

Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra
Jeri Lynne Johnson, Music Director
Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia
Alan Harler, Artistic Director

Beethoven and Gill

PROGRAM

Overture to Fidelio, Op. 72bLudwig van Beethoven

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 36Ludwig van Beethoven

1. *Adagio molto; Allegro con brio*
2. *Larghetto*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro vivo; Trio*
4. *Allegro molto*

Jeri Lynne Johnson, conductor
Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra

Intermission

Before the Wrestring Tides Jeremy Gill
world premiere

Erin Swanson, soprano	John Leonard, tenor
Jennifer Beattie, alto	Ryan Tibbetts, bass

Choral Fantasy, Op. 80Ludwig van Beethoven

Barbara Berry, soprano 1	Gabor Kari, tenor 1
Erin Swanson, soprano 2	Benjamin Harbold, tenor 2
Jennifer Beattie, alto	Nicholas May, bass

Alan Harler, conductor
Ching-Yun Hu, piano
Mendelssohn Club Chorus
Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra

Before the Wrestring Tides was commissioned by Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia through the generous support of: the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia Alan Harler New Ventures Fund; Concert Artists Guild through a gift from Lois Lehrman Grass and Martin L. and Lucy Miller Murray; and by the Archie W. and Grace Berry Foundation.

The use of recording or photographic equipment during this concert is strictly prohibited. Please turn off audible cell phones and alarms.

PROGRAM NOTES

Overture to *Fidelio*, Op. 72b

Beethoven composed a single opera, *Fidelio*, but he extensively revised it twice and provided no less than four overtures. He confided to a friend, "I tell you, this opera will win me a martyr's crown." Beethoven had settled on a French play, *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal* for the libretto. In the play, Florestan has been falsely and secretly imprisoned by the corrupt, despotic Don Pizarro and is slowly being starved to death. Florestan's wife Leonore, disguised as a man named Fidelio, obtains a job at the prison, where she locates her husband, thwarts Pizarro's plot to have him executed, and exposes Pizarro's villainy. Florestan is released and Pizarro is led off to prison. The triumph of justice over tyranny and the steadfastness of a woman's love were themes that resonated with Beethoven. The opera was premiered in November 1805 under the title *Fidelio*, to avoid confusion with two contemporary *Leonore* operas based on the same play, and featured the overture now known as *Leonore No. 2*.

The premiere was less than successful. Vienna was under occupation by the French, and most of Beethoven's patrons had fled to their country estates. The libretto had expanded the two act play to a three act opera, which diluted the dramatic content. On the advice his supporters, he revised the opera using a shortened, two act libretto, and composed a new overture, the *Leonore No. 3*. This 1806 version was better received, but Beethoven had a dispute with the theater over the box office receipts and angrily withdrew the opera after five performances. The overture *Leonore No. 1* was written in 1808 for a planned performance in Prague that failed to materialize. Beethoven made his final revision of *Fidelio* in 1814, recomposing a significant portion of the opera to accommodate yet more changes to the libretto and providing the fourth and final overture. Unlike the previous three overtures, which were in C major, the key of the finale in *Fidelio*, and which all quoted material from the opera, the *Overture to Fidelio* is in E major and is all original music. It opens with an orchestral fanfare that is gradually elaborated to form the principal thematic material. The heroic sound Beethoven created fit both the opera and the contemporary mood. 1814 marked the final defeat of Napoleon after 13 years of war, in which Vienna was shelled by the French and occupied twice, and the relief of the Viennese at their own deliverance from tyranny was palpable.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 36

Beethoven first noticed some difficulties in his hearing when he was only twenty-five. He was already acclaimed as the finest pianist in Vienna, with an amazing facility for improvisation, but he had made his public debut and published his first compositions only the year before. By the time he was thirty, he was avoiding social gatherings because he had difficulty hearing conversation. He was sufficiently alarmed that he began discreetly consulting a steady stream of doctors, whose prescriptions were imaginative if not effective (one doctor forbade shower baths – Beethoven promptly fired him). In 1802, he finally received a prescription to his liking, a summer holiday in Heiligenstadt, a rural resort near Vienna famed for the rejuvenating power of its natural hot springs.

