Deng

Danielle Greene

Buon Park

Yeeun Ha

Zoë Sellers (on leave)

Viola

Keith Hamm – Principal

Ethan Filner – Assistant Principal

Clayton Leung

Rhonda Henshaw

Stefan Jungkind

Cello

Rafael Hoekman – Principal

The Stuart & Winona Davis Principal Cello Chair

Julie Hereish – Assistant Principal

Ronda Metzies

Meran Currie-Roberts

Victor Pipkin

Bass

Hilda Cowie – Principal

Chris Jones – Acting Assistant Principal

Janice Quinn

Rob Aldridge

Chantel Leung

Douglas Ohashi (on leave)

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(American Federation of Musicians of the United States
and Canada) Local 390.*

Flute

Elizabeth Koch – Principal

Sarah Pollard – Assistant Principal

Oboe

June Kim – Principal

Paul Schieman – Assistant Principal

The Steven & Day LePoole Assistant Principal Oboe Chair

Clarinet

Julianne Scott – Principal

David Quinn – Assistant Principal

Bassoon

Bianca Chambul – Principal

Edith Stacey – Assistant Principal

Horn

Allene Hackleman – Principal

Megan Evans – Assistant Principal

Ryan Garbett – Assistant Principal

Donald Plumb – Assistant Principal

Trumpet

Robin Doyon – Principal

Frédéric Payant – Assistant Principal

Trombone

John McPherson – Principal

Kathryn Macintosh – Assistant Principal

Bass Trombone

Tyler Cairns – Principal

Tuba

Scott Whetham – Principal

Timpani

Barry Nemish – Principal

Percussion

Martin Bui – Principal

Harp

Nora Bumanis – Principal