

## The Young Beethoven

By Jessie Rivest

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I watched Kelowna music-lovers lineup eagerly, with tickets in hand. I reluctantly chugged the last half of my gingerbread latte while looking out at the colourless lake and heathered mountains. I took a deep breath and headed inside, little did I know an even greater treat was waiting for me.



It was a delight to be greeted by Canadian bassoonist and impresario, George Zukerman. Although he was not playing music today, his commentary was instrumental to this concert. Between each piece, he unraveled the story of young Beethoven, adding amusing and gratifying context to what we were hearing. These early works were from when Ludwig van Beethoven, a piano virtuoso, had just begun studying composition with Haydn after Mozart passed away. The first piece was 1 of 3 duos Beethoven wrote at 19 years old. Jose Franch-Ballester

(clarinet) and Jesse Read (bassoon) started our road trip back in time to somewhere between 1789-1792, in vehicles of buoyant counterpoint and perfect cadences.

The 2 woodwinds were then replaced by 3 strings. Rebecca Ruthven (viola) and Brian Mix (cello) watched Yuel Yawney (violin) intently to keep their entries concise, and the pin-drop rests as clean as could possibly be. As each musical passage ended, a new one seamlessly began; I was encapsulated with the gorgeous circling of ideas brought to life by this astute trio. The audience vocalized a chef's hum of satisfaction, (which I'm certain would have been oohs and ahhs without masks) and happy hands applauded as soon as the bow hairs left the strings.

My ears shifted gears from 4th to 5th with the addition of Nancy DiNovo (violin). I squinted to discern whether or not she may have been gifted with an extra finger somewhere. Indeed, she has the standard number of fingers. The quartet mastered the frolicking arpeggios of *Opus 18, no 4*. \*Fun fact: publishers only respected works that were submitted in groups of 6, double the trinity.

Things took a turn when the quintet surprised us with a french horn sandwich! Clarinet and bassoon were the dancing bookends of not one, not two, but three horns. Steve Denroche, Andrew Clark, and Dawn Haylett essentially created a Newton's cradle of momentum and energy. This expressive piece finally gave me the *forte* I had been waiting for. It was one of Beethoven's W.o.O.'s aka *Werke ohne Opus* or Work without Opus number, a sketch that was discovered later on, written at age 18 or 19.

The sextet was really a sextet plus one. Michael Vaughan was intentionally added, as double basses often were when performance spaces changed from small courtyards to larger concert halls. Even in the 18th century they couldn't deny that everything is better with more bass. Always. *Opus 81B* had incredibly challenging, flamboyant horn lines between 2 soloists, which Denroche and Clark executed brilliantly.

Summitatively, the spectacular septet took us through 4 movements of *Opus 20*, a segue into Beethoven's first symphony, *Opus 21*. The musicians demonstrated pure athleticism and stamina, but beyond that, I was impressed to see how they interacted with one another. Their eyebrow raises and smiles helped them anticipate each other, stay connected, and keep this mad-beautiful-genius work moving in the absence of a conductor. Franch-Ballester in particular, really put the "play" in play. A joy to watch as he spun each phrase into the air with his clarinet. The *presto* section had this first-class ensemble play ornamentations so quick that I would have a delayed reaction and jolt in my seat! I was blown away, as we all were. The crowd contained their excitement in a reserved but energized and appreciative manner with frivolous applause. They are more than ready to get back to the theatre for the next Kelowna Community Concert.