Program Notes for VSO Concert – September 19-21, 2025
Beethoven – Piano Concertos #2 and #4; Farrenc – Symphony #3

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770 to 1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven was part of the generation that experienced the full impact of the French Revolution, with a vision of freedom and the dignity of the individual. His music reflects this heroic age in an accent never to be forgotten. The man, himself, stepped outside the confines of his art to live heroically in the world. His masterpieces tell of his "wrestling with destiny" and have never been equaled. They culminate, of course, with his Ninth Symphony.

Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany, and baptized on December 17, 1770. His exact birthdate remains uncertain, despite some influential sources claiming it was on December 16. An abusive, alcoholic father made for an unhappy family situation. His musical education began at a young age, and his great talent was quickly recognized.

When Beethoven was seventeen, during a trip to Vienna, he performed for Mozart. Mozart is said to have commented to his friends, "Keep an eye on him—he will make a noise in the world some day." One genius recognized another. Beethoven studied with Joseph Haydn, but the young man's volcanic temperament and independent spirit were too much for the aging musician.

His pianistic abilities wowed the music-loving aristocracy, and he was welcomed by powerful patrons whose names you can find in the dedications of some of his works. Beethoven referred to them as the "princely rabble" and forced them to treat him as an equal and a friend. He said, "It is good to move among the aristocracy, but it is first necessary to make them respect you." He was a passionate rebel. Rather than attaching himself to the court of a prince, he worked under a sort of patronage system, getting paid for lessons and compositions. He had at least a half dozen publishers and was able to set his own terms and price.

The first decade of his career was marked by youthful exuberance, and perhaps a somewhat arrogant awareness of his strength. He said, "Power is the morality of men who stand out from the mass, and it is also mine!"

But vulnerability struck quickly. Beginning to lose his hearing at the age of 26 struck a tremendous blow to his pride. His affliction symbolized his apartness and difference from others. He began to understand that if life would withhold happiness, he would create music to achieve the victory fate threatened to take from him.

He overcame a personal sense of chaos and believed that humankind could, too. This became the epic theme of his music: moving from despair to conflict to serenity, then to triumph and joy. In fostering this idea, he became the major prophet of the nineteenth century, the architect of a heroic vision of life.

Though Beethoven's deafness is well-known, other aspects of his life are not. He supported charities, including schools for the deaf and orphanages. He was a chess enthusiast, animal lover,

avid reader of literature, philosophy, and history, nature lover, talented cook, and heavy drinker. Beethoven never married but had several relationships with women. He also enjoyed the company of close friends and colleagues. The enduring myth that Beethoven was a tortured and lonely genius completely ignores this rich and fulfilling personal life.

In the last years of Beethoven's career, he put forth an unyielding effort to get the elements of his art in line with his expressive ideals. His brilliant compositions attest to his success. The public, especially the younger generation, responded to the power of his music. Does that sound like the emergence of rock and roll, and now rap?

Outwardly, his life was uneventful. When he became totally deaf, he quarreled more with associates and friends. It is well-known that Beethoven dedicated his Symphony No. 3, also known as the "Eroica Symphony," to Napoleon Bonaparte, but later retracted it when Napoleon declared himself emperor. Beethoven died in 1827 at age 56, famous and revered then, and just as famous and revered today.

Beethoven's life and music have filled books. One massive and marvellous tome in my collection is *The Beethoven Companion,* edited by Thomas K. Scherman and Louis Biancolli. Beethoven's biography makes for just as fascinating reading as biographies of Churchill, Einstein, and possibly Steve Jobs and Elon Musk.

The last words here go to Wallace Brockway and Herbert Weinstock, from an old book called *Men of Music* (apologies for the sexist title). They begin their discussion with these words, "The history of music offers no experience comparable to that of an expanding universe afforded by the masterpieces of Ludwig van Beethoven."

BEETHOVEN'S PIANO CONCERTOS

How many piano concertos did Beethoven write? He composed several concertos during his teens—the piano score of a complete concerto from 1784 is the only one to have survived. But the five numbered and published piano concertos written between 1795 and 1809 are the beloved ones. In what order did he compose them? The No. 2 was the first to be written while No. 1 was written second.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19 – Ludwig van Beethoven (1795)

Orchestration: *flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, strings, and solo piano.* This is the only one of Beethoven's completed concertos that omits clarinets, trumpets, and timpani.

