

## Program Notes

by Chris Morrison

Reno Chamber Orchestra

“Season Finale: Dreaming Big” – May 31, 2026

### Ludwig van Beethoven

*Born: December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany*

*Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria*

One short biographical sketch on Beethoven begins “The events of Beethoven’s life are the stuff of Romantic legend, evoking images of the solitary creator shaking his fist at Fate and finally overcoming it through a supreme effort of creative will.” Those biographical details, however, such as the deafness that plagued his last three decades of life, his stormy love affairs and his famous ill temper, are dwarfed by his artistic output, which is one of the monuments of music history. He literally mastered and transformed all the musical forms of his day, and extended the range and depth of expression available to composers. Beethoven was no Mozart-like prodigy, although even in his teens he was composing and playing in orchestras. But by his twenties – after studies with the likes of Franz Josef Haydn and Mozart’s legendary nemesis Antonio Salieri – both his compositions and piano playing had garnered considerable attention. It was around the age of thirty that Beethoven first noticed his encroaching deafness, but soon thereafter began the second, or “middle,” of his creative periods, which included groundbreaking works like the *Eroica* Symphony, the *Appassionata* and *Waldstein* piano sonatas, and the opera *Fidelio*. After a period of relative musical inactivity in the late 1810s, he entered his so-called “late” period, highlighted by the Ninth Symphony and the late string quartets and piano sonatas, in which his music gained a new, very personal depth and freedom.

### Overture to *Egmont*, Op. 84

*Composed: 1809-10*

*Duration: 9 minutes*

*Instrumentation: 2 flutes (one doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings*

Of the three plays for which Beethoven wrote incidental music over the years 1809 through 1811 (the others were Kotzebue’s *The Ruins of Athens* and *King Stephen*), by far his favorite was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Egmont*. Goethe was one of the composer’s great heroes, and Beethoven worked conscientiously on the music from October 1809 to June 1810 for a revival of the play at Vienna’s Burgtheater on June 15, 1810.

*Egmont* is set in the 1560s and deals with the Netherlands’ struggle for independence from Spanish rule. Some of Beethoven’s most valued ideas are touched on in the play: freedom, national liberation, and the hero that makes these aspirations come to fruition (along with the tragic death of the hero). The fact that Vienna had been besieged and occupied for the second time by the French in 1809 gave the play contemporary relevance.

As *Egmont* opens, the Netherlands is in turmoil. The Spanish, trying to dominate the country, have instituted the Inquisition. The ominous opening gesture of the famous Overture and the slow melody that follows establish the despairing mood of the people. The dramatic, headlong central section evokes their defiance and, after a brief reference to Egmont’s death (a falling fourth interval, and four chords

of lamentation), a quiet rustling gains force, and the triumphant ending of the Overture refers to the peoples' ultimate freedom.

## **Franz Josef Haydn**

*Born: March 31, 1732, Rohrau-on-the-Leitha, Austria*

*Died: May 31, 1809, Vienna, Austria*

Along with Mozart and Beethoven, Franz Josef Haydn is one of the most significant composers of the Classical era (roughly 1750 to 1820). Sometimes referred to as the “Father” of the symphony and string quartet, Haydn’s remarkable catalog – over one thousand works, including 104 symphonies – is one of the largest produced by any composer. His music’s distinctive combination of elegance and earthiness, its memorable tunes, skillful construction, and robust humor have all made Haydn one of the most beloved of composers. His career took off in 1761 when he entered the employ of the wealthy Esterházy family. For the next three decades Haydn worked under Princes Paul Anton and Nikolaus Esterházy, directing their orchestra and composing music for them. In the early 1780s Haydn befriended Mozart, becoming one of his most enthusiastic patrons and friends. Haydn’s growing fame led to further opportunities, including the two trips to London in 1791-2 and 1794-5 that sealed his reputation and produced works like the twelve “London” symphonies.

### **Keyboard Concerto in D major, Hob. XVIII/11 (first movement)**

*Composed: 1782*

*Duration: 8 minutes*

*Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 oboes, 2 horns, strings*

While forms like the symphony and the string quartet loom large in Haydn's output, concertos do not have such a prominent place. He did compose quite a number of concertos, though: four for the violin, two for cello, one for trumpet, a few for lesser-known instruments like the *lire organizzata* (a kind of hurdy-gurdy) and baryton (a relative of the viol), and quite a number that are either lost or spurious for a variety of other instruments. He also wrote some fourteen concertos for keyboard, either harpsichord or fortepiano. Only three of those are certainly by Haydn, while the rest are either doubtful or lost.

One of the undoubtedly genuine of the keyboard concertos is No. 11 in D major. Composed in the early 1780s, possibly 1782, and published in 1784, it is the only one of Haydn's keyboard concertos that gets regular performances today. The opening Vivace has two main themes that are each stated twice, first by the orchestra, then by the soloist. The following development section focuses on the first theme, with the second idea making just a brief reappearance in the closing recapitulation.

