

**Program Notes for VSO Concert – Chopin and Elgar, March 28-30, 2025**  
**Chopin – Piano Concerto No. 2; Elgar – Symphony No. 1**

**By Jonathan Berkowitz**

**Frédéric Chopin (1810 to 1849)**

Frédéric Chopin, composer and virtuoso pianist of the Romantic period, disliked romanticism. A friend of Liszt, Schumann, Berlioz, and Mendelssohn, he had little to say about their music. He admired Beethoven but found his music too big. He praised only two masters, Bach and Mozart. Chopin commented that, “In order to be a great composer, one needs an enormous amount of knowledge, which... one does not acquire from listening only to other people’s work, but even more from listening to one’s own.”

He composed almost exclusively for solo piano. And yet, this did not diminish his worldwide renown as a leading composer of his era. Charles Rosen wrote that Chopin’s “poetic genius was based on a professional technique that was without equal in his generation”. Musicologist Harold Schonberg wrote, “Chopin was a musical freak, more so than even most prodigies. He was not only a genius as a pianist, he was creatively a genius, one of the most startlingly original ones of the century.”

Born in 1810 in Zelazowa Wola, Poland, Chopin was a child prodigy. He was raised and received his musical education in Warsaw. Playing in the elegant salons of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, Chopin’s musical brilliance quickly became evident. His piano-playing displayed emotional depth, technical mastery, and an unparalleled artistry that captivated audiences. He was both sensitive and virtuosic.

A critical moment in Chopin's career came in 1830 when he left Poland for Paris, where he spent the rest of his life. He preferred the intimate atmosphere of the salons to concert halls and actually only performed publicly 30 times. Instead, he supported himself by selling his compositions and giving piano lessons, for which he was in high demand. Chopin became friends with Liszt and earned the admiration of many musical contemporaries.

A failed engagement was followed by a stormy relationship with the novelist George Sand, who was a source of both inspiration and turmoil in his life. Their affair left an indelible mark on Chopin’s music. A brief and unhappy visit to Mallorca with Sand in 1838–39 was one of his most productive periods of composition.

In poor health most of his life, Chopin’s wellbeing declined even further in the final years of his life. He retreated into solitude and introspection, seeking solace in his music. Physical frailty, however, did not dim his creativity. In fact, he composed some of his most enduring masterpieces during his last years. Chopin’s death in 1849 at the age of 39 marked the end of a brief but brilliant career.

Except for two piano concertos, some chamber music and a few songs set to Polish lyrics, Chopin’s compositions are only for solo piano. His mazurkas, waltzes, nocturnes, polonaises, ballades, études, impromptus, scherzo, preludes, and sonatas are technically demanding, and expand the understanding of the piano as an expressive instrument. Chopin’s innovative use of chromaticism, rubato, and pedal techniques revolutionized the art of piano playing.

Beyond his technical prowess, Chopin imbued his music with a very personal quality that reflected his innermost feelings and experiences. The turbulent events of his time contributed to the sense of loss and longing that permeates his music. The strong nationalist sentiment in some of his musical forms influenced other composers during and after the late Romantic period.

Wordsmiths, too, paid tribute to Chopin with a classic anagram, Rearrange the letters of BENEATH CHOPIN and you can spell THE PIANO BENCH. His music represents a watershed in the history of piano music.

The Polish parliament established an Institute to exclusively promote Chopin's life and works. It hosts the prestigious International Chopin Piano Competition. The final Masterworks Gold concert this season (May 30-31) features soloist Bruce Liu who won the 2021 Chopin Piano Concerto Competition. (Author's note: Liu will play Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3, which is, in my opinion, the most exciting piano concerto in the entire repertoire!)

### **Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21, – Frédéric Chopin**

*Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone, timpani, strings, and solo piano*

Chopin was about 20 years of age when he composed his Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21, before he had even finished his formal education. It was written first but published after his Piano Concerto No. 1, explaining its numeric order.

He had just made a successful impromptu solo debut in Vienna and now needed a concerto to play on future tours. Although Chopin wrote almost exclusively for piano, and was not tempted to compose symphonies or operas, career advancement required that he write concertos for piano and orchestra. The public expected it, and he went along with the tradition. Both piano concertos are beautiful and vital contributions to the repertoire.

The premiere, which he played in Warsaw, was a tremendous success, reprised at another concert a few days later. Following his 1832 Paris debut, at which he played the concerto again, critic François-Joseph Fétis wrote, "Here is a young man who... has found, if not a way of reviving piano music completely, at least some of what has so long been vainly sought, that is to say an abundance of original ideas of which the type is nowhere to be discovered. ... I am speaking of music for pianists, and in this realm I find... indications of a change of form that may in the future exercise considerable influence on this branch of art."

