

Emilie Mayer's Faust and Beethoven's Fifth

Thursday, October 22, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Riccardo Minasi, conductor · Mao Fujita, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	MAYER 1812–1883 <i>Faust Overture</i>	11'
2	MOZART 1756–1791 <i>Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major, K. 503</i>	32'
3	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67</i>	33'
TOTAL MUSIC		76'

Emilie Mayer

1812–1883

Faust Overture

THE COMPOSER

Emilie Mayer (1812–1883) was one of the most prolific and successful composers of nineteenth-century Germany, and one of the most unjustly forgotten. Born in the Mecklenburg town of Friedland, the daughter of a wealthy pharmacist, she showed musical gifts early but, like most women of her time and class, seemed destined for a purely domestic life. Her path changed dramatically and tragically in 1840, when she was twenty-eight: her father took his own life, and she threw herself into composition. She moved to Stettin to study with the celebrated song composer Carl Loewe, and later settled in Berlin, where she built a remarkable public career at a time when professional women composers were almost unheard of. She wrote on the largest scale (eight symphonies, fifteen concert overtures, string quartets, sonatas and a great deal of chamber music), and her works were performed and praised in her lifetime, earning her the nickname ‘the female Beethoven.’ After her death in 1883 her music vanished almost completely from the repertoire, and it is only in recent years that her symphonies and overtures have begun to be revived, recorded and championed. This concert takes part in that rediscovery.

11 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

The concert overture (a single-movement orchestral piece, often inspired by a literary or dramatic subject, written for the concert hall rather than the theatre) was one of the most popular orchestral genres of the Romantic era. Mendelssohn's overtures were the great models, and composers across Europe used the form to paint a scene, tell a story in miniature, or evoke a famous literary character. Emilie Mayer, a prolific and resourceful orchestral composer, wrote around fifteen such overtures, and among them is this Faust Overture, inspired by Goethe's monumental drama: the foundational text of German Romanticism, and a subject that drew composers from Berlioz and Schumann to Liszt and Wagner.

Mayer composed the Faust Overture around 1880, in her later Berlin years, when she was a well-established figure in the capital's concert life, and it was critically acclaimed in the early 1880s. Goethe's Faust, the story of the restless scholar who bargains his soul with Mephistopheles in his search for meaning, knowledge and love, offered exactly the kind of dramatic, philosophically charged subject the Romantic concert overture thrived on. Its appearance on this programme is a reminder of just how recently Mayer's music has begun to return to the international stage after more than a century of neglect.

Hearing it opposite Beethoven, whose shadow loomed over every nineteenth-century symphonist, is fitting for a composer once called 'the female Beethoven': it invites us to listen to Mayer not as a curiosity but as a serious orchestral voice of her age, finally being given her due.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

As a Faust overture in the Romantic tradition, expect music of dramatic contrasts: the brooding, striving spirit of Goethe's hero set against more lyrical, tender material. Listen for a weighty, often shadowed opening that establishes the work's serious tone (the restless searching that defines Faust himself), and for the way Mayer builds momentum through her orchestra with sudden harmonic shifts and rich colourings.

This is your chance to hear, quite possibly for the first time, the orchestral voice of a composer her contemporaries took entirely seriously. Notice how confidently she handles the full Romantic orchestra, how she shapes a dramatic arc across a short span, and how the music drives toward its climax. Come without pre-

conceptions: rather than measuring the piece against the masterpieces that frame it, listen for what is individual in Mayer's voice, and for the simple, striking fact that music this assured lay silent and unheard for well over a hundred years.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

32 minutes

1756–1791

Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major, K. 503

THE COMPOSER

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart needs little introduction. Born in Salzburg in 1756, he was a prodigy whose talents were cultivated and exhibited across Europe by his father Leopold. By the time he composed this concerto in 1779, the twenty-three-year-old Mozart was restless in provincial Salzburg, dreaming of Vienna and larger stages. Within two years he would make the move that defined his mature career.

Less well known is his sister Maria Anna, called “Nannerl,” five years his senior. She was an equally brilliant pianist as a child, and the siblings toured together as wonders of nature until Nannerl's touring career ended when she was about seventeen. Following the customs of the time, she stayed at home while Wolfgang continued traveling with their father. The brother and sister remained close, and this concerto was written for the two of them to play.

ABOUT THE WORK

Mozart completed his Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major on 4 December 1786, in the same busy stretch that produced the ‘Prague’ Symphony, and probably played it himself in Vienna soon afterwards. It is the last of the great series of concertos he wrote for his own use during his peak Viennese years, and it is the grandest and most public of them all. Where some of the earlier concertos charm or beguile, K. 503 impresses: it is big-boned, ceremonial and symphonically ambitious, the work of a composer at the height of his powers writing on the largest scale the genre allowed.

The key of C major, with its bright trumpets and drums, had long carried associations of pomp and grandeur, and Mozart exploits them fully. Yet the concerto is far from merely festive. Again and again the confident C-major rhetoric is shadowed by sudden turns to the minor, lending the music a searching, ambiguous quality beneath its splendour. Commentators have often heard in its breadth and contrapuntal richness a foreshadowing of the ‘Jupiter’ Symphony, which lay two years ahead.