## **George Gershwin**

*Born: September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York*

*Died: July 11, 1937, Los Angeles, California*

George Gershwin is one of the most beloved American composers of the twentieth century. His songs, orchestral music, Broadway shows, and his most ambitious work, the “folk opera” *Porgy and Bess* (1935), effectively bring together the worlds of classical music, jazz, and popular music – musical realms that Gershwin never felt were mutually exclusive. Gershwin studied piano as a teenager and worked as a song plugger, performing pop songs in public places to help sell sheet music. The first of

his own compositions to become a huge hit was the song “Swanee,” written when he was 21 and popularized by Al Jolson. He had several further successes with his own songs and on Broadway, including shows like *Funny Face* (1927), *Strike Up The Band* (1929), *Girl Crazy* (1930), and *Of Thee I Sing!* (1931), the first musical comedy to win the Pulitzer Prize. In 1924, Gershwin composed his first major classical work, *Rhapsody in Blue*; it and *An American in Paris* (1928) have remained staples of the classical repertoire. In 1935, Gershwin moved to Hollywood, composing film scores until his death from a malignant brain tumor.

### **Piano Concerto in F major, first movement**

*Composed: 1925*

*Duration: 13 minutes*

*Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings*

Paul Whiteman's famous concert of February 12, 1924, “An Experiment in Modern Music,” at which Gershwin had been the piano soloist in the premiere of his *Rhapsody in Blue*, essentially introduced jazz to the classical concert hall. While there had been earlier works by the likes of Igor Stravinsky and Darius Milhaud that brought jazz elements into classical composition, Gershwin's work was the real breakthrough, partly because Gershwin was already so famous, and partly because so many prominent musicians had been in attendance at the Whiteman concert.

One of those musicians was Walter Damrosch, the conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra. Damrosch enthused, “Various composers have been walking around jazz like a cat around a plate of soup, waiting for it to cool off so that they could enjoy it without burning their tongues, hitherto accustomed only to the more tepid liquids distilled by cooks of the classical school. Lady Jazz ... has danced her way around the world ... but for all her travels and sweeping popularity, she has encountered no knight who could lift her to a level that would enable her to be received as a respectable member of musical circles. George Gershwin seems to have accomplished this miracle ... boldly by dressing his extremely independent and up-to-date young lady in the classic garb of a concerto ... He is the Prince who has taken Cinderella by the hand and openly proclaimed her a princess to the astonished world, no doubt to the fury of her envious sisters.”

The day after the Whiteman concert, Damrosch commissioned Gershwin to write a piano concerto. Gershwin had already been contracted to write music for no fewer than three Broadway musicals, and therefore wasn't able to start on the new concerto until July 1925. He did so with some reluctance, so self-conscious about his relative lack of formal training that he even purchased textbooks to teach himself more about form and orchestration. Gershwin was out to prove himself: “Many persons had thought that the *Rhapsody* was only a happy accident. Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was more where that had come from.” Within three months he had completed the first draft of what he was then calling his “New York Concerto.” After a few revisions, the Concerto was given its premiere by Gershwin, Damrosch, and the New York Symphony Orchestra on December 3, 1925 at Carnegie Hall.

A rhythmic tattoo from the timpani and other instruments opens the first movement, described by Gershwin as “quick and pulsating, representing the young enthusiastic spirit of American life.” After the bassoon and the rest of the orchestra introduce a couple of melodic ideas, accompanied by a Charleston rhythm, the solo piano takes over with a sultry theme. Soon a countermelody is introduced by the cellos and strings; later the roles are reversed, as the strings take up the original tune and the

piano the countermelody. The piano and orchestra play with these themes in music that moves easily between strength and delicacy. Towards the movement's end, in a section marked *Grandioso*, the orchestra takes up the theme introduced by the piano in its early solo, with the piano providing triplets.

## **Bobby Ge**

*Born: 1996*

Bobby Ge is a Chinese-American composer and avid collaborator whose work, often collaborative in nature, focuses on themes of home, communication, and hybridity. Winner of the 2022 Barlow Prize, Ge has received commissions and performances by groups including the Minnesota Orchestra, Alarm Will Sound, the New York Youth Symphony, the Albany Symphony, the U.S. Navy Band, Music from Copland House, the Bergamot, Tesla, and JACK Quartets, and many more. He has created multimedia projects with the Space Telescope Science Institute, painters collective Art10Baltimore, the Cape May Bird Festival, and the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D at Princeton University, and holds degrees from the University of California, Berkeley and the Peabody Conservatory.

### ***Through the Air & Underground***

*Composed: 2025-26*

*Duration: 13 minutes*

*Instrumentation: 2 flutes (second doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, percussion, strings*

Bobby Ge has provided the following note on *Through the Air & Underground*:

“I’ve spent most of my life in coastal urban centers, and consequently, I’ve always taken things like humidity and simple tree maintenance for granted. The first time I really considered how remarkable it was that trees of so many kinds could survive in so many different biomes was after encountering Richard Powers’s beautiful novel, *The Overstory*. The book’s incredible empathy for the natural world, mesmerizing prose, and structural ambition left a deep impression. When conductor Kelly Kuo reached out to me about composing a new work for the Reno Chamber Orchestra and its community, it was obvious to me what my piece would be about.

