

GILLHAM PLAYS BEETHOVEN

Friday 24 September, 7.30pm
Federation Concert Hall, Hobart

Johannes Fritzs conductor
Jayson Gillham piano
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

SCHUBERT Symphony No 8, 'Unfinished' (22')

Allegro moderato

Andante con moto

BEETHOVEN Piano Concerto No 4 (34')

Allegro moderato

Andante con moto –

Rondo: Vivace

The so-called 'Unfinished' Symphony by Franz Schubert (1797-1828) might better be thought of as 'abandoned' rather than 'unfinished'. Written in 1822 – six years before the composer's death – it was followed some years later by the Symphony No 9 ('Great'). The fact that Schubert started to sketch a third movement for the 'Unfinished' indicates that at some point he fully intended to write a larger work. But he was equally keen to get the symphony performed and, in 1823, sent the two completed movements to the Musikverein in Graz where, unacknowledged, they languished in a desk drawer until 1860. With no likelihood of a performance, Schubert effectively abandoned the symphony. The first movement commences (and also ends) with a sepulchral phrase played by the cellos and basses. Out of the gloom we hear a pulsating figure on the violins and a mournful melody enunciated by oboe and clarinet. Following a decisive cadence in B minor, the cellos introduce a lyrical theme in the key of G. All of these ideas will permeate the movement to a greater or lesser degree. Listen out for the dramatic use of powerful chords (and silences) and, around the middle of the movement, some stirring writing for trombone. The second movement, which is in the key of E, offers a sweetness absent from the opening movement but, here too, powerful outbursts occasionally upset the serenity. Indeed, there is a brooding, shadowy quality that binds the two movements of the 'Unfinished' together.

Of the five piano concertos by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), the Concerto No 4, which was completed in 1806, is the most experimental. It is as though Beethoven had decided to take the concerto apart and put it back together a different way. Conventions are overturned; expectations are thwarted. It opens with a brief meditation for the solo instrument after which the piano disappears for the better part of 70 bars. The opening piano solo, however, proves to be the geminating seed of the movement's principal theme, and one of the motifs derived from it – a two-note falling figure, traditionally held to be a musical 'sigh' – pervades much of the musical argument. The piano makes its second entry almost as an aside, arriving with none of the fanfare and dramatic preparation traditionally afforded the solo instrument. Beethoven's experimental quest reaches its apotheosis in the middle movement. The mood is operatic. Specifically, the high drama of recitative obligé, where voice and accompaniment stand in sharp contrast – the string accompaniment severe and emphatic, the voice (or, in this case, the piano) cantabile and expressive. The very fast finale opens with a soft, drumming gesture on the strings which builds to a ten-bar theme. Taken up and elaborated by the piano, the theme assumes its full military colours when trumpets and timpani (silent in the first two movements) ring out in the fortissimo orchestral tutti. A secondary theme offers a moment of hymn-like stasis, but the mood is overwhelmingly joyous with scintillating piano figuration and a race to the finish for soloist and orchestra.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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