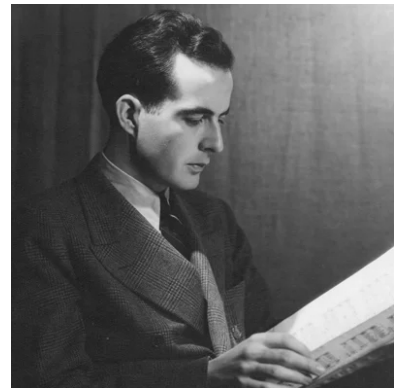


Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Subscription Program No. 8 – Laura Jackson conducts Beethoven's fifth
May 7-8-9, 2027

This program, conducted by Music Director Designate Laura Jackson, opens with a witty and youthful work by Samuel Barber, his *Overture to "The School for Scandal."* We are delighted to welcome back the wonderfully eclectic string trio Time for Three (Tf3): violinists Nicolas (Nick) Kendall and Charles Yang, and bassist Ranaan Meyer. This genre-bending group, whose performances not only include string playing and vocals, also embrace a huge range of musical styles, and they were sensational last time they performed with the MSO in April 2025! Here they play a work written expressly for them, Jennifer Higdon's 2007 *Concerto 4-3*. After intermission, the trio returns with a pair of more popular style songs. We close this 101st season with Beethoven's great fifth symphony.

Barber composed this work when he was still a student. It was his first orchestral piece, and received a premiere by the Philadelphia Orchestra.



Samuel Barber

Born: March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Died: January 23, 1981, New York City.

Overture to "The School for Scandal," Op. 5

- **Composed:** 1931-33.
- **Premiere:** August 30, 1933, by the Philadelphia Orchestra, under the direction of Alexander Smallens.
- **Previous MSO performances:** 1997 and 2008.
- **Duration:** 9:00.

This concert overture was inspired by a satirical 18th-century play.

Background

Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 1777 play *The School for Scandal* takes place in the jaded social circle of the aptly named Lady Sneerwell. This comedy of ill-manners centers on the eccentricities and malicious gossip of Sheridan's upper-class characters. In the score to his *Overture to "The School for Scandal"* Barber notes

only that the piece was “suggested” by Sheridan’s play, and though there is no explicit program, the wit and fast-paced nature of the music certainly resonate with the nature of the play. Barber began work on this overture in 1931, while he was still a student at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. During summer break, Barber made an extended trip to Italy, most of which he spent staying with his partner Giancarlo Menotti and Menotti’s family. He wrote home to his parents that he had begun a “new piece for orchestra” and that work was going well. The premiere did not take place until two years later, when the Philadelphia Orchestra performed the work at one of its outdoor concerts at Robin Hood Dell. The *Overture to “The School for Scandal”* was a landmark in Barber’s career: it was not only his first completed orchestral work and his first work to be performed by a major orchestra, it also won the prestigious Beams Prize for composition (the second of his student works to win this award).

The work is organized in a strict sonata form.

What You’ll Hear

The overture is set in a classical sonata form. The introduction is a brilliant fanfare for the entire orchestra and contains a little two-note descending motive that is the seed of the overture’s main theme. This theme is first stated very quietly by the violins. (Barber directs that the violins are to play at the very tips of their bows.) It is a quirky, offbeat little jig that slowly builds in intensity. The second theme, introduced by solo oboe, is gradually augmented by flourishes from the other woodwinds. After a short development section and conventional recapitulation, the overture ends with a *fortissimo* coda, a fugue-style version of the jaunty main theme.

Higdon, one of America's leading composers, wrote this work in 2007 for Time for Three..

Jennifer Higdon

Born: December 31, 1962, Brooklyn, New York.



Concerto 4-3

- **Composed:** 2007.
- **Premiere:** January 10, 2008, by Time for Three with the Philadelphia Orchestra, under Christoph Eschenbach.
- **Previous MSO performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 23:00.

Higdon grew up in Tennessee, hearing bluegrass style and has channeled the experience in multiple pieces, including this one.