Beethoven's first years in Vienna saw him become the leading piano virtuoso of his age. He had a reputation as a genius at improvisation, showing original musical intellect of great emotional power. Although he played private concerts for patrons and benefactors, he did not make his first public appearance until 1795; he premiered his B-flat Concerto for piano and orchestra at a benefit concert. He may have begun work on it as early as 1787, completed a version by 1792, but rewrote two movements in 1795, finishing that version two days before his concert. He kept revising it until

1801 when he finally sent it to the publishers. His ‘official’ cadenza for the first movement followed in 1809: not surprisingly, it is far more advanced in style. In the meantime, he composed and published a Piano Concerto in C major. Because it was published first, it is known as No.1; the B-flat initial work had to be labelled as No. 2.

Classical concertos began with a long orchestral passage for orchestra to build up suspense for the soloist’s entrance. Beethoven followed that form here, but, spoiler alert: his last two piano concertos depart dramatically from this. More about this later, in the notes about Piano Concerto No. 4.

The first movement—**Allegro con brio**—opens brightly to set up a graceful Classical atmosphere. By the time the piano enters, it is rather conversational in style, full of wit but without any fireworks. The most important melodic material had already been stated by the orchestra. Beethoven spices up the classical sonata form with bold harmonic shifts and playful dialogue between soloist and orchestra. Rapid scales, brilliant passagework, and unexpected accents remind the listener that the young Beethoven was already pushing against Mozartian refinement with a more muscular pianism. Beethoven’s cadenza is difficult and stylistically very different from the Concerto. He uses the opening theme in many ways, changing its character each time.

The slow second movement—**Adagio**— is lyrical and introspective, a song-like meditation. It is not like his magical slow movements of later years. Instead, the flowing melodic lines are ornamented and decorated beautifully. Beethoven’s gift for expressive simplicity in the hushed cushion of sound from the orchestra against the operatic aria without words from the piano is evident. There are also hints of a deeper harmonic imagination that will appear in Beethoven’s later works. As the conclusion approaches, the piano alternates with the orchestra, one of Beethoven’s favourite devices. Herbert Glass notes that this movement may have been inspired by the *Larghetto* of Mozart’s last Piano Concerto, K. 595.

The finale—**Rondo: Molto allegro**—is lively, witty, and quintessentially Beethovenian, perhaps the most jovial of any of his concerto movements. It is a reverse of the opening movement’s construction; here the piano presents the melodic ideas which are then commented on by the orchestra. The playful rondo theme keeps returning in altered guises, interrupted by surprising key changes and syncopations. The theme is rhythmically unbalanced by stresses on beats 2 and 5 of each 6/8 measure. Beethoven even seems to trick the listener with a false ending. Before the last appearance of the rondo theme, the piano enters in the “wrong” key, and with the theme shifted early by one beat. The orchestra discovers and fixes the discrepancy, before the piano bursts back in. This musical joke can be seen in many of Beethoven's subsequent compositions.

The Beethoven of later years—romantic, stormy, and original—is only hinted at in Piano Concerto No. 2. Rather than look for those hints, just enjoy the classical charm and 18th-century polish that mark it so definitely with the humour of Haydn and elegance of Mozart, but with bravado and rhythmic punch that are distinctly Beethoven. Herbert Weinstock wrote, “It is music-making for music’s own self-sufficient sake, quite devoid of both of the darker inklings of tragedy which marked Mozart’s maturity and of the autobiographical urgency of some of the music that Beethoven himself would shortly be composing.”

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 – Ludwig van Beethoven (1806)

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

Beethoven composed this Concerto at the height of his so-called "middle period", the same years he was working on the *Appassionata* Sonata, the *Razumovsky* Quartets, and the *Eroica* Symphony. By this time Beethoven had fully embraced his identity as an innovator, expanding traditional forms with bold new expressive techniques.

Beethoven publicly premiered his Piano Concerto No. 4 in December 1808 in Vienna as the soloist, his last of such appearances with an orchestra. What a concert it was! Four hours in duration, it also featured the premieres of his *Choral Fantasy*, the Fifth and Sixth symphonies, and part of the Mass in C. Beethoven dedicated the Concerto to his friend, student, and patron, the Archduke Rudolph.

Although the Concerto was well-received at the premiere and is considered one of the pinnacles of the piano concerto repertoire, it has always been overshadowed by the grandiose Fifth, the "Emperor" Concerto. The Fourth declined in popularity even during Beethoven's lifetime and languished until 1836, when Felix Mendelssohn revived it. Why it was neglected is baffling. It is immediately appealing, intimate for a large work, flawlessly constructed and original in detail; its melody inspires.