Intriguingly, this magnificent work was not an immediate favourite. Its grandeur and relative reticence (it offers fewer of the obviously seductive tunes of, say, the A-major or C-minor concertos) meant it was less often played, and it only really entered the standard repertoire in the later twentieth century. Today it is recognised as one of the supreme achievements of the Classical concerto: spacious, noble, and inexhaustibly rich.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement (*Allegro maestoso*) opens with grand, march-like C-major chords. But listen, just moments in, for the music's sudden clouding into the minor, a shadow that will keep recrossing the movement and give it its peculiar depth. This is one of Mozart's longest and most symphonic concerto movements; notice the wealth of themes and the way the piano, when it enters, both joins and gently transforms the orchestra's grand argument. One of its melodies has often been likened to the 'Marseillaise.'

The slow movement (*Andante*) moves to the warm key of F major and unfolds as a serene, songful meditation, the piano in intimate dialogue with the woodwinds, Mozart the opera composer audible in its vocal grace. The finale is a spacious rondo built on an elegant, dancing theme, but it too has surprising reach and contrapuntal interest, far more than a simple romp. Keep your ear on the conversation between piano and orchestra throughout: in this concerto, more than almost any other, they are true equals in a single grand design.

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

33 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

No piece of orchestral music is more famous than Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and few have been more influential. Its four opening notes, three short and one long ('short-short-short-LONG'), are perhaps the most recognisable musical idea ever written, and the symphony built from them became, almost immediately, the very emblem of what a symphony could be: not merely a sequence of pleasing movements but a single dramatic journey, a struggle that ends in triumph.

Beethoven worked on the symphony over several years, completing it in 1808 amid the most fertile period of his life, even as his deafness deepened. It was unveiled at one of the most extraordinary concerts in history: a marathon, freezing four-hour event at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on 22 December 1808, which also gave the premieres of the Sixth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto and the Choral Fantasy, with Beethoven himself at the piano. The under-rehearsed performance was reportedly a shambles, but the Fifth Symphony's power soon became undeniable. The writer E. T. A. Hoffmann, reviewing it shortly afterwards, hailed it as opening 'the realm of the colossal and immeasurable.'

The symphony's overarching design, a tense, stormy C minor driving across four movements to a blazing C-major victory, became the model for the 'struggle to triumph' narrative that would shape Romantic music for the rest of the century. The terse opening motto saturates the whole work, binding it into a single, irresistible argument.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Everything grows from those first four notes. Listen for how the opening motto is not just a theme but a building block: Beethoven hurls it through the first movement obsessively, in every register and instrument, generating tremendous momentum from the barest material; even a lone oboe's brief, plaintive cadenza cannot halt its drive.

The second movement (*Andante con moto*) offers respite: a flowing, dignified set of variations on two themes, with noble brass outbursts. The third movement returns to C minor and a sense of foreboding: listen for the menacing opening on cellos and basses and the gruff, scrambling fugato of its central trio. Then comes the symphony's great masterstroke: instead of ending, the scherzo dissolves into a long, suspenseful passage of hushed, throbbing strings over a quiet drumbeat, the tension

stretched almost unbearably, until it bursts directly, without a break, into the blazing C-major finale. At that moment Beethoven brings in trombones, piccolo and contrabassoon for the first time in the symphony, flooding the hall with new brilliance. Listen, too, for how the shadow of the third movement briefly returns mid-finale, only to be swept aside as the music drives to one of the most emphatic, hard-won victories in all of music.

Tonight's artists

Mao Fujita *piano*

Mao Fujita's affinity for Mozart is well established: his recorded cycle of the complete Mozart sonatas marked him out as a Mozartian of rare poise and clarity. The 'grand' C-major Concerto, K. 503, asks for more than charm, though: its symphonic breadth and shadowed grandeur call for architectural command alongside the singing tone and transparency that are Fujita's hallmarks. Hearing this most public of Mozart's concertos in his hands is a chance to test a celebrated Mozart specialist against the composer's most ceremonious canvas.

Mao Fujita, born in Tokyo in 1998, is among the most admired pianists of the younger generation. He began playing at the age of three and rose rapidly through the competition circuit, winning first prize at the Clara Haskil Competition in Switzerland in 2017 and then the silver medal at the 2019 International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, which brought him to wide international attention. An exclusive Sony Classical artist, he announced himself on record with an acclaimed complete set of Mozart's piano sonatas, and his Mozart playing, poised, transparent, unaffected and singing, has become something of a calling card. Praised for the refinement and natural musicality of his playing rather than mere display, he now appears with leading orchestras and in major recital halls around the world.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth and the Human Imagination**

Matthew Guerrieri, Vintage 2014

A lively book about Beethoven's Fifth and the many meanings people have heard in its opening motif, from Romantic critics to wartime radio.

ACCESSIBLE **Mozart: The Reign of Love**

Jan Swafford, Harper Perennial 2021

Swafford's life of Mozart, strong on the Vienna years that produced the great piano concertos such as K. 503.

DEEPER **The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven**

Charles Rosen, W. W. Norton 1998

Rosen's study of the Classical style has a long chapter on Mozart's piano concertos and shows the musical language Beethoven's Fifth grew from.

SOURCES

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