It was not to be the relaxing experience that Beethoven had hoped. Ferdinand Ries, one of his students, visited Beethoven, and as they sat outside a café, Ries remarked on the sound of a wooden flute being played in the distance by a shepherd. Beethoven could not hear the sound, and although Ries immediately agreed that the music had become inaudible, Beethoven saw through the lie and became morose and withdrawn. It was evidently a telling moment for him, for he referred to it repeatedly in letters to his friends. He was forced to the conclusion that his deafness was progressive and incurable. He wrote a remarkable document, the Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he laid bare his anguish at a defect in the sense most necessary to a musician, his thoughts of suicide, and his determination to live for the sake of his art. It is not clear for whom the letter was actually intended; he left the salutation blank and only later inserted the name of his younger brother Carl (and curiously omitted the name of the youngest brother Johann). It seems to have been written more with posterity in mind. It was never posted and was only found among his papers after his death.



It was against this grim backdrop that Beethoven completed one of his liveliest, most energetic and most engaging works, the *Symphony No. 2 in D Major*. Like his *Symphony No. 1*, it is of Classical dimensions and scored for a Classical orchestra – strings, pairs of winds, trumpets, and horns, and timpani. But the *Symphony No. 2* is filled with sly good humor, and definitely pushes the envelope of symphonic music. It opens with a long introduction that manages to maintain a rather stately and serious façade until a series of flute trills usher in the first theme, very lively music constructed around the D-major triad. The second theme is equally jaunty and similarly constructed around the A-major triad. It is characteristic of Beethoven's compositional skill that he could take such relatively simple thematic material and create absolutely wonderful music from it.

The slow movement, marked *Larghetto*, is one of the longest Beethoven wrote for a symphony. It features a simple but beautiful folk tune-like melody, spun out in a series of variations. The third movement is Beethoven's greatest innovation. Instead of the traditional minuet, he substitutes a scherzo. While we usually think of a scherzo as lively, rhythmic music in triple meter, the Italian word actually means joke. And the joke here is frequent, abrupt changes in dynamics, sometimes on a measure by measure basis. The trio again features folk dance-like music, this time set for oboe. The *Finale* opens with a wonderful syncopated melody incorporating a downward leap of an octave and a half. Audiences didn't quite know what to make of such unusual music. There was a popular suggestion that it represented, how to phrase this delicately, digestive sounds inspired by Beethoven's legendary intestinal difficulties. Beethoven did nothing to discourage this interpretation. Whatever it may have represented, it provides a rollicking, joyous conclusion to this remarkable symphony.

The *Symphony No. 2* was premiered in 1803 at a typically massive Beethoven *Akademie* (self-produced concert) that also included the *Symphony No. 1*, the *Piano Concerto No. 3* and the sacred oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. Public reaction was mixed. Reviewers dutifully noted the “interesting” effects for which Beethoven seemed to be striving in the *Second Symphony*, but on the whole preferred the *First Symphony*, whose feet were firmly planted in the Classical tradition. But it was the sunny, irreverent *Second Symphony* that pointed the way to the future.

Before the Wrestling Tides

The music of Jeremy Gill has been performed throughout the United States and Europe by artists and ensembles including the Casals and Parker Quartets, singers Jonathan Hays and Sarah Wolfson, flutist Mimi Stillman, violinist Maria Bachmann, pianists Stephen Gosling and Peter Orth, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra, and the Chautauqua Music Festival Orchestra. Upcoming premieres include *Capriccio* with the Grammy-winning Parker Quartet and *Diario dun Camiño* with guitarist Peter Fletcher. Recent premieres include *8 Variations and Toccata on “Betzet Yisrael”* with organist Mark Laubach, *Fantasy Etudes* for four oboes, *3 Songs About Words*, with soprano Sarah Wolfson and pianist Renata Rohlfing, and a performance of his string quartet *25* with choreography by Alan Hineline and featuring the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet and Concertante. Gill has served as the composer-in-residence with the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra and the Newburyport Chamber Music Festival. His compositions can be heard on two CD releases on the Albany label.



