THE CHELSEA SYMPHONY

Beethoven's Eroica
November 6 & 7, 2026

PROGRAM NOTES

AGITATO
Aaron Dai

Eight years ago, I wrote a piece called *Four Miniatures for a Dark Age*, which was a direct response to the first Trump administration and its alarming actions and rhetoric. After the Chelsea Symphony premiered the work in January 2019, several people encouraged me to write more of it…to expand the vignettes into fuller stories. But what initially felt like a charge of sorts faded as the politics in the country seemed to shift in a less harrowing direction over the next couple of years.

Well, we are now in the midst of another dark age, and for me, the signs could not have been clearer for an expansion of that original suite. Agitato is a fleshing out of the first miniature (by the same name), and it begins with the original frenetic jittering in ⅞ time between the violins. The prominent entrance of the trumpets heralds the official beginning of the new material, followed soon after by the low strings and bassoons suggesting a second theme. This theme is tossed about the orchestra before it eventually receives a more formal presentation by a clarinet in the slower middle section.

--Aaron Dai

CELLO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN A MINOR, OP. 33
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Camille Saint-Saëns was one of the most gifted and versatile musicians of the 19th century. A child prodigy, he gave his Paris debut at ten, playing Mozart and Beethoven concertos from memory, and later served as organist of the Église de la Madeleine, where he was renowned for his improvisations. He was also a conductor and writer, with passions extending into science, astronomy, and travel.

Composed in 1872 and premiered in Paris in January 1873, the concerto was written for the cellist Auguste Tolbecque. Although it falls into three connected sections, it is played without pause, as a single continuous span in which each section grows out of the last. Its themes recur

and transform, a Lisztian approach that also recalls Schumann's single-movement Cello Concerto.

- **Allegro non troppo**. The concerto begins *in medias res*: a single sharp orchestral chord flashes like a bolt of lightning, and the cello plunges in headlong in response, swirling into a thunderstorm of its own. The urgent, restless opening displays the cello's full range from the very first moment. Hints of a warm four-note theme emerge as the storm clears, but the movement remains tumultuous, with scattered showers as the cello travels up and down the instrument. By the end of the first section, the music practically floats into a dream.
- **Allegretto con moto**. The second section shows Saint-Saëns' French delicacy at its finest. The muted strings tiptoe into a minuet to introduce the cello with another four-note theme, serving as a launching point into a delightful dance with the orchestra. The cello has a brief, flowing cadenza that blossoms into a full melody before the dream comes to an end.
- **Molto Allegro**. The final section resumes the turbulent storm and develops that four-note theme into a delicate, syncopated three-note figure. The writing expands into the most virtuosic passages of the piece, then revisits the syncopated theme in recapitulation before turning to a triumphant A major to conclude the concerto.

The concerto remains a staple of the cello repertoire and is often named by cellists among the most rewarding concertos to perform: lyrical, brilliant, and idiomatic, yet never overstuffed. It sits alongside Saint-Saëns' best-loved works, including the Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor (1880) and "The Swan" from *Carnival of the Animals* (1886), itself a cello showpiece. One of his less frequently played but equally beloved works is the Organ Symphony (1886), a fitting piece for a composer who clearly wanted to give a starring role to the instrument he had played for so many years.

--Evan Wood

FLAUTINO CONCERTO IN C MAJOR, RV 443 (1729)

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

This concerto for flautino, strings and basso continuo was likely composed while Vivaldi was employed at the Seminario dell'Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, the orphanage for girls that increasingly came to promote musical talent. Vivaldi wrote a large number of works for the young musicians to play at their concerts on Sundays and holidays.

Among his more than 500 concertos, Vivaldi only wrote three for the flautino. No convincing explanation has yet been found as to which instrument he had in mind. During the Baroque period, it usually denoted a recorder of small size (most likely a sopranino, which sounds an octave higher than the alto recorder). Vivaldi later allowed the concerto to be played (in G major) on a soprano recorder. Since the late 18th century, it has been a favorite among (transverse) flute and piccolo players as well.

The concerto in C Major is virtuosic, but makes at least one concession to the instrument: it makes sparing use of the recorder's lowest notes, which are its weakest. The first movement, Allegro, opens energetically with a ritornello for the main body of instruments, leading to an incredible display of agility by the soloist. The movement continues with considerable rhythmic drive, including further demanding solo episodes. The slow movement, Largo, is a gorgeous showcase for the soloist's lyrical abilities. The third movement, Allegro molto, restores the ritornello format. In the contrasting episodes, the soloist indulges in trills, arpeggios and rapid triplets, interrupted by brief passages for the tutti to give the soloist a chance for breath.

