NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2026

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Richard Wagner: Prelude to Act I of *Lohengrin*

Lohengrin's subject matter is the very stuff of 19th-century romanticism. Set in Antwerp in the 10th century, the plot concerns Elsa of Brabant, who has been unjustly accused of murdering her missing brother Gottfried, heir to the Dukedom. She is defended by an unknown knight who appears on the river in a boat drawn by a swan. He redeems her honor and marries her, cautioning her that she must never question him about his identity. Of course she does ask him, and the tragedy unfolds from there.

The opera's Prelude opens with shimmering, reverent violins and flutes. After two minutes, the brasses join in. Wagner spins his prelude from a single theme intended to represent the sacred nature of the Holy Grail. So gradually that we hardly notice the expansion, he builds to a splendid and colorful climax, then fades away into hushed silence.

Kevin Puts: *Contact*

For nearly three decades, Kevin Puts has been a major figure in new music both in the US and internationally. His career has had a steady upward trajectory, including prestigious teaching positions at University of Texas and at Johns Hopkins Peabody Institute, orchestral residencies, and multiple awards. He won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for his first opera, *Silent Night*.

Contact is a triple concerto that was written for Time For Three. Xian Zhang's recording of it with The Philadelphia Orchestra won the 2023 GRAMMY for "Best Contemporary Classical Composition." Broadly speaking, the piece is in four movements arranged slow-fast-slow-fast (though the first and third movements may also be described as moderate in tempo). While the ensemble calls for full orchestra, Puts has written extended passages for the string soloists to play as a trio, particularly in the opening, "The Call." His second movement, "Codes," is intense and dramatic, with force and fury that recall Shostakovich's scherzi in his Eighth and Tenth Symphonies. It is virtuoso writing for both orchestra and soloists. The third movement, "Contact," is an introspective meditation on the human condition. Puts' finale takes its impetus from a lively Bulgarian dance, bringing the work to a thrilling close.

Puts has written, "The word 'contact' gained new resonance during the years of [Covid] isolation. It is my hope that this concerto might be heard as an expression of yearning for this fundamental human need."

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 5, in C Minor, Op. 67

The Fifth Symphony was a highlight of Beethoven's 'heroic decade,' from 1802 to 1812. Tradition has assigned it a philosophical narrative: depicting the artist as hero, pitted against an unsympathetic society, and emerging triumphant after a victory over internal strife. Military flavor is perhaps the overriding characteristic that unifies the music of the Fifth Symphony. March rhythms figure prominently, sometimes even when the music is in triple time, as in the C major sections of the slow movement.

The first movement is dominated by the famous four-note motto. Beethoven's focus on it is imaginative and varied, building dramatic tension that leads to electric climaxes. The motive recurs in the later movements, ingeniously altered.

Beethoven opens the slow movement with an elegant, elaborate theme that dissipates the storminess of his Allegro con brio. He then presents four variations. His scherzo departs from tradition with the spooky, menacing lower strings that outline his opening gesture. Horns announce a military theme, with the same rhythm as the first movement motto. The trio is both assertive and good-natured, reminding us that Beethoven had a wonderful sense of humor.

The transition to the finale is one of classical music's great moments: a controlled crescendo that builds to a triumphant first statement. The finale overflows with an abundance of new themes, closing with victorious, resounding chords that will linger in your ears long after the concert is over.

Richard Wagner: Prelude to Act I of *Lohengrin*

Richard Wagner
Born: May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany
Died: February 13, 1881 in Venice, Italy
Composed: 1846–47
World Premiere: August 28, 1850 in Weimar, Germany
Duration: 8 minutes
Instrumentation: three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, and strings

Opera or music drama? That question is central to understanding Wagner's theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or complete art work. *Lohengrin* was the last of Wagner's stage works that can really be classified as an old-style opera, as opposed to the newer music drama. He worked on it from 1845 to 1848. The first production took place in Weimar in August of 1850. *Lohengrin*'s subtitle is "Romantic Opera in Three Acts," and its subject matter is the very stuff of 19th-century romanticism. Set in Antwerp in the 10th century, the plot concerns Elsa of Brabant, who has been unjustly accused of murdering her missing brother Gottfried, heir to the Dukedom. She is defended by an unknown knight who appears on the river in a boat drawn by a swan. He

redeems her honor and marries her, cautioning her that she must never question him about his identity. Of course she does ask him, and the tragedy unfolds from there.

The opera's Prelude opens with shimmering, reverent violins and flutes. After two minutes, the brasses join in. Wagner spins his prelude from a single theme intended to represent the sacred nature of the Holy Grail. So gradually we hardly notice the expansion, he builds to a splendid and colorful climax, then fades away into hushed silence.