“*Through the Air & Underground* takes its inspiration from the extraordinary ways plants and trees communicate, proliferate, and thrive in places as seemingly inhospitable as the high desert of Reno. The music is structured broadly in two halves, based on features of native flora: I. *Anemochory* and II. *Mycorrhizae*. The first half, named for the way seeds spread by riding the wind, is floaty and gentle. The music begins in the orchestra’s highest registers before gradually drifting downward and opening into florid melodies and textures. The second half, meanwhile, is named after the extensive fungal networks that enmesh themselves (symbiotically) in roots; these mycorrhizal networks facilitate communication and resource collection among communities of trees and plants. Here, the music is choppy and energetic, introducing motifs in the lowest reaches of the orchestra that rapidly transmit upward and outward. Finally, after building to a triumphant head, the piece concludes with a mercurial coda that ties both halves neatly together.

“It was an honor serving as the 2025-26 Sound Investment Composer for the Reno Chamber Orchestra. I truly enjoyed getting to know the community, musicians, and landscape of the town, and I felt very

lucky to get to write a new piece celebrating all these elements at once. Many thanks to Amy Heald and Kelly Kuo for believing in my work.”

## **Franz Schubert**

*Born: January 31, 1797, Vienna, Austria*

*Died: November 19, 1828, Vienna, Austria*

Franz Schubert is one of the best-loved and most important composers of the nineteenth century, his music consistently marked by a remarkable melodic gift, rich harmonies, and an expansive treatment of traditional forms. During his short but extremely prolific career, he composed nine symphonies, dozens of chamber and solo piano works, and a host of operas and liturgical works. His songs, numbering over 600, virtually created the genre of the art song. He started composing in his teens, and some early works came to the notice of Antonio Salieri, who worked with the young composer on composition and music theory. After a couple of unhappy years spent as a schoolteacher by day and composer by night, Schubert decided to pursue a career as a full-time composer, leading a somewhat bohemian life while creating a vast number of compositions that, at the time, attracted little attention. Only gradually did his music win acclaim, inspiring a remarkable burst of creativity in the mid 1820s. By that time, however, he was suffering badly from the syphilis and (possibly) typhoid fever that would take his life at age 31.

### **Symphony No. 3 in D major, D. 200**

*Composed: 1815*

*Duration: 25 minutes*

*Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings*

In 1808, eleven-year-old Franz Schubert entered Vienna’s Konvikt, the Imperial and Royal Seminary, studying at the school there while also singing in the choir and playing in the school orchestra. There he got his first hands-on exposure to the orchestral repertoire, particularly the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Music making had also been a tradition in the Schubert home. The young Franz played viola in the family string quartet with his brothers and father. The quartet soon expanded into a chamber orchestra as friends and acquaintances joined the group, which played initially in the Schubert home, then in the home of a local merchant, and eventually gave some public concerts starting in 1815.

After Napoleon’s occupation of Vienna ended in 1813, the city’s economy – and the artistic culture – needed time to rebuild. With little professional music making in the city, amateur groups like the Schubert family’s orchestra and the Konvikt student orchestra helped satiate the city’s music-hungry audiences. Most of Schubert’s early orchestral music was written for these two groups, including the Symphony No. 3, which the eighteen-year-old began on May 24, 1815 (composing the first 47 bars of the first movement) but mostly wrote in a remarkable nine days, from July 11 to July 19 of that year. No record exists of any performance of the work during Schubert’s lifetime. And after Schubert’s untimely death at age 31, there was little interest in his orchestral music for decades thereafter. Only in 1870s England did these works start receiving their due, and the first complete performance of the Symphony No. 3 apparently took place on February 19, 1881 in London under the direction of August Manns.

After the grand scale of Schubert’s Symphony No. 2, the Third is much lighter in texture and modest in ambition, and perhaps even more satisfying in its melodic profile and energy. The influences of Haydn and Mozart are fairly clear here; lying a bit further in the background is Beethoven, particularly his

Symphony No. 2, one of Schubert's favorites (and like much of Schubert's early orchestral music in the key of D major). But the distinctive melodic voice of Schubert is also quite evident.

Haydn is certainly evoked in the slow minor key introduction to the Third Symphony's first movement. After that, the music is quite lively and almost entirely in the major, with distinctive tunes and a brief development of them. The lovely second movement is in a simple ABA form, its central section featuring a clarinet solo over a very Viennese "oom-pah" accompaniment. Oboe and bassoon perform a duet during the trio of the lively and rhythmic Minuet. In the finale, another of Schubert's influences becomes apparent – Gioacchino Rossini. One can't help but think of the latter's lively opera overtures when listening to Schubert's *tarantella* rhythm, fast-paced scales and repetitions of short melodic motives, and exciting crescendos.