

BEETHOVEN'S EIGHTH | JANUARY 7, 2023 PROGRAM NOTES

Strum

Jessie Montgomery (b. 1981)

Jessie Montgomery is an acclaimed composer, violinist, and educator. She was raised in Manhattan's Lower East Side by parents working in music and theater. She holds a bachelor's degree in violin performance from the Juilliard School, and completed a master's degree in Composition for Film and Multimedia at New York University in 2012.

In 1999, Montgomery began working with the Sphinx Organization, a non-profit based in Detroit that supports young African American and Latino string players. She continues to serve as composer-in-residence for the Sphinx Virtuosi. Her music interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, poetry, and social consciousness, making her an acute interpreter of 21st century American sound and experience. The following is Jessie Montgomery's description of her piece *Strum*:

"*Strum* is the culminating result of several versions of a string quintet I wrote in 2006. It was originally written for the Providence String Quartet and guests of Community MusicWorks Players, then arranged for string quartet in 2008 with several small revisions. In 2012 the piece underwent its final revisions with a rewrite of both the introduction and the ending for the Catalyst Quartet in a performance celebrating the 15th annual Sphinx Competition.

Originally conceived for the formation of a cello quintet, the voicing is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound. Within *Strum* I utilized texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming pizzicato serves as a texture motive and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration."

Concerto in A minor for Oboe and Strings

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Premiered on September 30, 1944 by the Liverpool Philharmonic featuring oboist Léon Goossens

British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams was seventy-two years old when he finished the *Concerto in A minor for Oboe and Strings* in 1944. Prior to this piece he had composed and arranged approximately 300 pieces of music. The most recent was his *Symphony No. 5* (recently performed by the CSO in October), which was completed in 1943 and shares a lot of similarities with the concerto. The musical material from the last movement of the oboe concerto was originally intended for his fifth symphony as part of a revision of the second movement (Scherzo) before utilizing it for the concerto instead.

The concerto was scheduled to premiere at the Proms in London in July of 1944. However due to the threat of military rocket raids on the city during this time, the premiere was delayed until September 30, 1944 in Liverpool with oboe soloist Léon Goossens, to whom the score was dedicated.

The piece is scored for solo oboe and strings and is divided into three movements. The first movement (*Rondo Pastorale*) uses the warm and luxurious sound of the oboe to evoke the emotion and spirit of the English countryside. The oboe begins with a soft and rhythmically flowing line at a soft dynamic reaching a brief cadenza in only 10 measures into the piece. The melody is then passed around from soloist to orchestra until we reach a longer cadenza that closes out the movement.

The second movement (*Minuet and Musette*) is like a lilting waltz broken into two sections, one in C minor and the other in C major. The *Finale* movement moves at a rapid speed with quick key changes and constant movement in the oboe. The movement reaches a slower, more relaxed section in which Vaughan Williams reintroduces the idea of the English pastoral setting.

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Premiered on February 27, 1814 in Vienna

Ludwig van Beethoven often wrote his symphonies in pairs. His fifth and sixth symphonies were written around the same time and even premiered at the same concert. His seventh and eighth symphonies were also written around the same time with their premieres just 3 months apart. As you compare his symphonies, it seems as though his odd-numbered symphonies often push limits while his even-numbered symphonies retreat towards the more classical style. Because of this, his even-numbered symphonies often get overshadowed by their neighboring counterparts.

Beethoven's Eighth Symphony was one of his favorites. He affectionately referred to it as "my little Symphony in F." When a student of his asked why the Eighth was less popular than the Seventh, Beethoven responded, "because the Eighth is so much better."

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93 was completed in 1812 and is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. It was premiered in Vienna in 1814 as part of a concert that included the Seventh Symphony. The piece is described as light and humorous despite the ongoing health issues and hearing loss that Beethoven was struggling with at the time.

The first movement (*Allegro vivace e con brio*) begins with a cheerful and buoyant opening theme with material that sounds like it should be used for a powerful ending rather than the opening of the piece. From this material a second theme emerges and Beethoven rushes through the movement until the extensive coda. Throughout the movement, Beethoven showcases a range of volume through his dynamics. The movement ends with hammer-like accents with the last measure matching the same material as that of the first.

The second movement (*Allegretto scherzando*) is not the usual slow movement familiar in other symphonies. It begins with the constant ticking of wind instruments. It is as though this movement is a parody of the metronome, which was invented around the same time by a friend of Beethoven.

The third movement (*Tempo di menuetto*) reverts from the scherzo form typical of the Romantic period to the minuet and trio form of the Classical period. However, Beethoven's version includes deliberate amusements with weird rhythm, unusual accents, and false downbeats.

The fast paced final movement (*Allegro vivace*) plays with a range of dynamics and continued humor. The movement begins with soft scurrying in the violins. Throughout the piece we hear unexpectedly loud notes that almost come off as wrong notes. The movement concludes with a long passage of loud tonic harmony in the coda.