Kevin Puts: *Contact*

Kevin Puts
Born: January 3, 1972 in St. Louis, Missouri
Composed: 2020–21
World Premiere: March 26, 2022 in St. Petersburg, Florida
Duration: 30 minutes
Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, three percussion, piano, two solo violins, solo bass, and strings

For nearly three decades, Kevin Puts has been a major figure in new music both in the US and internationally. Born in St. Louis, Puts (pronounced as in "he puts his cards on the table") attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY, where his instructors included Samuel Adler and Joseph Schwantner. Puts subsequently earned a master's degree at Yale, working with Jacob Druckman, Martin Bresnick, and David Lang, then returned to Eastman for his doctorate under Pulitzer Prize-winner Christopher Rouse. Puts is also an excellent pianist who studied with Nelita True at Eastman.

His career has had a steady upward trajectory. He taught at the University of Texas from 1997 to 2005 and was composer in residence to the Fort Worth Symphony during the 2006-07 season. Prior to his Fort Worth Symphony appointment, he was Composer in Residence for the California Symphony from 1996-99. His awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as prizes from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, BMI's William Schuman Prize in 1998, and the Barlow International Prize for Orchestral Music in 1999. Since 2006, Puts has served on the composition faculty of the Johns Hopkins Peabody Institute, and he was Distinguished Visiting Faculty at Juilliard in the 2024-25 academic year. He is also the Director of the Minnesota Orchestra Composer's Institute.

In recent years Puts has established a major presence in the world's opera houses. He won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for his first opera, *Silent Night*, about a spontaneous cease fire among German, Scottish, and French soldiers in World War I. Since then he has composed three more operas, most recently *The Hours*, based on Michael Cunningham's novel. *The Hours* premiered at The Metropolitan Opera in November 2022.

Contact is a triple concerto that was written for Time For Three. Xian Zhang's recording of it with The Philadelphia Orchestra won the 2023 GRAMMY for "Best Contemporary Classical Composition." Broadly speaking, the piece is in four movements arranged slow-fast-slow-fast (though the first and third movements may also be described as moderate in tempo). While the ensemble calls for full orchestra, Puts has written extended passages for the string soloists to play as a trio, particularly in the opening, "The Call." His second movement, "Codes," is intense and dramatic, with force and fury that recall Shostakovich's scherzi in his Eighth and Tenth Symphonies. It is virtuoso writing for both orchestra and soloists. The third movement, "Contact," is an introspective meditation on the human condition. Puts' finale takes its impetus from a lively Bulgarian dance, bringing the work to a thrilling close. The composer has graciously provided the following background and context for *Contact*.

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In April 2017, I first heard a live performance by the prodigiously gifted string trio Time For Three at Joe's Pub in New York City. The group—Nick Kendall and Charles Yang, violinists and Ranaan Meyer, bassist—had contacted me about the possibility of me writing them a concerto, and after hearing them play, sing, improvise and perform their own arrangements and compositions that evening I felt both elated—by the infectious energy and joy they exude as performers—and also rather daunted by the thought. It seemed our musical tastes were so similar that I suggested to them, not at all facetiously, "Maybe you ought to write your own concerto!" I simply couldn't imagine conceiving any music they couldn't improvise themselves.

One of the tunes the trio performed that night at Joe's Pub was an original, called "Vertigo," which the guys later told me they wrote in a hotel room on the road. In the song, all three members both play their instruments and sing. I wondered about the possibility of beginning the concerto with the trio singing a wordless refrain, *a cappella*. I wrote a chord progression which unfolds from a single note and progresses through simple, suspended harmonies. Orchestral winds respond with the same music while the trio adds decorative, improvisatory gestures. This idea, first heard in a reflective manner, grows considerably until the orchestral brass deliver a most emphatic version of it. This first movement, "The Call," ends with the same sense of questioning with which it began.

Threatening unisons, played by the entire orchestra, break the mood startlingly and impel the soloists who drive forward with syncopated rhythms and virtuoso flurries of arpeggios. The energy in this second movement, "Codes," is unrelenting, often drawing its harmonic flavor from the ladder of notes which forms the overtone series and by combining triads from disparate keys.

By yet another contrast, the orchestral music that opens the third movement, "Contact," is cold and stark. I had the image of an abandoned vessel floating inert in the recesses of space. The soloists interrupt this with a quiet, gently rolling meditation, eventually inviting a solo oboe and a solo clarinet to join in lyrical counterpoint high above. Eventually, the soloists recall the stark opening of the movement, rendering its rhythms into an unaccompanied phrase of tenderness and longing.

To put it mildly, the search for a silver lining amid the Covid-19 pandemic has been a unique challenge. But the cancellation of the initial performances of *Contact* scheduled for the summer of 2020 allowed us to continue working together on the concerto long after I finished it. Though my original title was simply Triple Concerto, we all agreed there was something more than abstract musical expression going on, that there was a story being told. Could the refrain at the opening of the concerto be a message sent into space, a call to intelligent life across the vast distances containing clues to our DNA, to our very nature as Earth people? Could the Morse code-like rhythms of the scherzo suggest radio transmissions, wave signals, etc.? And might the third movement (originally called simply "Ballad") represent the moment of contact itself? (Admittedly, the climax of the film adaptation of Carl Sagan's *Contact*, at which point Ellie, played by the wonderful Jodie Foster, en route via a wormhole to an alien civilization, witnesses a radiant cosmic event to which she tearfully breathes, "No words … they should have sent a poet … no words ..." was in my mind during these discussions.)