Sonya Tokarchyk

Jeremy Gill also maintains an active schedule as a conductor. He is in his third season as Music Director of the Delaware County Symphony, leading them in an impressively diverse repertoire that includes new music like Shulamit Ran's *Voices for a Flautist with Orchestra*, and infrequently heard pieces like Stanford's *Irish Rhapsody* and Kalinnikov's *Symphony No. 1*, as well as the standards of the literature. A conductor particularly devoted to contemporary music, Gill has conducted over 30 world premieres with ensembles including Network for New Music, Dolce Suono Ensemble, Chamber Music Now, Penn Composers Guild, the orchestras of West Chester and Temple Universities, and his own Delaware County Symphony. He has previously served as Assistant Conductor of the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra, and Music Director of the Atlantic Coast Opera Festival and the orchestras of West Chester University, Dickinson College, and Messiah College. The 2011 CD release *The Calls of Gravity* on the New Focus Recordings label features music of David Laganella with Ensemble CMN under the direction of Gill.

Following a Mendelssohn Club tradition of pairing new music with masterworks, *Before the Wrestling Tides* was commissioned for performance along-

side Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*. It uses the same musical forces as the *Choral Fantasy*, and requires an equally high degree of virtuosity from the piano soloist. But unlike the *Choral Fantasy*, whose text was hastily written specifically for the performance, *Before the Wrestling Tides* draws its text from the poetry of one of America's most distinctive and iconic voices, Hart Crane, and Crane's life, words and style inform every aspect of the music.

Fleeing his parents' messy divorce, Hart Crane (1899-1932) dropped out of high school at 17 and moved to New York City, ostensibly to study for an entrance exam to Columbia but in reality to further his budding writing career. Self-confident even to the point of being brash, he introduced himself into New York's literary community, but it was his obvious talent that won him acceptance. Even after his poetry began to earn recognition, however, Crane was still forced to take what he called hack jobs, editing and writing advertising copy, to support himself. His poetry is densely strewn with striking, highly idiosyncratic and often very personal imagery, allusions and word play. In many ways, he was heir to the American Romantic traditions of Emerson and Whitman, and Crane himself considered his masterwork, *The Bridge*, as a sort of modern *Leaves of Grass*, interpreting the American experience through a 20th century perspective.

Unfortunately, there was a dark side to his life as well. He drank heavily, got into brawls, and cruised the waterfront bars looking for sailors to pick up, which as often as not left him beaten up or in jail. While he defended his increasingly self-destructive lifestyle, it made it extremely difficult for him to write and publish. Even as his poetry began to win public success, he began to fear that he was losing his ability to write. He traveled to Mexico on a Guggenheim Fellowship to research a planned epic poem based on Cortez and Montezuma, but he fell into his old habits, drinking furiously, getting into repeated scrapes with the Mexican police, and writing very little. On the voyage back to New York, Hart Crane committed suicide by jumping over the railing into the Gulf of Mexico. He was thirty-two years old.

Jeremy Gill has provided the following notes about *Before the Wrestling Tides*:

"The title *Before the Wrestling Tides* is a paraphrase from Crane's *Ave Maria*, a section from *The Bridge*. While the piece itself is a setting of *Voyages II*, from his first published collection, *White Buildings*, it has become a broader meditation on Crane's life and work, and includes musical references to both *The Bridge* and Crane's last published poem, *The Broken Tower*.

"Throughout my work, which, as a companion piece to Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*, features both the chorus and solo piano as alternating primary 'voices,' there are musical depictions of bells (which feature prominently in *The Broken Tower* as well as *Voyages II*), the sea (the location of *Voyages II*), and chant — specifically the *Ave Maria*.

"As the title of my work suggests, there is an element of 'carpe diem' at play in my piece. This was also true of Crane's life and work: he was a wildly flamboyant character whose excesses ultimately deprived him of the ability to write."

