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Concertos  
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BEETHOVEN  
PIANO CONCERTOS

ELIZABETH  
SOMBART **PIANO**



ROYAL  
PHILHARMONIC  
ORCHESTRA

PIERRE  
VALLET  
CONDUCTOR

**PIANO CONCERTOS Nos. 1 & 2**  
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

**Piano Concerto No. 1 in C, Op. 15**

- |          |                     |         |
|----------|---------------------|---------|
| <b>1</b> | I. Allegro con brio | [15.00] |
| <b>2</b> | II. Largo           | [13.34] |
| <b>3</b> | III. Rondo: Allegro | [9.46]  |

**Piano Concerto No. 2 in B Flat, Op. 19**

- |          |                           |         |
|----------|---------------------------|---------|
| <b>4</b> | I. Allegro con brio       | [14.35] |
| <b>5</b> | II. Adagio                | [10.47] |
| <b>6</b> | III. Rondo: Molto allegro | [6.38]  |

Total timings: [70.22]

ELIZABETH SOMBART Piano  
ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA  
PIERRE VALLET conductor

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# Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

## Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Op. 15 (c. 1796)

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Largo
- III. Rondo: Allegro

Beethoven's early musical career was linked inextricably with the piano, both as a performer and composer. His early lessons at the hands of his alcoholic father would have broken many a lesser child – he was regularly dragged from his bed for an impromptu tutorial or to perform in front of a drunken gathering. Late at night, neighbours reported seeing him practise 'standing on a low bench in front of his clavier, sobbing fitfully' as his father looked menacingly on. Beethoven dutifully made his concert debut aged seven, and three years later had his first composition published: a set of variations for solo piano.

Although phenomenally gifted, Beethoven was not a piano virtuoso in the classic tradition. He belonged to no particular school of playing and possessed a technique that while thoroughly effective when supporting his many tempestuous outbursts, was considered inelegant by contemporary standards. In 1787, he met Mozart in Vienna – the contrast between the two could hardly have been more marked.

Mozart was a dapper young man, well-dressed and outwardly frivolous, while Beethoven was intensely serious, with unkempt hair, bullish looks and largely ignorant of society etiquette. Mozart agreed to hear him play, however, and although bemused by his stormy musical temperament, recognised in him a kindred spirit: 'Watch this lad,' he commented, 'Some day, he will force the world to talk of him!'

From now on Beethoven's musical development progressed at a staggering rate. He moved to Vienna, had a series of indifferent consultations with Joseph Haydn and quickly realised that the only way forward was to win sponsorship from wealthy patrons. Accordingly, he dedicated his Op. 1 Piano Trios to the renowned admirer of chamber music, Count Moritz Lichnovsky. This shameless piece of flattery clearly had the desired effect for within a month of the trios' publication, Beethoven was invited to premiere three new piano sonatas (his Op. 2) at the Count's palace. In addition, he was given his own apartment in Lichnovsky's mansion, where the servants were given strict instructions to answer the young firebrand's bell even before the Count's.

By now Beethoven was already more than a match for any of his German contemporaries, as can be gathered from an account given in the magazine *Musikal* by Carl Junker in 1791: 'I also heard one of the greatest of pianists – the dear, good Beethoven ... I heard him extemporise in private; yes, I was even invited to propose a theme for him to vary. The greatness of this young man, as a virtuoso, may in my opinion be safely estimated from his almost inexhaustible wealth of ideas, the altogether unique expression in his playing, and the great powers of execution which he displays.' On 29 March 1795, Beethoven created a sensation with the premiere of his B Flat Piano Concerto (which became 'No. 2' in its revised form). Although the concerto known as 'No. 1' was composed shortly afterwards, it was the first to be published and so was awarded pride of place.

Beethoven had meanwhile made many personal enemies of pianists who had fallen by the wayside in comparison with his somewhat unruly but prodigious talent. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) his unpredictable behaviour and irascible outbursts, the aristocracy had taken him very much to their collective bosom. Indeed, such was his impact that by the turn of the century he had become fully established both as an independent pianist and composer, and can therefore be considered the first successful, major freelance musician.

Beethoven dedicated his First Piano Concerto to Countess Babette von Keglevics, a gifted blonde pupil with whom the 25-year-old composer was very much enamoured at the time. Cast in the standard three movements, it overflows with original touches, such as the very opening, where the militaristic first theme is sounded not as a trumpet call-to-arms (as would have been customary at the time) but by the string section playing *pianissimo*. The second main theme, announced by the first violins, then turns out to be little more than a decorated descending scale answered by a gently rising and falling chord sequence in the woodwind. Most surprising of all, the piano's very first entry has very little to do with this introductory material at all. Little wonder Beethoven retained a great deal of affection for this bracingly inventive movement, for which he wrote no fewer than three versions of the pianist's solo cadenza.

