



Beethoven: The First and Second Symphonies

Sunday 22nd March 2026, 12 noon and 4pm. Strathpeffer Pavilion

Welcome to our concert, which is dedicated to the memory of the conductor George Hurst (1926 – 2012), whose centenary is this year.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 1 in C major, op. 21

- I. *Adagio molto – Allegro con brio*
- II. *Andante cantabile con moto*
- III. Menuetto. *Allegro molto e vivace* Trio.
- IV. Finale. *Adagio – Allegro molto e vivace*

Interval

Beethoven: Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 36

- I. *Adagio – Allegro con brio*
- II. *Larghetto*
- III. Scherzo. *Allegro* Trio.
- IV. *Allegro molto*

The Mahler Players, conducted by Tomas Leakey

When Beethoven moved from Bonn to Vienna at the age of 21 he was aware of the weight of expectation placed upon him as a successor to Mozart, who had died the previous year, and the ageing Haydn. Beethoven, already a piano virtuoso, had formal lessons in composition with Haydn from when he arrived in Vienna in 1792 up until 1794. He composed many works in his early years in the city, including sonatas, trios and concertos. However, he initially steered clear of the genres of symphony and string quartet, which were widely seen as the highest forms of music and already brought to perfection by Mozart and Haydn. There are indications of sketches for a symphony in C major as early as 1795, but the project seems to have been quickly abandoned. The principal work on what became the First Symphony resumed in 1799, and the composition of his first set of string quartets (opus 18) began a year or so earlier. So Beethoven was almost 30 before he felt ready to embark on his first works in these exalted forms.

The premiere of the First Symphony was on the 2nd April 1800, in a benefit concert organised by Beethoven himself in the Burgtheater in Vienna. The characteristically huge programme included a Mozart symphony (which one is unknown), two movements from Haydn's *Creation*, and an improvisation by Beethoven at the piano. The works by the young composer were the Septet, the C major Piano Concerto and, last in the running order, the C major Symphony. The reviewer for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* described the event as "truly the most interesting concert in a long time" and the symphony specifically as containing "considerable art, novelty and wealth of ideas". However, the unknown correspondent criticised the orchestration, writing that "the wind-instruments were used too much, so that there was more Harmonie [wind and brass] than orchestral music as a whole." The wind instruments are indeed heavily used in the symphony, though this has subsequently been viewed more positively! The reviewer's comments on the performance itself are fascinating: "In the second part of the symphony [the orchestra] became so lax that despite all efforts on the part of the conductor no fire whatsoever could be got out of them... How, under such circumstances, is even the most excellent composition to be effective?" We will never know for certain what the orchestra actually sounded like, but there is a poignancy to the idea that Beethoven may not have heard good performances of his orchestral works even before the onset of his deafness.

Symphony No. 1 in C major begins with a slow introduction and continues with a sprightly *Allegro con brio*. The structure is relatively conventional but the material is full of contrasts and harmonic twists and turns, with some of the music anticipating Schubert. The *Andante cantabile con moto*, more like a Minuet than a traditional slow movement, starts off as though it were a fugue, then evolves into a delicate chamber-like piece, with tension arising from the juxtaposition of duplet and triplet rhythms. The third movement Menuetto (Beethoven must have been pulling the audience's leg with this title as it's every bit a Scherzo) is the most forward-looking part of the symphony, on a large scale and modulating widely. The Trio by contrast is initially strangely static but then contains a splendid build-up of instruments at its climax. The Finale, the only part of the symphony which made use of the sketches from 1795, continues the humorous vein and finishes with something of a festive parade. The First Symphony is a genial work, inspired by Haydn, and with the unmistakable fingerprints of Beethoven.