Background

Jennifer Higdon is among America's most successful contemporary composers. Born in Brooklyn, she studied flute at Bowling Green State University and composition at both the University of Pennsylvania and at the Curtis Institute, where she taught until 2021. In 2010, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her *Violin Concerto*, one of many honors she has garnered in the past twenty years. Her first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the prestigious International Opera Award for Best World Premiere in 2016—the first American opera to do so in the award's history. Within the past few years, Higdon has had successful premieres of her *Double Percussion Concerto* with the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the *Cold Mountain Suite* with the Delaware Symphony, and *The Absence, Remember*, a choral work commissioned by several choruses. She is among America's most frequently-programmed living composers, and her *blue cathedral* is among the most often-played pieces of contemporary orchestral music, receiving well over 600 performances since its premiere in 2000.

This work is laid out in three movements:

- A wild opening, linked to the next movement by a long trio passage.
- A serene slow movement.
- A fierce, virtuosic finale.

What You'll Hear

Higdon provides the following comments on *Concerto 4-3*:

Concerto 4-3 is a three-movement concerto, featuring two violins and a bass, which uses the language of classical music, with dashes of bluegrass technique. The work is divided into three movements, with the option to perform a cadenza between the first and second movements. The movement titles refer to rivers that run through the Smoky Mountains (where growing up, I heard quite a bit of bluegrass): *The Shallows*, *Little River*, and food in it. I wanted to reference the Smokies, because East Tennessee was the first place that I really experienced bluegrass (or as they call it there, “mountain music”).

The first movement, *The Shallows*, incorporates unique extended techniques (a manner of playing beyond the normal way of playing these instruments) that mimic everything from squeaking mice to electric guitars. These sounds resemble parts of the mountain rivers that move in shallow areas, where small rocks and pebbles make for a rapid ride that moves a rafter quickly from one side of the river to the other.

The second movement, *Little River*, is slow-moving and lyrical, very much in hymn-like fashion. This movement reflects the beauty of Little River as it flows through Townsend and Walland, Tennessee. At times there is real serenity and a majestic look to the water, with no movement obvious on the pure, glassy surface.

The third movement, *Roaring Smokies*, is a rapid-fire virtuosic movement that shifts and moves very much like a raging river (those wild mountain waters that pour out of the mountains). It is fun to swim in those cold waters, but your attention must always be alert, as danger lurks...the water goes where it wants and will take you with it.

While *Concerto 4-3* is written in the Classical vein, with certain bluegrass techniques incorporated into the fabric of the piece: emphasis on offbeats, open strings, and slides. But the language is definitely tonal, 21st-century and American-sounding in style. This work was commissioned by The Philadelphia Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony, and the Wheeling Symphony.

Time for Three performs two shorter pieces, starting with their version of Frankie Valli’s 1967 hit *Can’t Take My Eyes Off You*. This familiar romantic song was written by **Bob Crewe** and Valli’s Four Seasons bandmate **Bob Gaudio**. In this arrangement, **Charles Yang** gets to show off his formidable pop singer chops!

Yang's song *Joy*, which has an uplifting message of joy even in dark circumstances, has been in their repertoire for several years. (It was performed as an encore last time they played with the MSO.)

Certainly the best-known of Beethoven's orchestral works is the stunning fifth symphony. Beginning with the unforgettable four-note motive that dominates the first movement, Beethoven continuously develops his musical ideas through a lyrical slow movement, a fierce scherzo, and a triumphant finale.



Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 17, 1770 (baptism date), Bonn, Germany.

Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

- **Composed:** Between 1804 and 1808.
- **Premiere:** December 22, 1808, at the Theatre an der Wein in Vienna.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1929, 1948, 1952, 1970, 1983, 1997, 2004, and 2011.
- **Duration:** 34:00.

“It is merely astonishing and grandiose.”

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

This was composed at the same time as his (very different!) *Symphony No. 6*, the “Pastoral.”

Background

Although preliminary sketches of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* date from as early as 1804, the bulk of the work was written in 1807-08, at roughly the same time as the *Symphony No. 6* (heard on our October concert). Both symphonies were performed for the first time at a benefit concert in Vienna on December 22, 1808. The program for this landmark (and marathon) event also included excerpts from his *Mass in C* and the concert aria *Ah, perfido*, together with premieres of two works with Beethoven himself at the piano, the *Piano Concerto No. 4* and the hastily-composed *Choral Fantasy*. After a bit of initial resistance from audiences and his fellow musicians—this was, after all, a truly *avant garde* work—the

Symphony No.5 was recognized as a masterpiece and has remained the single most familiar of Beethoven's works since then.