The first movement—**Allegro moderato**—begins in an utterly unconventional way: instead of the orchestra introducing the main theme, the solo piano begins alone with a gentle, questioning phrase. The structure is revolutionary. No previous concerto had opened this way. The orchestra then responds in a contrasting key, a feature Beethoven loved to use to change the mood and create a dialogue to set the tone for the movement.

With only a minimum of additional material, the theme undergoes one of the most subtle and complete developments in all of music. Instead of thunderous virtuosity, Beethoven emphasizes a restrained interplay between piano and orchestra, alternating between introspection and grandeur. The movement is scored for string, woodwinds, and horns, but no trumpets or timpani. The cadenza (Beethoven wrote several versions) is highly dramatic, but even here, the mood is more philosophical than showy.

The short slow second movement—**Andante con moto**—is one of Beethoven's most dramatic dialogues between piano and orchestra. The orchestra begins with stern, brusque chords—octaves by the strings while the winds are silent. The piano answers with gentle, quiet, lyrical responses.

The subtle and delicate piano writing was a result of Beethoven's new piano. Like a modern instrument, there were three strings for each of the upper notes but, unlike the modern instrument, the pedal mechanism could make the hammers hit one, two, or all three strings. That gave great control both in volume and in tone colour. Beethoven asks for "una corda" and "due corde" in the second movement. The player of a modern grand piano can only approximate the effect.

Ever since a suggestion first made in the 19th-century, the second movement has been associated with Orpheus taming the Furies at the gates to Hades. The piano's gentle voice gradually calms the orchestra's severity. The strings now play soft harmonies under the piano. The movement fades into a hushed close, the conflict unresolved, but the atmosphere transformed. Its brevity and intensity make it one of Beethoven's most striking slow movements.

The finale—**Rondo (Vivace)**—bursts with buoyant energy. The main rondo theme is lively and rhythmically playful. It begins quietly with the strings, followed by the piano. After it is played twice, the trumpets and drums enter in an explosion of sound. Beethoven gives the soloist abundant opportunity for virtuosic display: brilliant scales, sparkling passagework, and energetic exchanges with the orchestra. Unlike the philosophical depth of the first two movements, the finale radiates joy and affirmation, bringing the Concerto to a jubilant close.

This is a work of quiet revolution: a Concerto that begins with the piano alone, that stages a dialogue of confrontation and reconciliation in its slow movement, and then concludes with exuberant affirmation. It balances lyricism and virtuosity, intimacy and grandeur, and stands as one of the most original and profound statements in the concerto tradition. Donald Tovey described it as "the most poetic of all Beethoven's concertos."

Piano Concerto No. 5, "The Emperor", was written four years later. Although Beethoven lived for a further 18 years, he never returned to the concerto form. By the Fifth, Beethoven had become too deaf to continue as a virtuoso. In his isolated world, other musical forms provided opportunities for the ideas he wanted to express.

The Fourth and Fifth are complementary masterpieces. The Fourth embodies inward reflection and poetic dialogue while the Fifth characterizes heroic assertion and symphonic power. Together, they capture the full range of Beethoven's genius. As Brockway and Weinstock wrote in 1939, "With all deference to this breath-taking work [the Fifth], it is to be hoped that a day will come when the phrase 'Beethoven piano concerto' will not inevitably mean the 'Emperor'". That day has certainly come.

LOUISE FARRENC (1804 to 1875)

Louise Farrenc (née Jeanne-Louise Dumont) was born in 1804 to a Parisian family of artisans and sculptors. She showed early musical promise and studied piano with leading pianists of the early 19th-century, including Ignaz Moscheles and Johann Nepomuk Hummel. Because women were not yet allowed to learn composition formally, she studied it privately with Anton Reicha, a respected theorist and teacher (and colleague of Beethoven). She developed a style with German Romantic and Classical influences. At age 17 she married flautist Aristide Farrenc and they embarked on a concert tour together. Settling in Paris, her husband opened a successful publishing company. Éditions Farrenc, became one of France's leading music publishers for nearly 40 years.

Louise Farrenc enjoyed a successful career as a concert pianist, performing widely across France, admired for her refined artistry. But it was as a composer that she made her boldest mark. She

wrote in many genres. Her chamber music is noted for its structural clarity and depth of expression. It comprises nine works: piano quintets, sextets, and a nonet. The Nonet, for winds, strings, and piano, was a particular triumph, performed by some of Paris's finest musicians. It earned wide acclaim. Farrenc composed a large body of music for solo piano often compared stylistically to Mendelssohn and Schumann. Her husband published many of her piano works, helping to further her career as a composer. During the 1830s-1840s she wrote three symphonies that were performed in Paris, and which gained her recognition during her lifetime. They display strong orchestration and craftsmanship, standing alongside the works of her male contemporaries.

