



# BEETHOVEN'S FIRST

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THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21, AT 7 PM

FRIDAY & SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22 & 23, AT 8 PM

## NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

GIANCARLO GUERRERO, *conductor*

ANDREW RISINGER, *organ*

### IGOR STRAVINSKY

*Symphonies of Wind Instruments*

**10 minutes**

### FRANCIS POULENC

*Concerto for Organ, Strings  
and Timpani - 22 minutes*

*Andante*

*Allegro giocoso*

*Subito andante moderato*

*Tempo allegro; Molto agitato*

*Très calme; Lent*

*Tempo de l'allegro initial*

*Tempo introduction; Largo*

### LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

*Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21 - 28 minutes*

*I. Adagio molto - Allegro con brio*

*II. Andante cantabile con moto*

*III. Menuetto: Allegro molto e vivace*

*IV. Finale: Adagio - Allegro molto e vivace*

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*The performance of the Poulenc  
Organ Concerto is presented in memory  
of Mr. William Henry "Hank" Woerner, Jr.*

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## PROGRAM SUMMARY

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What defines a composer's unique sound? Our own era has embraced the validity of picking and choosing from styles across the spectrum of music history. Igor Stravinsky anticipated this development in his long career. He created a style that, as with Pablo Picasso (one of his early collaborators), involved changing styles, going through a number of makeovers that baffled those who attempted to pigeonhole his music. Stravinsky vehemently rejected the Romantic notion of art as subjective expression of emotions – yet through all of these changes, the result was always identifiably Stravinskian. *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* lies on the cusp between the style that initially made him world famous (through such works as *The Rite of Spring*) and a new style of detached clarity that became known as Neoclassicism.

Stravinsky was warmly supportive of his younger colleague Francis Poulenc, who adopted an attitude of debonair charm and playful irony that fit in well with the anti-Romantic, pleasure-seeking tenor of Paris in the 1920s. Then, a profound spiritual experience in the 1930s led to a dramatic shift in Poulenc's priorities that affected his style. Both of these coexist, with all their glorious contradictions, in the Organ Concerto Poulenc wrote for an aristocratic patroness. Its unusual soundscape, meanwhile, complements the harsher timbres of the string-less Stravinsky score that opens the program.

There is a longstanding convention of trying to make sense of Beethoven's changing styles by assigning them to three periods ("early," "middle," and "late"). But the artificiality of this device becomes apparent with milestone compositions like the First Symphony. Like *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, this work can be seen both as a gesture of farewell (in this case, to the 18th century) and one that proudly greets the future with gestures that anticipate the composer to come.

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# IGOR STRAVINSKY

## *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*

Born on June 17, 1882,  
in Oranienbaum, Russia

Died on April 6, 1971,  
in New York City

**Composed:**  
1920; revised/  
reorchestrated  
in 1947

**Estimated  
length:**  
10 minutes



**First performance:**

June 10, 1921, in London, with  
Serge Koussevitzky conducting

**First Nashville Symphony  
performance:**

January 16, 1978, under the  
direction of Michael Charry  
at War Memorial Auditorium.

The *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* dates from one of Stravinsky's most significant transitional periods. He had become internationally famous in the years just before the First World War for his ballet scores that draw on Russian themes. Calling for an enormous orchestra, their revolutionary approach to harmony, timbre, and rhythm (above all in the history-changing *Rite of Spring*) created a sound world that seems light years away from the hard-edged "objectivity" and textural economy of the new, so-called neoclassical phase that emerged in the 1920s. Stravinsky's music in this later style self-consciously mimicked — but also reimagined — styles from the past, adapting traditional forms and processes such as variations or fugues.

The *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* from 1920 lies on the cusp between both worlds. The critic who first dubbed Stravinsky's stylistic shift of the 1920s "neoclassicism" (fellow Russian emigré Boris de Schloezer) derived his definition of the concept from this piece specifically. He explained neoclassicism as a style limited to "a system of sounds alone that follow one another and group themselves

according to purely musical affinities" — the diametrical opposite of hyper-expressive Romanticism and its association with "emotions, feelings, desires, aspirations." Stravinsky himself approved of this view of *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*.

At the same time, aspects of the earlier Russian phase permeate the *Symphonies* as well. In fact, its original inspiration was indebted to Russian Orthodox sources. The piece was at first intended to serve as a kind of secular requiem, using echoes of the Orthodox memorial service. Claude Debussy's death in 1918 deeply affected Stravinsky, and he readily agreed to contribute a short chorale for solo piano to a memorial anthology published in 1920 as a tribute to the deceased French composer. Stravinsky subsequently decided to expand on the chorale, incorporating other ideas he had been sketching for woodwind and brass instruments; he finished the single-movement work in the same year. Because it was so poorly received at its London premiere in 1921, the composer set *Symphonies* aside until the mid-1940s, publishing a revised version in 1947.

## WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Stravinsky's use of the plural "symphonies" in the title does not refer to the classical genre as practiced by Beethoven et al. Instead, he evokes the etymological sense of the word (which is derived from Greek and means "sounding together"). In this sense of "sounding together," *Symphonies* groups and juxtaposes varying blends of wind instruments. Along with the chorale music that was the original source, Stravinsky assembled independent fragments of material, which he spliced together in the manner of a montage (to borrow a term from cinema, then a newly emerging art). Stravinsky's neoclassicism rejects the linear logic of classical music that is especially determinative in Beethoven. The result is a "three-dimensional," sculptural quality.

Two ideas dominate at the beginning: a high, piercing cry from the woodwinds, resembling bell sounds, and then fragments of the somber brass chorale. Other motifs are introduced in block-like fashion. The chorale idea continually comes back, and *Symphonies* draws to a close with a full statement of the chorale that had appeared separately as the Debussy memorial. Stravinsky referred to the piece as "an austere ritual which is unfolded in terms of short litanies between different groups of homogenous instruments ... music that is not meant to 'please' an audience nor to arouse its passions."

*Scored for 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, and tuba.*



# FRANCIS POULENC

## *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani*

Born on January 7, 1899, in Paris

Died on January 30, 1963,  
in Paris

**Composed:**  
1934-38

**Estimated  
length:**  
22 minutes



**First performance:** Private premiere on December 16, 1938, at the salon of the Princess de Polignac, with Nadia Boulanger conducting; public premiere on June 1939 in Paris, with Roger Désormière conducting the Paris Symphony; Maurice Duruflé was the soloist on both occasions

**First Nashville Symphony performance:**

October 13, 1989, under the direction of Kenneth Schermerhorn at War Memorial Auditorium

“Its profound beauty haunts me,” wrote the Princess Edmonde de Polignac of the *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani*. Born in the United States as Winnaretta Singer and an heiress to her father’s fortune (he invented the Singer sewing machine), the Princess belonged to a circle of fashionable, art-loving aristocrats in Paris with whom Francis Poulenc blended quite comfortably. The Princess, like Poulenc himself, was primarily attracted to her own sex, her marriage to the Prince having been arranged by the man who served as the actual model for Marcel Proust’s fictive Baron de Charlus. But the de Polignac couple shared a passion for music, and their legendary salon in Paris — another source for Proust — became a crucible for new music by the likes of Debussy and Ravel. After her husband’s death, the Princess “Winnie” continued to commission leading composers, including Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, and her friend Poulenc.

In 1932, Poulenc had written his *Concerto for Two Pianos* on a commission from her — a work that dates from near the end of his period of youthful adventure. Himself born into a wealthy family involved in the

budding pharmaceutical industry, Poulenc had risen to fame as a sparkling, saucy *bon vivant* amid the free-wheeling spirit of 1920s Paris. One contemporary described him as a “hooligan,” and young Francis was attracted to the irreverent playfulness of Erik Satie, who had made a career of puncturing holes in the armor of self-important artists. Poulenc also teasingly confessed a taste for “adorable bad music” passed on from his beloved mother, the first to give him piano lessons.

Recognizing the paradoxical sides to his personality, Poulenc alluded to the image of the double-headed Janus — an image depicting the contradictory impulses that pulled him in seemingly opposite directions. The stylish and fun-loving composer had a taste for luxury and the material comforts of life, but in 1936 he went through a powerful conversion experience that reawakened his spiritual awareness.

This life-changing event occurred while Poulenc was writing the *Organ Concerto*; he was shaken to his core by the sudden death of a friend in a violent car accident. Poulenc undertook a pilgrimage to the historic shrine of the wooden Black Madonna in Rocamadour in southwestern France and

experienced an epiphany that caused him to embrace again the Catholic faith of his childhood. As a result, Poulenc was inspired to write some of the most glorious sacred choral music of the past century as well as the remarkable opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*, about a group of nuns during the Reign of Terror phase of the French Revolution.

The Organ Concerto encompasses the extreme facets of Poulenc's musical personality: the fan of gorgeous tunes who also loves to shock and the pious composer seeking to induce a spirit of intimate contemplation. After another candidate turned down the commission, Princess de Polignac asked Poulenc to write something for small orchestra with a relatively easy solo organ part she would be able to play herself. But in contrast to the intentionally amusing Concerto for Two Pianos, he found himself composing more in the vein of "a Poulenc en route to the cloister," as he put it. The Organ Concerto as a result became more ambitious and time-consuming than his other works up to that point. The process of creating it cost a great deal of soul-searching, as Poulenc documented in letters. "I keep seeing this in terms of a ladder, straight and difficult to climb ... the hours of doubt are dreadful," he wrote.

## WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Organ Concerto is designed as a single span consisting of seven interlinked sections with dramatic changes in tempo. A vast historical gap of more than two centuries separates Poulenc's work from the time when organ concertos were popular during the Baroque era (as represented in the work of such composers as Handel), and Poulenc launches his contribution by deliberately evoking a famous organ piece by J.S. Bach

(a favorite of the Princess). This powerfully dramatic gesture starts a slow introduction, underpinned at first by the timpani and then joined by the strings.

