

Opening Weekend: New Jersey Symphony Returns

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Michael Abels: *Emerge* (World Premiere, NJSO Co-Commission)

In the first commission of our new season, Emmy-nominated composer Michael Abels has written a piece about our collective response to, and recovery from, the extended pandemic. He writes: “*Emerge* is a piece that imagines a group of highly trained musicians getting back together after a long break, remembering both the exhilaration and the discipline of performing together. The piece begins with a section that evokes a sunrise on a group of musicians all playing independently. They gradually all team up to play a powerful, energetic crescendo, but that dissipates into softer section built on solo playing of bluesy phrases that keep happening in canon, rather than in unison. The middle of the piece is a placid, lyrical episode with graceful, independent string lines flowing underneath it. That kicks off a volley of rising scales back and forth between the strings and the winds. When the brass get involved, the strings are finally able to play a melody all together in unison above them. The scale volley becomes faster until it finally comes together, and this sets up an exuberant coda which, despite some shades of difficulty and frustration, is absolutely triumphant.”

Daniel Bernard Roumain: *Voodoo Violin Concerto*

Haitian-American composer and violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain grew up with hip-hop and classical music. His *Voodoo Violin Concerto* fuses multiple arenas, also embracing jazz, blues and folk music. Improvisation over orchestral pedal points plays a significant role, for example in the opening cadenza “Hollerin’ in the night,” launching the concerto in a wild and exuberant fashion. The mood and style shift rapidly, incorporating the jazz technique of call and response and interpolating several additional cadenzas (one of which riffs on “The Star-Spangled Banner”).

Ludwig van Beethoven: *Symphony No. 7*

Richard Wagner famously called this symphony the “apotheosis of the dance.” Extroverted and flamboyant, the Seventh shakes our hand vigorously, draws us into lively conversation, issues belly laughs when it finds

something uproariously funny and exhilarates with its unceasing fount of energy. Yet its Allegretto is among the most sublime and mysterious slow movements ever composed.

Michael Abels: *Emerge* (World Premiere, NJSO Co-Commission)

Michael Abels

Born: October 8, 1962, in Phoenix, Arizona

Composed: 2021

World Premiere: These performances are the world premiere.

Duration: 8 minutes

Two-time Emmy-nominated composer Michael Abels is best known for his scores for the Jordan Peele horror films *Get Out* and *Us*, for which Abels won a World Soundtrack Award, the Jerry Goldsmith Award, a Critics Choice nomination, Image Aware nomination and multiple critics' awards. His hip-hop-influenced score for *Us* was shortlisted for the Oscar and was named "Score of the Decade" by the online publication *The Wrap*.

Abels is co-founder of the Composers Diversity Collective, an advocacy group to increase the visibility of composers of color in film, gaming and streaming media. As a concert composer, Abels has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and New Music USA. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Philadelphia Orchestra are just two of the major ensembles who have performed his orchestral music.

As conductor of *Get Out* in Concert, Abels has led the National Symphony and San Francisco Symphony. Several of his orchestral compositions have been recorded by the Chicago Sinfonietta on the Cedille label, including *Delights & Dances*, a Sphinx Organization commission. His recent projects include *Desert In* for Boston Lyric Opera, *Allen v. Farrow* for HBO and the Netflix film *Nightbooks*. Other premieres this season include *At War With Ourselves* for the Kronos Quartet and the opera *Omar*, which he co-wrote with MacArthur winner Rhiannon Giddens, for Spoleto USA.

Emerge is a consortium commission in partnership with co-commissioners the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and National Symphony. Abels' new piece is about our collective response to, and recovery from, the extended pandemic. His composer's note explains its relevance and outlines the narrative trajectory of *Emerge*:

Emerge is a piece that imagines a group of highly trained musicians getting back together after a long break, remembering both the exhilaration and the discipline of performing together. The piece begins with a section that evokes a sunrise on a group of musicians all playing independently. They gradually all team up to play a powerful, energetic crescendo, but that dissipates into a softer section built on solo playing of bluesy phrases that keep happening in canon, rather than in unison. The middle of the piece is a placid, lyrical episode with graceful, independent string lines flowing underneath it. That kicks off a volley of rising scales back and forth between the strings and the winds. When the brass get involved, the strings are finally able to play a melody all together in unison above them. The scale volley becomes faster until it finally comes together, and this sets up an exuberant coda which, despite some shades of difficulty and frustration, is absolutely triumphant.

Buoyant and optimistic, *Emerge* crystallizes the hope in all of us as we emerge from the pandemic and embrace the prospect of a better future.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (first doubling E-flat clarinet), two bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, xylophone, vibraphone, glockenspiel, tubular bells, triangle, snare drum, bass drum, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, tam-tam, harp and strings. The strings include two solo players each from first and second violins, violas and cellos.

Daniel Bernard Roumain: *Voodoo Violin Concerto*

Daniel Bernard Roumain

Born: December 11, 1971, in Margate, Florida

Currently residing in Harlem, New York

Composed: 2002

World Premiere: 2002

NJSO Premiere: These performances are the NJSO premiere.

Duration: 24 minutes

Daniel Bernard Roumain's acclaimed work as a composer, performer, educator and activist spans more than two decades, and he has been commissioned by venerable artists—including Philip Glass, Bill T. Jones, Savion Glover and Lady Gaga—and institutions worldwide.