The central *Largo* is the longest of all Beethoven's concerto slow movements, its calm, flowing phrases providing the perfect antidote to the *Allegro con brio*'s bracing athleticism. For the finale, the composer lets his hair down with a scampering main theme introduced by the soloist and immediately taken up by the full orchestra, thereby reversing normal procedure. He saves his best joke till last, however, when just as it sounds as though the music has quietly petered out, he adds a final vivacious outburst that never fails to catch out the unwary listener.



**Piano Concerto No. 2 in B Flat, Op. 19**  
(c. 1795, rev. 1798)

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Adagio
- III. Rondo: Molto allegro

Beethoven was the single most influential figure in the history of Western music. Starting out with Mozart and Haydn as his spiritual mentors, he wrestled off the shackles of 18th-century Classicism, forging uncompromising musical landscapes with a visionary intensity that left most musicians quivering in his wake. Meanwhile, his lack of social etiquette set him on a collision course with even his most devoted patrons as well as a string of society-women, whom he was in the habit of falling hopelessly in love with. Not even the cruel onslaught of deafness could silence his noble creative spirit. For centuries music had lagged behind the other arts, but spurred on by Beethoven's iron-clad will, it found itself at the cutting edge of social change.

To see the young lion in full flow was an awesome spectacle. Pianos literally buckled under the relentless pressure exerted by his groundbreaking scores. In mid-performance hapless piano technicians would find themselves feverishly trying to prize away broken strings and hammers while Beethoven simply kept on going, pulverising the instrument into

submission. Here, at last, was someone completely in tune with the mood of the times.

Beethoven's earliest fully orchestrated work for piano and orchestra – a delightful Rondo in B Flat dating from around 1793 – was integrated initially into the burgeoning Second Concerto. The completed work was dated 'March 1795', the initial draft predating any known sketches for the First Concerto by at least seven years. It is only the fact that Beethoven subsequently revised the Second Concerto in 1798 and then published it *after* 'No. 1' (in December 1801) that has led to its somewhat misleading numbering.

On 29 March 1795, Beethoven created a sensation with what is widely assumed to have been the premiere of his B Flat Piano Concerto (destined to become 'No. 2' in its revised form). Typically, he was working on a replacement Rondo finale up until the last minute. According to a friend, it was completed just two days before the concert, 'and then while suffering from a pretty severe colic, which frequently afflicted him...In the afternoon sat four copyists to whom he handed sheet after sheet as soon as it was finished.' It was around this time that fellow-composer and pedagogue Carl Czerny reflected on Beethoven's pianism: 'In whatever company he might chance to be, he knew how to produce an effect upon every hearer, so that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break out into loud sobs.'

Beethoven's later dismissal of his Second Piano Concerto as 'not one of my best compositions' seems a little harsh. He was no doubt concerned at the time by its occasional nod in the direction of Haydn (whose teaching Beethoven had effectively rubbished) and, most especially, Mozart. Yet it is its unmistakably Beethovenian touches that give this high-spirited concerto its unique flavour.

Who, for example, but Beethoven would have so flouted convention by side-stepping the 'correct' key of the opening movement's second theme (F major) into the remote world of D Flat? No wonder many of the cognoscenti thought he was raving mad. One observer admired Beethoven's 'powerful and brilliant playing', yet was somewhat less taken with his 'daring deviations from one motive to another', which he felt 'weaken even his greatest compositions'.

The long-breathed central movement is no less groundbreaking in its expansive use of sonata form, but with the central 'development' section telescoped into a mere six bars. Where the soloist would normally have been expected to tastefully improvise around the main theme second time around, Beethoven circumvented the possibility of hackwork from second-rate performers by writing it out in full in the manuscript.

Perhaps finest of all is the madcap finale, whose main theme hilariously displaces the expected rhythmic profiling, so that what should fall naturally *before* the beat actually arrives on it. Beethoven points up the joke just before the end when he briefly appears to get the rhythm correctly sorted out, only now he seems to have strayed into the 'wrong' key (G major). The world of music had been turned topsy-turvy in an instant.

*Notes by Julian Haylock*

## BIOGRAPHIES

### ELIZABETH SOMBART

Born in Strasbourg, Elizabeth Sombart started studying the piano at the age of seven. She entered the conservatoire of her home town and gave her first public performance at eleven. After receiving the National Piano and Chamber Music First Prize, she left France to study in Buenos Aires with Bruno-Leonardo Gelber. Her training was completed with great masters such as Peter Feuchtwanger in London, Hilde Langer-Rühl in Vienna, and finally Sergiù Celibidache at the University of Mayence, with whom she studied musical phenomenology for ten years.

Elizabeth has performed in the world's most prestigious concert venues: Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw (Amsterdam), Suntory Hall (Tokyo), Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (Paris). In addition to solo and chamber music recitals, she has performed concertos



with L'Orchestre National de Lille and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

From a young age, Elizabeth has sought to share classical music with the most diverse audiences possible, and with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 1988, she created Fondation Résonance, which is active today in seven countries. One of the foundation's key goals is to bring classical music into the community, to institutions where it is most needed: hospitals, orphanages and prisons.

