

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW PARALLEL EVENTS

1808

Beethoven

Symphony No. 5



MUSIC

Spohr
Clarinet Concerto No.1



ART

Goya
The Third of May, 1808



LITERATURE

Blake
Milton



HISTORY

Tsar Alexander I of Russia proclaims Finland a part of Russia.

1909

Rachmaninoff

Isle of the Dead



MUSIC

Mahler
Das Lied von der Erde



ART

Matisse
Dance (I)



LITERATURE

Baum
The Road to Oz



HISTORY

Louis Blériot is the first man to fly across the English Channel.

2020

Chin

Subito con forza



MUSIC

Simon
Fate Now Conquers



ART

Plensa
Water's Soul



LITERATURE

Erdich
The Night Watchman



HISTORY

The World Health Organization declares the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic.

BEETHOVEN'S FIFTH!

Ruth Reinhardt has chosen to cap her first season as Music Director with a program that bristles, like the world itself, with enormous contrasts.

Composed in celebration of Beethoven's 250th birthday in 2020, Unsuk Chin's compact work *Subito con forza* draws inspiration from the 19th century master's ability to create music that moves from (in her words) "volcanic eruptions to extreme serenity." From its first chord – a full-forced orchestral explosion – to moments of hushed anticipation in the strings, *Subito con forza* is an attention grabber that *The London Times* has described as "effective and eerie, with plenty happening in five teeming minutes. Chin's ear for color is her greatest weapon."

Equally colorful, although of a more somber palette, is Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*. After seeing a monochrome reproduction of the symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin's painting of the same name, depicting the arrival of a small boat at a desolate island seen across dark waters, Rachmaninoff was moved to capture the image in music. Using a remarkable range of warm and glinting colors, Rachmaninoff immerses the listener in the world of the painting, as blissfully haunting melodies and counter melodies emerge organically from the fog.

Rachmaninoff himself conducted the premiere of *The Isle of the Dead* in Moscow, but by all accounts, it seems to have gone much more smoothly than Beethoven's attempt to conduct the premiere of his own Fifth Symphony in Vienna. On that fated evening, the composer's ambition seemed to have gotten the better of him. He had programmed a marathon event lasting over four hours, in a freezing hall. Making matters worse, the woefully under-rehearsed orchestra had to restart due to a derailing mistake, only to watch in horror as Beethoven's awkward conducting led to both a toppling of lamps and the accidental smacking of an unfortunate stagehand in the face.

But all of this appears to have been soon forgotten. Beethoven's fifth symphony was quickly accorded general acclaim and on its way to immortality.

BEETHOVEN'S FIFTH!

Amica Rush Hour: Friday, May 1, 2026

TACO Classical: Saturday, May 2, 2026

Subito con forza

UNSUK CHIN (1961-)

This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. This piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, percussion, piano and strings.

At the age of 24, the Korean-born Unsuk Chin had already attracted international attention with works such as her spellbinding *Spektra* for three celli, which she completed while still an undergraduate. György Ligeti, one of the towering figures of classical music of the late 20th century, was so impressed by the power and individuality of her work that he invited her to Germany to be his protégé. Since then, Chin has made Germany her home, and has earned many of music's most coveted awards, as well as countless commissions from prestigious organizations.

Originally composed as part of the worldwide celebration of Beethoven's 250th

birthday in 2020, Chin's *Subito con forza* takes its inspiration from the older master's penchant for enormous contrasts – "from volcanic eruptions to extreme serenity," in her words. It stands to reason, then, that she would start the piece with a seismic orchestral explosion before eventually subsiding into a hushed string passage that allows everyone to catch their breath – but only for a moment.

The Italian expressive marking "subito, con forza" implies a sudden shift from one texture to another (a frequent event in Beethoven's music). Following the example of her mentor Ligeti, Chin freely draws upon any number of musical styles to achieve her expressive aims. In this piece, she uses them to create a tapestry in which to embed both clear and hidden Beethovenian references. Listen, for example, for hints of the "Emperor" piano concerto and the famous opening rhythm of the Fifth Symphony. Thus does Chin pay an ingenious homage to the man she describes as "the first consciously modern composer."