The small-town South Florida native's musical talent led him to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where he earned a BM in music composition and theory in 1994. From there he went on to University of Michigan, studying with Michael Daugherty and William Bolcom, completing his masters and DMA in composition in 1999. Currently he is chairman of the Music Theory and Composition Department and composer-in-residence at the Harlem School of the Arts. During the 2020–21 academic year, he served as Roth Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Dartmouth.

Off campus, Roumain participates in a dizzying array of musical pursuits in and around New York City, including his work as music director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company; artist-in-residence at Tribeca Performing Arts Center and assistant composer-in-residence of the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

Known for his signature violin sounds infused with myriad electronic, urban and African American music influences, Roumain takes his genre-bending music beyond the proscenium. He is a composer of chamber, orchestral and operatic works; has won an Emmy for Outstanding Musical Composition for his collaborations with ESPN; has been featured as keynote performer at technology conferences; and created large-scale, site-specific musical events for public spaces.

An avid arts industry leader, Roumain serves on the board of directors of the League of American Orchestras, Association of Performing Arts Presenters and Creative Capital and the advisory committee of the Sphinx Organization, and he was co-chair of 2015 and 2016 APAP Conferences.

A first-generation Haitian American whose parents speak French and Creole, Roumain grew up listening to hip-hop and classical; he is comfortable in both languages. His *Voodoo Violin Concerto* fuses multiple arenas, embracing not only hip-hop and classical but also jazz, blues and folk music. Improvisation over orchestral pedal points plays a significant role, for example in the opening cadenza "Hollerin' in the night," launching the concerto in a wild and exuberant fashion. The mood and style shift rapidly, incorporating the jazz technique of call and response and interpolating several additional cadenzas (one of which riffs on "The Star-Spangled Banner").

The central “Prayer” section features solo piano and repeated chords in a hypnotic “Three Blind Mice” pattern supporting a simple melody in the violin. As repetitions grow increasingly complex, the music metamorphoses into a set of minimalist variations. The slower, funky atmosphere gradually accelerates to a moderate tempo, bringing back a motive from the start of the concerto.

Roumain has said, “The music [of *Voodoo Violin Concerto*] is percussive, lyrical and, at times, soulful.” It is also brimful of variety, including amplification, a vocal segment and some unusual uses of the bow. Listeners will not be bored, and they are likely to be enchanted by the visceral persuasiveness of this unique concerto.

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, solo violin and strings.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1811–12

World Premiere: December 8, 1813, in Vienna

NJSO Premiere: 1934–35 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 36 minutes

If the string quartets are the realm in which Beethoven made his most profound philosophical observations, the nine symphonies were his venue for adventure, expansion and exploration of his musical language. Beethoven’s orchestra grew gradually as his own ideas grew, and the sheer sound of the middle and late symphonies seems to beg for an expanded string section to deliver the power of his ideas. This concept of his music is, of course, a generalization. The more intimate and smaller scale Eighth Symphony, for example, almost seems like a conscious look back over Beethoven’s shoulder toward the 18th century. But the Eighth’s companion piece, the Symphony No. 7 in A (the two works were composed in 1811 and 1812, respectively, were published with contiguous opus numbers and premiered within five days of each other in December

1813) is anything but intimate. Public, aggressive, decisive in its gestures and filled with boundless enthusiasm, it is one of Beethoven's most gregarious and optimistic compositions.

The Seventh Symphony falls into what Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon calls "the heroic decade." During this period—1802 to 1812—Beethoven wrote in a grand style that melded elements of the Viennese symphonic tradition and the French orchestral style. French music of this era frequently bore a martial stamp. Among Beethoven's orchestral works, the Fifth Symphony is the easiest one in which to discern French "military" motifs, but the Seventh Symphony in its day was strongly associated with the victory over Napoleon.

Op. 92 opens with the lengthiest slow introduction of any Beethoven symphony. Music historian JWN Sullivan has written of it: "The great introduction to the first movement seems to convey the awakening and murmuring of the multitudinous life of an immense forest. Much more than in the Pastoral symphony do we feel here in the presence of Nature itself. It is life, life in every form, not merely human life, of which the exultation is here expressed."

That spirit of exultation bursts forth in the ensuing Allegro, whose pronounced dotted rhythm dominates the entire fabric of the movement.

The slow-movement Allegretto enjoyed enormous popularity in the 19th century and proved to be one of Beethoven's most influential compositions. Essentially a march, it is closely related to the funeral march slow movement of the "Eroica" Symphony; among other similarities, it switches back and forth between the parallel major and minor (in this case A major and A minor) and features triplet accompaniment in the contrasting trio sections. Beethoven emphasizes the string section in the minor sections and the woodwinds in the A-major parts. Combining elements of rondo, march and variation, he spins a remarkable tale from the simplest of means.

Beethoven's scherzo is a vibrant Presto in F major, the only case in the nine symphonies where he strays from the home key for this movement. By expanding the conventional tripartite form (with contrasting middle section in D major) to an A-B-A-B-A structure, he increases the length and scope of the scherzo, endowing it with more psychological weight. He closes with a jubilant Allegro con brio, an overwhelmingly optimistic movement that captivates us with its distinctive flourish in its opening measures and a compelling rhythmic drive throughout. Indeed, rhythm is the most memorable feature of the Seventh Symphony, delivering

Beethoven's personality more convincingly than his melodies do in this work, and setting in relief the understated calm of the unconventional slow movement.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani and strings.