More than five hundred concerts are planned in these venues every year. Fondation Résonance also aims to create piano schools with the founding principles of free teaching, no exams, no competitions, no age restrictions, and using the teachings of the Résonance Pedagogy – the phenomenology of sound and gesture.

Elizabeth has recorded an extensive discography, published several books, and featured in a number of documentaries.

As a result of her expertise in musical phenomenology, she has a particular passion and reputation for interpreting the musical language of Chopin and she has recorded all Chopin's nocturnes. She has made well-received recordings of Chopin's two piano concertos with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as *Favourite Adagios*, a double CD of *adagio* movements from the great piano concertos, also with the RPO. Elizabeth has recently appeared with tenor Andrea Bocelli by invitation in special gala concerts in Bucharest and Fatima.

Elizabeth Sombart has been honoured in France with the ranks of Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite and Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres for lifetime achievements and services to music.

## **ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA**

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For more than seven decades the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) has been at the forefront of music-making in the UK. Its home base since 2004 at London's Cadogan Hall serves as a springboard for seven principal residencies as well as more than forty-five concerts per year in long-term partnership venues across the country, often in areas where access to live orchestral music is very limited. With a wider reach than any other UK large ensemble, the RPO has truly become Britain's national orchestra.

Throughout the regional programme, plus regular performances at Cadogan Hall, Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall and a hugely popular series at the Royal Albert Hall, and international touring engagements, the RPO remains committed to working with the finest conductors. In July 2018, the RPO announced Vasily Petrenko as the Orchestra's new Music Director, assuming the title of Music Director Designate in August 2020 prior to commencing the full role in August 2021. He joins the RPO's roster of titled conductors, which includes Pinchas Zukerman (Principal Guest Conductor), Alexander Shelley (Principal Associate Conductor) and Grzegorz Nowak (Permanent Associate Conductor).



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In 2018, RPO Resound, the Orchestra's community and education programme, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Throughout its history it has thrived on taking music into the heart of the regions that the Orchestra serves, working with a variety of participants in a range of settings including working with young people, the homeless and recovering stroke patients.

Although the RPO embraces twenty-first-century opportunities, including appearances with pop stars and on video game, film and television soundtracks, its artistic priority remains paramount: the making of great music at the highest level for the widest possible audience. As the RPO proudly looks to its future, its versatility and high standards mark it out as one of today's most open-minded, forward-thinking symphony orchestras. For more information, please visit: [www.rpo.co.uk](http://www.rpo.co.uk)

## PIERRE VALLET

French conductor Pierre Vallet studied conducting and the theory of phenomenology in music with Sergiu Celibidache, piano with Louis Hiltbrand in Geneva and Peter Feuchtwanger in London. He is a graduate of L'Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris and the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris.

Praised for the elegance and intensity of his interpretations, Vallet is a frequent guest conductor with the world's great opera companies. Performance highlights include *Madama Butterfly* and *Faust* at the Metropolitan Opera; *Tannhäuser* and *Carmen* at L'Opéra National de Paris; *Samson et Dalila* and *Carmen* at The Dallas Opera; *Orfeo* at Opera Theater Saint Louis; *Don Carlo* at the Lithuanian National Opera Theater; *La Juive* at the Göteborg Opera, Sweden; *Faust* at the Gran Teatro del Liceu, Barcelona. His North American premiere performance of *Persée et Andromède* by Ibert was selected by the New York Times



as one of the top ten classical performances in New York in 2016.

He has enjoyed a long-term musical partnership with Seiji Ozawa, with whom he has worked closely on some forty operatic productions throughout Japan, the US and Europe. For the past 21 years, he has been associated with the Metropolitan Opera.

Maestro Vallet's symphonic work includes appearances at the RPO in London; the Camerata Royal in Bucharest; the Filarmonica Brasov; the National Philharmonic of Chisinau, Moldova; the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra; and the Spoleto Festival USA. His discography includes two recordings with the RPO and Elizabeth Sombart of the Chopin piano concertos and a collection of Favorite Adagios of piano concertos, as well as Cendrillon by Nicola Isouard.

As a pianist, he has performed in duo recitals in both the US and Europe with some of the world's most renowned singers, including Natalie Dessay, Maria Guleghina, Denyce Graves (at the White House), Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Roberto Alagna (at the Vienna State Opera), Nancy Herrera (at the Teatro Solis in Montevideo) and Joyce di Donato.

A committed educator, Pierre Vallet is a sought-after lecturer and guest teacher at the world's premier training institutions. In addition to his work with the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program at the Met, he has been a regular visitor to the Washington Young Artist program, the Steans Music Institute in Chicago, the Tanglewood Music Center, the Wolf Trap Opera Company, the Houston Grand Opera Studio.

Recorded in Cadogan Hall, London on 14th & 15th July (Concerto No. 1) and 16th & 17th July (Concerto No. 2) 2019.

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