This was a remarkable work for its time...or any time. Though not as long as his groundbreaking "Eroica" symphony of 1803, this work is played by an expanded orchestra that includes instruments seldom heard in earlier symphonies: piccolo, contrabassoon, and trombones. Beethoven was obviously proud of this innovation, and wrote to Count Franz von Oppersdorf that "...this combination of instruments will make more noise, and what is more, a more pleasing noise than six kettledrums!" Also new is the degree to which all of the four movements are linked thematically. The famous four-note motive of the opening movement reappears in all three successive movements, and nearly all the main musical ideas are linked in some way.

The symphony is laid out in four movements:

- A fierce movement in sonata form, focused on exhaustive development of a single motive.
- A free set of variations.
- A powerful scherzo movement that links directly into the finale.
- A glorious finale that ends with a jubilant coda.

What You'll Hear

There is no more recognizable motive in Western music than the opening four notes of the first movement. Whether or not Beethoven attached a specific meaning to this motto is unclear. His first biographer, Anton Schindler reported that Beethoven referred to this motive as "Fate knocking at the door," but this may be apocryphal. Later times have attached *all* sorts of meanings to it. For example, during World War II, because of its identity with the Morse Code "V," it became the musical emblem of Allied victory. At the same time, it was viewed as one of the most purely "German" nationalistic works by the Nazis. In purely musical terms, however, Beethoven's use of this rhythm in the opening movement is a work of genius. With two statements of this four-note motto, Beethoven brusquely tosses aside the stately Classical tradition of long, slow introductions, and jumps directly into the body of the movement (*Allegro con brio*). The opening theme is almost entirely spun out from the motto, and even the second theme, stated sweetly by the strings, is brazenly announced by the motto from the horns. The motto is also the focus of the development section, which includes some stunning antiphonal effects. The headlong rush of the recapitulation is abruptly broken by a brief oboe cadenza, seemingly at odds with the nature of this movement, but actually a logical continuation of the main theme. Beethoven reserves his most savage fury for the

coda, the longest single section of this movement, and another section of intense development.

The second movement (*Andante con moto*) is a very freely-constructed theme and variations. The theme is laid out first by violas and cellos and then more robustly by full orchestra. After three imaginative variations, Beethoven launches into a section of very free development, beginning with a lovely pastoral passage from the woodwinds. The scherzo (*Allegro*) begins mysteriously in the low strings, but soon picks up as much power as the opening movement, with a statement of the motto by the horns. The central trio moves from minor to major, and has a blustering theme in the lower strings developed in fugal style. When the main idea returns, it is strangely muted, and it quickly becomes apparent that this movement is not going to end in any conventional way. In place of a coda, there is a long and mysterious interlude, building gradually towards the most glorious moment in this work: the triumphant C Major chords that begin the finale.

The fourth movement (*Allegro*) is where Beethoven suddenly augments the orchestra with trombones and contrabassoon. This orchestral effect, probably inspired by contemporary opera, is stunning. (Please spare a good thought for the principal trombonist, who has to sit patiently through three movements to enter on a very high C!) The opening group of themes, stated by full orchestra, is noble and forceful and the second group, played by strings and woodwinds is more lyrical, but no less powerful. The development focuses on the second group of themes, expanding this material enormously. Just as the development section seems to be finished, there is a reminiscence of the scherzo—bewildering at first, but then perfectly logical as it repeats the movement's transitional passage and leads to the return of the main theme. While the recapitulation is rather conventionally laid out, the vast coda continues to break new ground. As in the development section, things seem to be winding to close when Beethoven takes an unexpected turn: in this case a quickening of tempo to end the symphony in a mood of grand jubilation.

The Last Word Goes to Berlioz

According to an account by Hector Berlioz, he brought his former teacher Jean-François Le Seur to an early performance of the *Symphony No. 5* in Paris. After the final bars, the old man was so excited by the piece that his head was reeling, and he wryly complained that: "One should not be permitted to write such music." Berlioz replied: "Calm yourself—it will not be done often."

