

Santa Barbara Symphony

Beethoven Piano Concerto Marathon

By Daisy Scott / VOICE

FIVE PIANISTS, TWO DAYS, AND ONE INCOMPARABLE COMPOSER will shine at the Granada Theatre this weekend when the Santa Barbara Symphony presents a Beethoven Piano Concerto Marathon for the first time.

Created to showcase emerging virtuosos, the marathon will feature five international piano competition winners and finalists in two distinct programs at 7:30pm on Saturday, January 17th and 3pm on Sunday, January 18th.

"Beethoven's music is defined by innovation, risk-taking, and an unmistakable sense of forward momentum, qualities that resonate deeply with what we thrive to do artistically at the Symphony," said Santa Barbara Symphony Music & Artistic Director Nir Kabaretti. "Bringing multiple young voices to this monumental cycle not only reveals the extraordinary range of interpretation within a single repertoire, but also celebrates the next generation of musicians carrying Beethoven's adventurous spirit into the future."

To listen to Beethoven's piano concertos is to experience sonic snapshots of his life. He wrote his first concerto at the age of 25 and completed his fifth *Emperor Concerto* in 1809, as he was beginning to lose his hearing. Ranging from intense and stirring masterpieces to gentle, lilting moments of beauty, each concerto marries the full body of the orchestra with powerful piano solos.

Kabaretti shared that he was inspired to present all of the concertos as a marathon so that local audiences could experience them as a "complete artistic journey rather than as isolated masterpieces."

Min Joo Yi, who won the 2025 Music Academy of the West's Solo Piano Concerto Competition will kick off the marathon on Saturday with *Concerto No. 3*. The only concerto to be composed in a minor key, the piece holds special interest for Yi, who



appreciates its "breadth of its expression."

"What I find particularly rewarding about performing this concerto is the way that sense of struggle gradually gives way to triumphant resolution as the music moves from C minor to C major,"

Yi said to VOICE. "That trajectory reflects where Beethoven was in his life at the time, at the beginning of his "Heroic" period. His contemporaneous Heiligenstadt Testament reveals his defiant resolve to continue composing despite his increasing deafness. Approaching the concerto with this context and his indomitable spirit in mind serves as a reminder that artistic growth often emerges through perseverance in the face of significant challenges."

Saturday's concert will also feature the SB Symphony playing Beethoven's *Egmont, Op. 84 Overture* as well as pianist Evren Ozel performing *Concerto No. 4*. Ozel placed second in the 2025 Cleveland International Piano Competition and feels that his concerto reveals Beethoven "at his most tender-hearted"

"Unlike the other concertos, the piece unfolds more slowly and gracefully, where each turn of phrase enchants the listener in an almost hypnotic way," said Ozel. "Working with an orchestra and conductor to get to that flow state of unfolding the piece is one of the most amazing experiences!"

Sunday's program will spotlight the concertos' bookends, beginning with *Concerto No. 1* and culminating in the dramatic fifth *Emperor Concerto*. Pianist Dmitry Shishkin, who earned silver at the XVI International Tchaikovsky Competition and won the Geneva International Music Competition, will take the stage for *No. 1*.

Music Academy talent will be represented once again as Angie Zhang, who studied solo piano at the Academy in 2022, presents *Concerto No. 2*. She makes her Santa Barbara return after ranking as a 2025 American Piano Awards finalist.

Even after years of playing Mozart's and Beethoven's sonatas and concertos, Zhang shared that she still listens with fresh ears whenever she plays Beethoven's *Concerto No. 2*, remarking that it "becomes a treasure hunt."

"There are so many 'Easter eggs' and parts that are stars in a constellation; every note and rest are meaningful in the larger picture," explained Zhang. "As his first completed concerto, and second published, there are many moments of whimsical dialogue between the soloist and orchestra, and I cannot wait to make those moments come alive live with the Maestro and Symphony. The mighty cadenza of the first movement, the ephemeral ending of the second movement, and 'good-times' dance feeling of the third are sure to stay with the listener hopefully for a long while after my performance!"

Palm Springs International Piano Competition winner Jonathan Marmoa will perform the grand *Concerto No. 5* finale, which boasts what he calls "one of the greatest middle movements of any concerto and perhaps one of the greatest pieces of music ever written."

"While the heroic and dramatic nature of the piece allows me as the performer to tap into the spirit of courageousness and fearlessness, all very rewarding experiences when performing," said Marmoa. "It offers such contrast to the rest of the piece, everything from its tenderness and beauty, to the entrance of the piano, to its orchestration, to the very key it's composed in."

Attendees looking to learn more can attend radio host Jennifer Miller Hammel's "Conversations with KUSC" pre-concert talks, to be held at 6:30pm on Saturday and 2pm on Sunday. For tickets (\$45-198) and to learn more visit thesymphony.org



Ludwig van Beethoven by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1820



SB Symphony Music & Artistic Director Nir Kabaretti



Min Joo Yi will perform Concerto No. 3



Evren Ozel will perform Concerto No. 4



Dmitry Shishkin will perform Concerto No. 1



Angie Zhang will perform Concerto No. 2



Jonathan Marmoa will perform Concerto No. 5

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