--Dirk Wels

THE LARK ASCENDING

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Ralph Vaughan Williams was a key figure in reviving English composition during the first half of the 20th century. He trained at the Royal College of Music and at Cambridge, then with Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris. Across his symphonies, concertos, operas, ballets, and hymns, he is best known for combining folk songs, hymnody, and Elizabethan music with themes inspired by the Baroque and Impressionist periods. His works inspired the likes of Benjamin Britten and William Walton.

Vaughan Williams drafted *The Lark Ascending* in 1914, then put it away for five years. At age 41, he enlisted in World War I as a wagon orderly in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Returning to composition in 1919, he revised the piece, finishing it in December 1920 at Kings Weston, near Bristol, with the violinist Marie Hall, to whom the piece is dedicated. Hall premiered the original violin-and-piano version that month at Shirehampton, and the orchestral version at the Queen's Hall in London on 14 June 1921.

The title comes from George Meredith's 1881 poem, twelve lines of which he inscribed at the head of the score:
He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.
For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup,
And he the wine which overflows
To lift us with him as he goes.
Till lost on his aërial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

The piece opens with sustained chords in the strings and winds. The violin enters alone as the lark: repeated rising intervals, then arpeggios that stretch out as they climb. From these the first theme emerges, introspective and folk-like, with the orchestra joining quietly underneath. The solo cadenza returns, after which flute and clarinet lead the woodwinds into a dance-like second theme. The full orchestra takes it up, though the scoring stays restrained throughout. Later, the soloist holds a trill while the winds answer with bird calls of their own. The violin then climbs into cadenza passages above the orchestra, often read as the lark circling over open country. Another solo lark episode leads to the reprise of the original theme, finally stated by the full strings. At the end, the violin returns to its rising intervals and thins out, lost, as Meredith puts it, on his aërial rings.

--Léa Bourgade

SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN E-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 55 "EROICA"

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Few works in the classical repertoire have influenced and reshaped subsequent symphonic music as much as Beethoven's Third Symphony. In 1802, while staying in Heiligenstadt, the composer wrote a famous, unsent letter addressed to his brothers, confronting his growing deafness and its psychological and social implications. Beethoven, who had contemplated suicide, stated that "it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce." His faith in art to help him overcome the struggles of life gave rise to what he called a "new path", and between 1802 and 1804, Beethoven wrote a work of unprecedented scope, length, orchestration, formal design, and harmonic and rhythmic complexity: a revolutionary piece that would set the composer and his experience at the center of artistic creation.

Although the truthfulness of accounts of the Eroica's genesis may be disputed, the most enduring is Beethoven's original dedication of the symphony to Napoleon Bonaparte. As a firm believer in Enlightenment ideals and the French Revolution, the composer revered the French revolutionary leader as Europe's savior. However, when Napoleon crowned himself Emperor in 1804, Beethoven, in a rage, exclaimed, "He is nothing but an ordinary mortal! He will trample all the rights of men underfoot to indulge his ambition...", before violently erasing Bonaparte's name from the dedication. Later, he would change the piece's title to the more ambiguous "Sinfonia Eroica: composed to celebrate the memory of a great man."

Since the first two impetuous E-flat major chords, Beethoven seems to tear down the wall of tradition and set course for a highly personal journey. Dispensing with the customary slow introduction, the composer leads us straight into the first movement's main musical substance, a triadic, majestic melody in the cellos that veers all too soon into unexpected harmonic regions. Displaced accents give the music a restless rhythmic instability, while new ideas derived from the main one are presented across the orchestra. A huge development introduces new themes, while reinventing old ones in a breathless exploration of new keys. A seemingly "early" horn, dissonant with the harmony beneath it, heralds the recapitulation, which brings further harmonic surprises before culminating in a substantial coda.

The second movement, a funeral march in C minor, transports us to an atmosphere of contained heroic grief, perhaps evoking our hero's burial. A lyrical middle section in C major suggests a remembrance of idealistic hope, interrupted by the return of the somber march and a fugato passage based on its theme. By contrast, the fleeting third movement, a Scherzo, feels like the renewal of our hero's spirit. The rustic trio utilizes one more innovation: a third horn, allowing the section to create chords in a dazzling display of virtuosity.

The finale takes the form of a theme and variations. After a thunderous introduction, the pizzicato strings playfully introduce not the theme itself, but its bass line. After a charming dialogue in the strings, the oboe takes over the first complete statement of the theme, a tune Beethoven used repeatedly in earlier works, most notably in the ballet The Creatures of Prometheus. Subsequent variations include fugal passages, a flute solo, and a powerful march.

The tempo gets slower, and a melancholy oboe sings the theme once more before the full orchestra takes over with the grandest, most heroic statement of the Prometheus melody. A fast, fanfare-like coda closes our hero's journey in life-affirming triumph.

--Nicolás Gómez Amín