In 1842, Farrenc was appointed Professor of Piano at the Paris Conservatoire, becoming the only woman to hold such a permanent position during the 19th century. She remained in that post for 30 years, shaping generations of pianists. Her appointment initially came with lower pay than her male colleagues. Farrenc fought for equal treatment and in 1850, after the success of her Nonet, she was finally granted equal salary, an early victory for gender equity in music.

Farrenc taught until two years before her death at age 71, but left composition and performance after the death of her daughter in 1859. She and her husband focused on compiling a multi-volume musical anthology of historical keyboard revival initiatives.

Farrenc's music reflects the Classical-Romantic transition. From Mozart and Beethoven, she absorbed a love of balanced form and motivic development. From her contemporaries like Mendelssohn and Schumann, she embraced lyrical Romantic expression and pianistic brilliance. Yet her voice remained distinct, especially in her chamber works. Her avoidance of opera was a brave choice in 19th-century Paris where opera was the dominant genre and orchestral and chamber traditions were less central.

Despite her talent and accomplishments, Farrenc's music fell into obscurity after her death in 1875. The biases of her era, which marginalized women composers, contributed to her neglect. For decades, she was remembered mainly as a teacher and pianist, rather than as a composer. But in recent decades, Farrenc has been rediscovered. Her symphonies and chamber works are increasingly performed and recorded, revealing a composer of originality, skill, and expressive power. She is now rightly celebrated as one of the finest French composers of the mid-19th century.

Symphony No. 3 in G minor, Op. 36 – Louise Farrenc (1847)

Orchestration: *2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, timpani, and strings*

Louise Farrenc composed her Third Symphony in 1847 at the height of her career as a composer and pianist. It was premiered in 1849 by the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, one of the leading orchestras in Europe at the time. It received positive reviews. She was fortunate to hear it performed as very little of anyone's symphonic music was performed in Paris at that time. Farrenc stayed with the usual Classical symphony form, and scored the work with a conservative orchestration, using only the standard eight woodwinds, two horns, timpani, and strings, but no trumpets.

The opening movement—**Allegro**—bursts forth with intensity. A vigorous first theme, propelled by driving rhythms and minor key tonality, sets a serious, stormy tone. A contrasting second theme is more lyrical but still tinged with tension. The orchestration is not overly heavy, allowing for dialogue between strings and winds. The development section works through all the material methodically; fragments of themes reappear in altered guises, building intensity before the recapitulation returns in full force. The movement concludes decisively, with a brief coda bringing the movement to an energetic close.

The slow movement—**Adagio cantabile**—opens with lyrical clarinet melody, supported by horns, bassoon, and timpani. The theme develops through variations of texture and orchestration, building in intensity and then returning to calm serenity. Interruptions of the tender atmosphere by more powerful contrasts is perhaps an echo of Beethoven's slow movements. The balance of elegance and emotional depth reflects her dual background as pianist and symphonist.

In the third movement—**Scherzo: Vivace**—Farrenc unleashes rhythmic vitality and wit. The scherzo is full of syncopation, sharp accents, and vigorous interplay between orchestral sections. The Trio is a lighter interlude which showcases the woodwinds, a skill evident in her chamber music works. The scherzo returns with renewed energy.

The final movement—**Finale: Allegro**—opens with unison strings playing a fiery main theme that propels the music forward. As in the first movement, Farrenc contrasts turbulence with more lyrical passages, creating a sense of struggle and resolution. William Runyan comments, "Farrenc chose to imbue this movement with dramatic heft. It is as if she dared any misogynous critics to drag out the old bromide, 'it sounds very masculine.'" In the coda, the music shifts triumphantly to a major key, ending the symphony on a note of victory and affirmation, with three triumphant final chords. This is another gesture reminiscent of Beethoven's practice of moving from darkness to light.

Louise Farrenc's Symphony No. 3 is a work of ambition and accomplishment. It is a testament to her determination to compose in a genre dominated by male composers and rarely attempted in France at the time. Combining Beethoven-like drive, Schumann-like lyricism, and her own distinctive elegance, it stands today as one of the most important symphonic statements of mid-19th-century France, and a cornerstone of Farrenc's long-overdue revival.