The Isle of the Dead, op.29

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Last performed February 27, 2010 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

In May 1907, while in Paris for a performance of his own Piano Concerto No. 2, Rachmaninoff came across a monochrome reproduction of the painting *Die Toteninsel* (The Isle of the Dead). This was but one version of this painting that the Romantic Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin had made, and reproductions of all of them could be found throughout Europe (including in the offices of Sigmund Freud). In what the artist considered a "dream image" one looks across dark waters to see a small boat, bearing a coffin and draped in wreaths, arriving at a desolate, cliff-covered island. The boat, bearing a coffin draped in wreaths, is steered by a figure shrouded in white and a single oarsman at the stern. It appears that they are on the verge of entering a pillared portal, lined with tranquil cypress trees, where only the dead might go. Rachmaninoff was deeply affected by what he saw in this painting, but it took two years of gestation in his creative mind before he settled on the best way to capture its melancholy style and sumptuously dark coloration.

By 1909, he had taken up residence in Dresden and was ready to put pen to paper. Within two weeks the piece was ready, and he took it with him to Moscow where he conducted its premiere.

Just as the ominous waters move in the foreground of the original painting, Rachmaninoff uses strings and timpani to evoke the lapping of waves against the shoreless cliffs as the piece begins. But that is the extent of the storytelling. From there on, Rachmaninoff prefers, instead, to conjure an arc of moods and feelings. Listen for the horn as it breathes a lamentation, sparking increased turbulence in the waters. The oboe, too, then takes up the lamentation until, eventually, it becomes a full brass chorale. At this point we finally hear it: a *Dies Irae* that was there all along. The *Dies Irae* is an ancient chant that has been used for centuries in the Roman Catholic Mass of the Dead. Its primeval power has prompted composers throughout history to quote it in their music when a moment of menace is warranted.

The middle section reaches an emotional peak as the strings transform the lamentation theme with lyricism and rapture. But the insistent tread of the *Dies Irae* returns, shattering melodies into mere fragments. In time, even those eventually dissolve back into the murmuring waters until, at last, only stillness and acceptance remain.

Symphony No.5 in C minor, op.67

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1824)

Last performed January 22, 2022 with Nathaniel Efthimiou conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

Perhaps the biggest challenge when listening to a live performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is to listen to it as if you're hearing it for the first time. But the effort is worth it.

At its core, Beethoven's Fifth is an experimental symphony. The opening is strange, with no clear harmony for quite some time. What key are we really in? But that question soon takes a back seat in the face of even more pressing matters. A revolutionary at heart, Beethoven eschews traditional melody to give this iconic work its distinctive sense of drama, but relies instead on visceral rhythm and imaginative structural details. In this way, he was a hundred years ahead of his time.

The famous four-note motif at the opening serves as the foundation for not just the first movement but, in fact, for the entire symphony. From it, the composer wrings every musical possibility imaginable, endowing the entire work with a stunning coherence. With the stroke of his pen, Beethoven gives history a new idea: even the most minute musical gesture can give rise to a masterpiece of enormous scope. Listen for the startling and lyrically expressive oboe cadenza (about four minutes in) that abruptly halts the torrent of rhythm. This delicious moment gives even greater meaning to the motif as it returns like a relentless hammer in the coda that follows.

In the second movement- *Andante con moto* – Beethoven elegantly spins a series of four variations on two main ideas. Violas and cellos start by venturing into an unexpected key (A-flat major), with one of the composer's most memorable melodies. A contrasting, more assertive theme in an equally unexpected key (C major) is then offered by the clarinets, flute and bassoons. Beethoven masterfully weaves double variations on both of these ideas, while never losing sight of the underlying rhythmic energy of the motif from the first movement.

The third movement takes the (then) traditional idea of a dance movement and whips it up into an enigmatic *scherzo*. Opening with a mysterious arpeggio in the low strings, unison horns soon interrupt to remind us what this bold symphony is all about. Once the matter is settled, the cellos and double basses launch into a ferociously difficult bit of counterpoint with the tenacity of feral animal. Ultimately, a truncated version of the opening returns, but even softer now, setting the stage for a moment of true musical magic.

Beethoven bridges the transition into the last movement with a delicate solo passage in the first violins, supported by gently throbbing basses and timpani, and sustained pianissimo notes in the seconds and violas. Then, in one of the most unnerving and tension-building passages in all the literature, a snake-like melody slithers and builds until, in a moment of unbridled joy, the trombones, contra-bassoon, and piccolo (instruments usually reserved only for the military or operas back in the day) finally make their long-awaited entrance. Echoes of "La Liberté" – a French revolutionary hymn that Beethoven certainly knew – cry out, and the whole orchestra responds with familiar music that is now made new by its context. All hints of darkness are expelled. At the end, 54 measures of emphatic C major chords mark the completion of the journey from strife to triumph.