



Alexander Shelley Takes the Podium to Lead Pacific Symphony in Beethoven's Fifth and the Emperor Piano Concerto

April 18, 2025 3:46 pm

An exploration of Beethoven's revolutionary masterpieces provides an exhilarating introduction for Shelley's first concert since being appointed the next artistic and music director

ORANGE COUNTY, Calif.—April 10, 2025— The four most famous notes in all of classical music —“*dun dun dun DUN*” from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and the composer's masterful Piano Concerto No. 5, nicknamed the “Emperor,” are rediscovered through the lens of Pacific Symphony's next Artistic and Music Director, Alexander Shelley, as he takes the podium for three concerts, May 1–3. These performances set the stage for a deeper exploration of Beethoven's music and his 250-year legacy, planned for future seasons.



Alexander Shelley to become Pacific Symphony Orchestra music director for 2026-27 season. Photo by Keyang Pang

Shelley praises Beethoven's music for its revolutionary character and contemporary relevance, saying, “Beethoven's Fifth is like visiting the Sistine Chapel or reading Jane Austen or Shakespeare. It's breathtaking whenever you do it. That's why it's an icon of human culture, one of the great works of humanity. But it's also a great cultural pillar. It sustains different interpretations, and the differences are really varied, even within eras.”

He continues, “The piece is about emancipation, about moving from dark to light. The first movement is the most famous, but the arrival, my favorite movement, is the finale with an ebullient C major. This is breaking the shackles of fate and darkness. He’s showing you as a creative artist that we can all be enlightened, that we can find the light and joy at the end.”

Inspired by Enlightenment ideals, Beethoven’s music champions the human spirit and its quest for freedom. Within his final piano concerto, he explores the individual’s right to be free with society’s need to be governed through the structure of the one (piano soloist) versus the many (the orchestra). Nicknamed “Emperor” for reasons debated, but most likely for its regal quality, triumphal spirit, and warlike rhythms, it requires extreme virtuosity from the piano soloist.

Performing the role of the noble hero is George Li, a 29-year-old American pianist of Chinese descent, who has been praised by *The New York Times* for giving “A bracing, fearless account...Mr. Li’s playing combined youthful abandon with utter command.” He was a recipient of an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2016 and silver medalist of the 2015 International Tchaikovsky Competition. Li has rapidly established a major international reputation and performs regularly with some of the world’s leading orchestras and conductors.

The concert opens with Tan Dun’s “Jubilation” movement from his symphony *Heaven Earth Mankind*, featuring the Southern California Children’s Chorus led by Founding Director Lori Loftus. The work includes themes from Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” (Symphony No. 9) and was composed to celebrate Hong Kong’s return to China. Tan Dun has emphasized that the piece is intended to unite people through universal art and tradition, beyond politics.

The second half opens with *Jeder Baum spricht* (“*Every Tree Speaks*”) by Iman Habibi, a contemporary commission honoring Beethoven’s 250th birthday. Scored for the same instrumentation as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, the piece reflects on environmental challenges and the urgent need for change.

As the composer describes, “*Jeder Baum spricht* is an unsettling rhapsodic reflection on the climate catastrophe, and is written in dialogue with Beethoven’s 5th and 6th symphonies...Like much of Beethoven’s music, this piece accompanies an unspecific narrative and imagery, and ends with a sense of resolve, one that I hope can drive our collective will towards immediate impactful change. Beethoven perceived nature as an image of the divine, if not divinity itself.

Taking place Thursday-Saturday, May 1-3 at 8 p.m. in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, the concert includes a preview talk with KUSC midday host Alan Chapman at 7 p.m. This concert is part of the 2024-2025 Classical Season and is sponsored by the Hal and Jeanette Segerstrom and Family Foundation. The 2024-25 season piano soloists are generously sponsored by The Michelle F. Rohé Fund. Tickets are \$30-\$160. For more information or to purchase tickets, call (714) 858-0945 or visit [pacificsymphony.org](https://www.pacificsymphony.org).

CALENDAR LISTING

SHELLEY CONDUCTS BEETHOVEN'S FIFTH & THE EMPEROR CONCERTO

Thursday – Saturday, May 1-3, at 8 p.m.

Preview Talk at 7 p.m. with KUSC midday host Alan Chapman.

Alexander Shelley, conductor

George Li, piano

Southern California Children's Chorus – Lori Loftus, founding director

TAN DUN: "Jubilation" from *Heaven Earth Mankind*

BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 5, "Emperor"

IMAN HABIBI: *Jeder Baum spricht (Every Tree Speaks)*

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 5

Experience Pacific Symphony's next artistic and music director, Alexander Shelley, in his first concert since his appointment.

"A natural communicator, both on and off the podium" (The Daily Telegraph), with a conducting technique described as "immaculate" (Yorkshire Post), Shelley serves as Artistic and Music Director Designate before assuming full artistic leadership in the 2026-27 season.

Praised by *The Washington Post* for combining "staggering technical prowess, a sense of command and depth of expression," pianist George Li possesses an effortless grace, poised authority, and brilliant virtuosity far beyond his years. He returns to Pacific Symphony to perform one of Beethoven's most powerful, most groundbreaking works, the ever-popular "Emperor" Concerto.

With Image Magnification (IMAG) on the big screen for a closer look at the guest artist, conductor and orchestra musicians!



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