

BEETHOVEN'S EIGHTH

Friday 26 November, 7.30pm
Federation Concert Hall, Hobart

Eivind Aadland conductor
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

BEETHOVEN Coriolan Overture, Op 62 (8')

CHIN Subito con forza (6')

BEETHOVEN Symphony No 8 in F, Op 93 (26')

Allegro vivace e con brio

Allegretto scherzando

Tempo di Menuetto

Allegro vivace

The Coriolan Overture, by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), was written as a curtain-raiser for a one-off performance of the play Coriolan by Viennese playwright Heinrich von Collin (1771-1811) that was staged in the palace of Beethoven's patron, Prince Lobkowitz, in 1807. Set in ancient times, Collin's play dramatizes the conflict between the exiled Roman general Coriolanus – who vengefully wishes to wreak havoc on the city of his birth, Rome – and his mother, Volumina, who tries to mitigate her son's anger. The key of the overture is C minor, a key that Beethoven reserved for some of his most dramatic and forceful music (the Fifth Symphony, for instance). It's a good fit for capturing the fury of Coriolanus. Volumina's conciliatory gestures, on the other hand, are expressed in the sweeter key of E-flat.

Subito con forza, by South Korean composer Unsuk Chin (born 1961), is a homage to Beethoven, a composer revered by Chin. It commences with a loud outburst which echoes the opening of Beethoven's Coriolan. Composed in 2020, Subito con forza, which means 'suddenly with force', carries a telling inscription at the head of the score: 'On the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth'. Chin has embedded references to Beethoven's music throughout Subito con forza. But they're subtle and discreet and embellished by dense aggregations of notes and a dizzying array of textures. We lurch from violent outbursts to soft and delicate passages (compare Beethoven's Coriolan Overture). And we end, fittingly, and inevitably, on a hazy but shimmering C-minor chord. The work includes a prominent part for piano, and you'll notice the two percussionists switching between more than a dozen instruments including xylophone, marimba, vibraphone and tam-tam, along with drums, cymbals and gongs of various sizes.

We turn to music of an altogether lighter cast with Beethoven's Symphony No 8. It begins, for instance, with the 'wrong' movement: the opening theme is a big, lumbering minuet, a dance formerly given over to the third movement of a four-movement work. The second movement is not a 'proper' slow movement at all but, rather, carries the marking Allegretto scherzando and makes use of gestures more often associated with comic opera. We can take 'scherzando', which means 'joking', literally. Thus, the first half of the symphony – the half which, traditionally, was the most intense and weighty – is unashamedly playful in tone. It is an attitude that is maintained in the remaining half. The heavy, accented bow strokes heard at the outset of the third movement, Tempo di Menuetto, herald the rustic idiom (an idiom that is amplified still further by the prominent horn parts in the Trio section), and the final movement, Allegro vivace, is a rollicking finale in the style of Haydn. Beethoven utilises the kinds of musical jokes that were Haydn's stock-in-trade, including stops and starts, dead ends, detours to remote keys, pregnant pauses and apparent wrong notes. The 'organised chaos' of the finale probably explains the repeated (and emphatic) F-major chords at the very end. Order is restored.

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