The first of three fast sections follows and introduces more thematic ideas that Poulenc cleverly develops later in the piece. While the concerto makes effective use of dramatic contrasts (in tempo, volume, and even style), these ideas build up an underlying sense of coherence and unity. Most of the sections last just a few minutes, but the ensuing slower music is the longest and closer in mood to the kind of Romanticism Poulenc had once parodied. Serene passages alternate with more agitated music until Poulenc reprises the arresting gesture of the opening. But the final section transcends references to music of the past with some of Poulenc's most affecting and original personal touches, coming to an end on an ecstatic chord, at full blast, that is neither major nor minor — as paradoxical as Poulenc himself.

*Scored for solo organ, timpani, and strings.*

# LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

## Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21

Born on December 16, 1770,  
in Bonn, Germany

Died on March 26, 1827,  
in Vienna

**Composed:**  
1799-1800

**Estimated  
length:**  
28 minutes



**First performance:**

April 2, 1800, with the  
composer conducting

**First Nashville Symphony  
performance:**

October 28, 1947, under the  
direction of William Strickland  
at War Memorial Auditorium.

In 1792, when Ludwig van Beethoven was nearly into his 20s, he did what any ambitious composer of the time needed to do to have any real chance of making their dreams a reality: he moved from the provinces to the feverish, competitive, musical, and imperial capital city of Vienna, far from his birthplace to the West in Bonn. Mozart had died only the year before, and Haydn was in the middle of his final, glorious outburst of symphonic creativity, which elevated the genre to new heights.

They were by no means the only shapers of the symphony and they were certainly not the only composers who influenced Beethoven, but their powerful reputations elevated its status. Mozart and Haydn were thus key figures in transforming the symphony from a genre associated with entertainment or, on occasion, ceremony, into something more ambitious and self-reliant. Their accomplishments stood as prominent models — along with others by composers associated with the new, revolutionary movement in France — while young Beethoven worked his way methodically through the major genres of the era.

Beethoven began with chamber music

and piano sonatas, preparing the way painstakingly for his first successful venture into writing a symphony (a pattern Brahms would repeat to an even more extreme degree). The occasion he chose for the premiere of his First Symphony was his first major benefit concert in Vienna, on April 2, 1800 — an event for which works by Mozart and Haydn were programmed alongside those of the newcomer.

We might even return to the image of the two-headed Janus that Poulenc called to mind. The First Symphony has been called “a fitting farewell to the 18th century,” and, appropriately, Beethoven even dedicated the score to his early patron Gottfried van Swieten. A music-loving Vienna diplomat, Swieten cultivated an obsession with J.S. Bach that awakened the interest of Mozart and other contemporaries to the hidden potential of this lineage from the past. Yet farewells can also imply greetings. While Beethoven here assimilates the high Classical style of his predecessors, the First Symphony already contains traits that would become recognizable components of the unique symphonic language he forged in the new century.

## WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

In the very opening measures of his slow introduction, Beethoven plays a game of surprise and suspense by delaying a statement of the Symphony's home key of C major. It already becomes a point of arrival rather than embarkation. This strategy intensifies the sense of inevitability when the music speeds up for the main part of the movement with a theme that hammers home the pivotal note C. Beethoven uses the architectural design that Haydn in particular had fine-tuned in his inventive symphonies, but with a fresh take. To bring closure to the movement, for example, the final section is turned into an extended occasion for reaffirming the home key with even greater force. Here, already, is the Beethoven signature — the signature, at least, of the great public works such as the symphonies — of keeping the end always somehow in view, no matter how thick the plot becomes.

The combined sonority of timpani and trumpet in the Andante is an unusual touch for a Classical slow movement. Alongside the conventional lyricism of this music, Beethoven accompanies it with a simple two-note pattern that recurrently fades in and out of the foreground throughout the movement.

In the last two movements, Haydn's influence

especially looms — no matter how much Beethoven scorned his work as a teacher, he could not break the spell the older composer's ingenious inventiveness and sense of humor cast over him. The third movement is labeled "Minuet" but in fact is Beethoven's first symphonic scherzo — and the most overtly original movement of the entire First Symphony. The simple rising-scale pattern of the main theme foreshadows the final movement, in which an ascending scale sets things in motion like a spun top.

Beethoven's humor is especially delectable in the deceptive "prelude" to the finale. At the beginning of the work, he illustrated the process of composition by feeling his way through chord progressions. Here, Beethoven allows us to hear, in a kind of paint-by-numbers game, how he gradually elongates the scale until it is ready to take off as an ear-catching theme on its own terms. The finale is a study in controlling, taming, and again letting loose the animated energy of that thematic idea. Beethoven ends the work with a thrilling mood of unassailable confidence, underscoring his declaration of independence as a symphonist.

*Scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.*

*— Thomas May is the Nashville Symphony's program annotator.*