Like a Crane poem, *Before the Wrestling Tides* is a richly textured work, with widely spaced intervals, thick chord clusters, melodic lines in which voices slide past each other by half-steps, and rushing, breathless whole-tone scales. It is also full of imagery and allusion, especially of bells and the rolling seas. It opens with three strikes of the timpani, repeated three times. This represents the *Angelus* bells, which were struck three times each to invoke the thrice-daily prayer to Mary, and it suggests both *The Broken Tower* and *Ave Maria*. This motif is repeated twice more, in the middle and at the end of the piece, forming a sort of structural framework. But there is also something a bit ominous or foreboding about the sound of the timpani, as if they are voicing a warning. *Voyages II* is a love poem, written during Crane's only long-term relationship, and while it is certainly sensuous, there is also a suggestion of impermanence, of the inevitability of loss. This wonderfully multilayered allusion in the music is very much in the style of Crane's own writing. Gill also subtly works in the *Ave Maria* Gregorian chant. Snatches of the chant are heard in the winds, in three-part canon, following the first stanza of the poem, and again in the strings, and again in canon, at the conclusion of the text. The chant is also embedded (encrusted, in Gill's words, with another allusion to the sea) in the widely spaced chord clusters hammered out by the piano soloist, which also occur three times in the piece. The work ends softly with the same timpani strikes with which it began, the *Angelus* now transformed into a death knell.

Choral Fantasy, Op. 80

The story of the *Choral Fantasy* actually begins with Beethoven's *Mass in C*, written in 1807 for the name day of the wife of Prince Nicholas II Esterházy. The prince was an important patron of music and one of Beethoven's earliest supporters. He had restored the musical establishment which flourished under his grandfather, enlisting Haydn once again as *Kapellmeister*, and the six name-day Masses Haydn wrote between 1796 and 1802 for the prince were masterworks of that musical form. Beethoven was a little reluctant to invite comparison to his former teacher, but he regarded the commission as a business opportunity. Beethoven had submitted a proposal to the Imperial Court Theater that he be engaged on salary to furnish them with an opera a year, and Esterházy was a member of the Theater's board of directors. But if Beethoven had hoped to win the prince's support with the *Mass in C*, he was to be disappointed. The prince found the music "utterly ridiculous and detestable," and offended Beethoven at the reception following the premiere with the remark "My dear Beethoven, what is it you have done here?" Beethoven angrily withdrew the dedication.

Convinced of the musical worth of the *Mass*, Beethoven began to negotiate for its publication. To arouse more popular interest, he decided to include the *Mass* at a mammoth *Akademie* in 1808, which also featured his *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies* and the *Fourth Piano Concerto*. Beethoven wanted a rousing work to close the concert, and since he already had piano, orchestra, vocal soloists and chorus, he decided to compose a new work using all those forces. He had a text prepared according to his own ideas, most likely by poet Christoph Kuffner, and completed the *Choral Fantasy* in the space of about two weeks.

Beethoven himself played the piano part; it would be the last piece in which he appeared in public as soloist with an orchestra.

Despite its utilitarian origins, the *Choral Fantasy* is a wonderfully constructed, highly inventive work. The opening piano solo offers a rare glimpse into Beethoven's legendary improvisational style; at the premiere he improvised the piano part, only notating it later for publication. After a brief dialog between the low strings and the piano, the main theme is introduced. It is developed as an exquisite series of variations, set first for piano, then various combinations of winds, then string quartet, full orchestra, and finally a vocal sextet and then full chorus. There is much in the *Choral Fantasy* that can be heard as a precursor to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. The dialog of the strings and piano, the main theme which so resembles the *Ode to Joy* in tone and contour, its presentation as a set of variations, even the final *presto* with the music racing along at double time, all these would ultimately find their way into the *Ninth*. Beethoven was not entirely satisfied with the text, which had been written in haste. He told his publishers that he would entertain suggestions for an alternate text, save for the word *Kraft* (strength). It forms the musical climax of the piece, a long, forte chord which brightens at the end as it moves from C minor to C major. It is a characteristic Beethoven flourish, and one with which he was evidently well satisfied.

– Michael Moore

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