

## Program Notes for November 13, 2021

# FATE AND TRIUMPH

In our season of “Coming Together Again,” tonight we pair opposites: fate and triumph. As so often happens, Beethoven provides metaphors for the challenges in life today, even as his music passes the two-century mark. Our guest conductor, Eduardo Leandro, expressed our times well when talking about Beethoven’s Fifth: “It’s about *fate* and *faith*. You can’t control what the world will do, but faith can see you through any crisis.” Enjoy the ride!



### Jessie Montgomery

b. 1981

#### *Starburst* (2012)

It’s no exaggeration to describe Jessie Montgomery as a triple threat. This composer, mentor, and violinist is one of the brightest lights in the American contemporary music scene. Her parents were artists, and Montgomery grew up on the front lines of New York City’s artistic explosion, spending her formative years at performances, artistic gatherings, and demonstrations. With degrees from Julliard and N.Y.U., Montgomery’ singular artistic voice combines activism, education, and performance with jazz, folk music, African-American spirituals, and civil rights anthems.

*Starburst* was commissioned in 2012 by the Sphinx Organization, which champions promising young Black and Latinx string players. “This brief one-movement work for string orchestra,” Montgomery writes, “is a play on imagery of rapidly changing musical colors. Exploding gestures are juxtaposed with gentle fleeting melodies in an attempt to create a multidimensional soundscape. A common definition of a starburst, ‘the rapid formation of large numbers of new stars in a galaxy at a rate high enough to alter the structure of the galaxy significantly,’ lends itself almost literally to the nature of the performing ensemble that premiered the work . . . and I wrote the piece with their dynamic in mind.”



### Sergei Prokofiev

1891-1953

#### *Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major*

(1917-23)

1917 marked a turning point in Russian history. As a result of that year’s February Revolution, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne. Following the October Revolution, the Bolshevik Party gained power. In the midst of this turbulence, Sergei Prokofiev experienced a surge of compositional productivity. Throughout 1917, he composed six pieces of music, including tonight’s *Violin Concerto No. 1*.

While the concerto was not well-received upon its Paris premiere, it gained popularity in Russia after violinist Joseph Szigeti used it in his touring repertoire. Szigeti later wrote that he was drawn to the concerto due to its “mixture of fairy-tale naivete and daring savagery in a lay-out texture.”

This juxtaposition of “fairy-tale naivete” and “daring savagery” is evocative of the early twentieth century musical landscape. Just four years before Prokofiev wrote the first violin concerto, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* premiered to general scandal in Paris. When compared with the lush musical romanticism of the previous century, Stravinsky’s ballet seemed outrageous.

Prokofiev’s work speaks to both styles – the “daring savagery” of contemporary music and the “fairy-tale naivete” of nineteenth-century romanticism.



## Ludwig van Beethoven

1780-1827

### *Symphony No. 5 in C minor* (1804-08)

*“Glowing beams shoot through this realm’s deep night, and we become aware of immense shadows, which rise and fall, close in on us, and wipe us out but not the ache of unending longing, in which every pleasure that has surged in sounds of celebration sinks and goes under, and only in this ache—the love, hope, joy (self-consuming but not destroying) that wants to burst our breast with a full-voiced harmony of all passions—do we live on as delighted visionaries!”*

So wrote German author E. T. A. Hoffman when he described Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5* in the *General Musical Journal* in 1810. Hoffman, who also described the piece as “one of the most important works of the time,” was the first of many to ascribe iconic status to the fifth symphony.

*Symphony No. 5*, also called “the Fate Symphony” is most famous for its iconic four-note opening phrase, which is echoed throughout the piece’s and is often described as evoking “fate knocking on the door.”

It is hard to overstate the Fifth Symphony’s impact on popular musical culture. From Chuck Berry to *Saturday Night Fever*, the “fate theme” seems ubiquitous. Despite this near-omnipresence, the symphony stakes an emotional claim on audiences. The first movement, with its layers of attention-grabbing phrases, will demand your attention; the subsequent music will keep you hooked until the very end.

Hoffman, again, puts it best:

*How this wonderful composition, in a climax that climbs on and on, leads the listener imperiously forward into the spirit world of the infinite! No doubt the whole rushes like an ingenious rhapsody past many a man, but the soul of each thoughtful listener is assuredly stirred, deeply and intimately, by a feeling that is none other than that unutterable portentous longing, and until the final chord—indeed, even in the moments that follow it—he will be powerless to step out of that wondrous spirit realm where grief and joy embrace him in the form of sound . . .*

All through this iconic symphony, Beethoven leads the listener in ever-closing arcs, moving into major keys, providing glimmers of hope, until finally, triumph is achieved.

## Comments from the Survey of our November 13, 2021 Concert

“The performance was superb, as always! The guest conductor was very engaging, made everyone laugh, and he had great unity with the orchestra. The programming was excellent as well. Thank you, Bridgeport Symphony!”

“It was a most enjoyable evening. What is not to love about Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup>? *Starburst* quite nice. The Prokofiev Concerto was excellent. It is an adjustment for us coming from the Symphony Hall and the Boston Symphony, but this was quite credible and with live music a special treat.”

“So moving to be enveloped by live music last night!”

“Brilliant” Grateful thanks to this great Orchestra for a glorious evening!”

“So glad we went. Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> is one of my favorite pieces. Love Debbie Wong (and Nina too) and the conductor was charming and terrific.”

“Thank you for a beautiful evening. The conductor’s talks were key. And I really enjoyed D. Wong’s performance!”