The work has three movements, typical of the period. One can't help but be swept up by Chopin's poetic expressiveness. Perhaps the term "poetry in motion" could be changed to "poetry in music" or "poetry in three movements".

The first movement—**Maestoso**—has a long orchestral opening that introduces its two main themes. The first melody is both romantic and dramatic, with stark dynamic contrasts; the second is more lyrical. The piano now enters and reinterprets both with the expressive embellishments Chopin became famous for. There is nothing percussive in Chopin's writing for piano; his smooth, legato melodies sing out to the listener. His virtuoso passages show how completely he understood the piano's resonance. The themes are tossed back and forth between orchestra and piano, with

tranquil and then more spirited passages that are “majestic and stately” as the movement’s marking indicates. The piano brings back both themes and climaxes with virtuoso displays; a brief orchestral coda concludes the movement.

It is a challenge to describe the second movement—**Larghetto**—which has been called a work of “indescribable beauty.” Reminiscent of his *Nocturnes*, Chopin claimed it was inspired by an infatuation with a woman classmate that never progressed beyond distant admiration. Franz Liszt described this movement as “... a perfection almost ideal, its expression now radiant with light, now full of tender pathos.”

The movement is introduced briefly by the orchestra. The piano plays a poetic and singing melody. Close your eyes and imagine a young man in love. The central section provides a contrast, beginning with tremolo strings, and then an agitated piano suggestive of opera recitative as if the piano is speaking. This piano–orchestra writing leads one to wonder what additional magic Chopin might have created had he written more than just the two piano concertos. The compelling opening melody reappears, and the movement ends just as beautifully as it began.

The third movement—**Allegro vivace**—begins with a melody in the style of a mazurka, a Polish dance. Chopin loved this simple, high-spirited form, and wrote many of them for solo piano. After the opening theme and virtuoso piano-playing, the violins and violas play a contrasting rustic theme *col legno*, that is, with the wood of the bow. Then the opening mazurka theme returns, and a horn solo introduces a brilliant and extremely technically demanding final section. The melody is infectious and will leave you smiling and humming. Musicologist Calvin Dotsey wrote. “Chopin’s art developed as the years went on, but nothing he wrote surpassed this last movement in simple, direct, healthy charm.”

### **Edward Elgar (1857 to 1934)**

Why did 19<sup>th</sup>-century England not develop as strong and individualistic a school of composers as Germany, France, or Russia did? Elizabethan England had many skilled composers. But Handel’s arrival in England in 1712 had both cataclysmic and catastrophic effects which seemed to stifle his successors. Mendelssohn was the next strong force on British music. A friend of Queen Victoria’s, both were cautious, conventional, and conservative. The Queen wanted all music to sound like Mendelssohn’s. Not a single major musical figure was produced in England between Handel’s death in 1759 and Edward Elgar in the 1890s.

Elgar was different. His music, noble and dashing, had the confidence of Edwardian England. It reflected his love for a country at the peak of its imperial power. Elgar was born in 1857 in the picturesque village of Broadheath and, like many great composers, his humble beginnings gave no clue to the towering musical legacy he would later create.

As a young boy, Elgar showed early signs of talent and a deep love for music. He had almost no formal musical training and was self-taught. His musical father encouraged him to experiment with composing. Elgar studied violin and piano and worked for a while in a law office. He then decided to concentrate on music but struggled in obscurity for many years. The *Froissart Overture*, written in 1889, was his first significant work and showed his ability to write for a large orchestra. It wasn’t

until the success of the *Enigma Variations* in 1899 that he became a national figure and England's most famous composer. He was knighted in 1904. Even then, money was scarce, and he suffered from self-doubt and writer's block (or perhaps composer's block).

Elgar didn't tackle composing a symphony for many years because of the giant shadow cast by Beethoven. He completed his First Symphony at the age of 51, although he had tried to write one ten years earlier. At a time when Germanic influences dominated the classical world, Elgar emerged as a staunch advocate for English musical traditions. The First Symphony premiered in 1908 and was a resounding success. It was important for Britain, which the Germans had disparagingly called "das Land ohne Musik" ("the land without music"). The Symphony was performed nearly 100 times around the world within the first year of its publication.

The success of his First Symphony emboldened Elgar to continue exploring the form with a series of groundbreaking works. His Second Symphony, composed in the aftermath of World War I, captures the tumultuous emotions of a nation scarred by war yet yearning for hope and renewal. Some of Elgar's other symphonic works were left unfinished at the time of his death. Beyond his symphonies, Elgar's contributions to the world of music were vast and varied. His iconic *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, including the rousing *Land of Hope and Glory*, have become synonymous with British ceremony. His heartfelt *Nimrod* from the *Enigma Variations* is a timeless tribute to friendship, loyalty, and the power of music to transcend language and culture.