Still in search of a finale to the concerto, I was serendipitously introduced to the wonderful *gankino horo* ("Ganka's Dance"), a traditional Bulgarian melody, blazingly performed by at least twelve young cellists in unison at my (then) ten-year-old son Ben's studio cello recital. At home, I began playing it on the piano and gradually my own compositional voice crept in. I was reminded of Bartók's haunting Romanian Folk Dances and the composer's fusion of his own musical sensibilities with age-old folk melodies. And so I set about composing a sort of fantasy on this tune, its asymmetric rhythmic qualities a fitting counterbalance to the previous three movements.

The word contact has gained new resonance during these years of isolation. It is my hope that this concerto might be heard as an expression of yearning for this fundamental human need. I am deeply grateful to Time For Three for their belief in my work and for the tireless collaborative spirit which allowed us to develop this showcase for their immense talents.

–Kevin Puts, January 27, 2022

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 5, in C Minor, Op. 67

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born: December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany
Died: March 26, 1827 in Vienna, Austria
Composed: 1807–08
World Premiere: December 22, 1808 in Vienna
Duration: 31 minutes
Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings

The decade from 1802 to 1812 was a period of astonishing productivity for Beethoven, yielding a remarkable succession of musical masterpieces. The twin pillars of 1807 and 1808 were his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. Ideas for a symphony in C minor, however, have been traced as far back as the "Eroica" sketchbook of 1803–

04. Considering that E-flat major, the key of the "Eroica" symphony, is the relative major of C minor, it is not all that surprising that Beethoven generated ideas for both works at the same time.

C minor has been called both the "key of fate" and the "heroic key" in Beethoven's music. There is no question that certain tonalities carried deep significance for Beethoven, and several other works in C minor share the terse drama of his Fifth Symphony. The "Pathétique" Sonata, Op. 13 (1798–99) and the Third Piano Concerto, Op. 37 (1800) are earlier examples; the "Coriolan" Overture, Op. 62 (1807) is a C minor work contemporary with the Fifth Symphony.

Tradition has assigned a philosophical narrative to the Fifth Symphony, regarding the work as depicting the artist as hero, pitted against an unsympathetic society, emerging triumphant after a victory over internal strife. Beethoven's transcriber Anton Schindler reported that Beethoven pointed to the beginning of the first movement and expressed in these words the fundamental idea of his work: "Thus Fate knocks at the door!"

Musical scholar W.J. Turner referred to the symphony's non-self-seeking hero, the passionate idealist battling against the inclemency and hostilities of nature and the passions of his fellow men and struggling to harmonize his own desires with those of the rest of mankind.

Robert Schumann detected French influence in the music of the Fifth Symphony, particularly that of Etienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763–1817). Much French music at the turn of the century, especially opera, bore the imprint of the French Revolution. France was in a state of political and social upheaval for Beethoven's entire creative life, and the strong presence of a growing military culture made its impact felt in the arts.

About the music

Military flavor is perhaps the overriding characteristic that unifies the music of the Fifth Symphony. March rhythms figure prominently, sometimes even when the music is in triple time, as in the C major sections of the slow movement. Beethoven's emphasis on the brass section underscores the martial quality of the symphony. So too does his expansion of the orchestra to include piccolo (redolent of military band flavor), contrabassoon, and trombones for the finale.

The first movement is dominated by the famous four-note motto. Beethoven’s focus on it is imaginative and varied, building dramatic tension that leads to electric climaxes. The motive recurs in the later movements, ingeniously altered.

Beethoven opens the slow movement with an elegant, elaborate theme that dissipates the storminess of his Allegro con brio. He then presents four variations, including one in minor mode and another with a brilliant fanfare incorporating the military aspect. His scherzo is traditional in its organization: loosely related to the classical structure of minuet-trio-minuet. Beethoven departs from tradition with the spooky, menacing lower strings that outline his opening gesture. Military elements return as the horns announce a new theme, whose rhythm is the same as the iconic first movement motto. The central trio is both assertive and good-natured,

reminding us that Beethoven had both a wonderful sense of humor and a formidable command of counterpoint.

The transition to the finale is one of classical music's great moments: a controlled crescendo that builds to a triumphant first statement. There is no pause between the third and fourth movements. The finale overflows with an abundance of new themes, all of which reinforce that the struggle is over. The symphony closes with victorious, resounding chords that will linger in your ears long after the concert is over.

Beethoven's Fifth was premiered at the Theater-an-der-Wien on December 22, 1808; it shared the program with the Sixth Symphony and the *Choral Fantasy*, Op. 80, both of which also received first performances. When it was published in April 1809, the score bore an unusual joint dedication to Beethoven's patrons Prince Lobkowitz and Count Rasoumovsky.