His final large-scale work was the Cello Concerto (1918-19) which ranks as highly as Dvořák's as the greatest of the genre. The Concerto displays a troubled, stormy soul hidden behind a calm exterior. After this, and for the final fifteen years of his life, his creativity ceased. He composed a few more things which are never performed. After the loss of his wife in 1920, he largely withdrew from musical contact. In 1924, Elgar was appointed Master of the King's Musick, a prestigious honour that solidified his status as a British musical icon. Only 40 years later the new British musical idols, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the rest of the "British Invasion" arrived on the scene. Elgar also recorded much of his music and was an early adopter of the gramophone to preserve his interpretive ideas for posterity.

Throughout his life, Elgar remained a tireless champion of British music, fiercely protective of his artistic vision and uncompromising in his dedication to excellence. Elgar's individuality makes it difficult to describe his music, but Harold Schonberg captured it well when he wrote, "An Elgar melody, with its curious tension, its wide intervals and exuberant leaps, its confident, strong British feeling immediately stands out, recognizable as the work of but one composer and no other in the history of music."

### **Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55 – Edward Elgar**

*Orchestration: 3 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, and strings.*

Sir Edward Elgar's Symphony No. 1 is a vast yet very personal work full of grandeur, intimacy and intense emotions. It draws inspiration from the English landscape, folk melodies, and the depth of human experience. Elgar made only one public statement about the meaning of this composition: "There is no program beyond a wide experience of human life with a great charity (love) and a

massive hope in the future.” He concluded that abstract music was the pinnacle of orchestral composition. For Elgar, music was a simple art, and at its best when it was simple.

The influence of Wagner can be seen in the interrelated leitmotif-like ideas and in its chromatic harmonies. But Wagner did not write symphonies, so Elgar’s represented a completely modern work.

The first movement, ***Andante. Nobilmente e semplice — Allegro***, begins with two low, ominous timpani rolls, and then, as indicated by the marking, a “noble and simple” introduction. The incomplete theme will return in the finale in a complete statement. Elgar wrote, “the opening theme is intended to be simple and, in intention, noble and elevating... the sort of ideal call – in the sense of persuasion, not coercion or command – and something above every day and sordid things.” The orchestra repeats the theme fortissimo—perhaps those are the “every day and sordid things”—followed by a quieter passage for the winds and violas, in a key that seems to clash with the opening one. Conductor Sir Adrian Boult claimed that the clashing keys arose from a bet with Elgar that he could not compose a symphony in two keys at once. The two keys form a tritone, known as the Devil’s Interval, that adds to the sweeping emotion. The two main themes are developed with highly dramatic turns. The recapitulation includes an intriguing idea. The opening “noble call” reappears, at first played only by the last desks of the string section, with fragments of other themes. The movement ends quietly.

The second movement—***Allegro molto***—is a vibrant march full of energy, wit, and rhythmic vitality. Some call it a scherzo although Elgar did not use that term. The second theme is gentler. Elgar described the middle section as being “like something you hear down by the river.” Things slow down toward the end of the movement, and the first theme transforms into the main theme of the slow movement coming next, even though the two are in different keys and different tempi.

The third movement—***Adagio***—is the emotional heart of the symphony. Elgar’s gift for melody is on full display. The mood shifts from serenity to impassioned intensity, creating an emotional ebb and flow. Unlike his usual angst in quieter passages, here there is only tranquility. The second theme is also tranquil, and the movement ends in what William Henry Reed (who played at the Symphony’s premiere) called “the astounding effect of the muted trombones in the last five bars... like a voice from another world.” Elgar’s friend August Johannes Jaeger, the inspiration for the “Nimrod” variation from the *Enigma Variations*, was dying as Elgar was writing the Symphony. Jaeger did manage to attend its London premiere and wrote to Elgar, “My dear friend, that is not only one of the very greatest slow movements since Beethoven, but I consider it worthy of that master...The music was written by a good pure man.”

The final movement—***Lento: Allegro***—is a tour de force of orchestral writing, with motifs from earlier movements woven together. It starts with a repeat of a theme from the first movement in a rather mysterious mood. Then comes a faster allegro, and a series of themes which include a march-like rhythm played by the bassoons and pizzicato cellos. That is heard again later but at a much slower tempo accompanied by the harp. The development continues, transforming various themes from dark to dreamy and then back to turmoil. It builds to a climax that ends the way the symphony started: the *nobilmente* opening theme in a Grandioso fashion leads to a triumphant conclusion played by the full orchestra, full of what Elgar called “massive hope for the future.”