The earliest sketches for the Second Symphony date from 1800, shortly after the completion of the First, but work was soon interrupted when Beethoven received a commission for a ballet, which became *The Creatures of Prometheus*. The composition of the Second Symphony resumed in the autumn of 1801 and the work was completed by February 1802. Composers' benefit concerts in Vienna could usually only take place in Holy Week as theatres and musicians were booked up for the rest of the year, and Beethoven had hoped to put on another such event for the premiere of the Second Symphony. However the planned concert was cancelled and Beethoven, who by this time was experiencing increasingly worrying problems with his hearing, decamped to the

village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna for the summer. In the end he stayed until October, and while there wrote the famous “Heiligenstadt Testament”, a moving document which shows the depths of the anguish he experienced due to his likely incurable and rapidly worsening deafness, his consequent thoughts of suicide, and his eventual resolve to battle on.

The Second Symphony was finally premiered on 5th April 1803 at the Theater an der Wien, where Beethoven had been appointed resident composer. Also on the programme was the First Symphony, the C minor Piano Concerto and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. According to Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven’s pupil, on the day of the concert the orchestra rehearsed from 8am until 2:30pm, by which time everyone was “*exhausted and more or less dissatisfied*”. Luckily the patron Prince Lichnowsky was on hand and sent for bread, butter, cold meat and wine for the musicians’ lunch, which improved morale. The concert was a financial success for Beethoven but reviews were once again mixed: a report in the *Freyemüthige* said “*the two symphonies were voted very beautiful*” but the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* remarked “*the first symphony is better than the later one because it is developed with a lightness and is less forced, while in the second the striving for the new and surprising is already more apparent. However it is obvious that both are not lacking in surprising and brilliant passages of beauty*”

Symphony No. 2 in D major was probably the longest symphony in existence at the time of its premiere. It was then very soon overshadowed by the even more epic *Eroica* Symphony (premiered in private just one year later). This eclipsing, which continues to the present day, is unfortunate, because as great as the *Eroica* Symphony undoubtedly is, the Second is also a sublime work which deserves its place in the sun. Like the First, it begins with a slow introduction, though on a more imposing scale, with highly contrasting material and unexpected changes of key. The main *Allegro con brio* has a scurrying first theme, an “alla turca” transition and a martial second theme. The striking coda which crowns the movement is said to be Beethoven’s homage to the chorus *The Heavens are Telling* from Haydn’s *Creation*. The second movement, a genuine lyrical “slow movement”, is one of many rejoinders to the old cliché that Beethoven couldn’t write a tune. The scherzo, built from a three-note figure, contains some hints of the Ninth Symphony in its Trio for oboes, bassoons and horns, before they are rudely interrupted by the strings in a foreign key. The Finale, which was described amusingly in the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* as “*A hideously writhing, wounded dragon that refuses to die, but bleeding in the finale, furiously thrashes about with its stiffened tail*”, is one of Beethoven’s most witty movements, with surprises aplenty!

We hope you enjoy today’s performance of these two gems by the young Beethoven.

Tomas Leakey

The Mahler Players were founded by Tomas Leakey in 2013.

Initially formed to play the music of our namesake Gustav Mahler, we have performed chamber orchestra versions of Mahler's First, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Ninth and Tenth Symphonies, *Das Lied von der Erde*, and most of his other song cycles. Over the last four years we have also been performing one or two of Beethoven's symphonies in every season and have made our first forays into the symphonies of Bruckner.

Since 2019 we have had a parallel focus on opera, and in particular Wagner, which has included the complete Act 1 from *Die Walküre*, Act 2 from *Tristan und Isolde*, Act 3 from *Siegfried*, Acts 2 and 3 from *Parsifal* and substantial sections of music from *Götterdämmerung* and *Tannhäuser*. We have worked with some of the greatest singers of our era, including Sir John Tomlinson, Magdalena Anna Hofmann and Peter Wedd, and in 2023 and 2024 were joined by the noted Wagnerian Anthony Negus as guest conductor. Later this year we will give two performances of the whole of *Parsifal*, our first complete Wagner.

Over the years we have also commissioned many new works, including *Birth-Rebirth* by leading Scottish composer Stuart MacRae. In 2021 we recorded and released our first CD, which features the world premiere recording of Matthew King's *Richard Wagner in Venice: A Symphony*. This Symphony brings to life for the first time many of Wagner's late sketches, left unfinished at the time of his death in 1883, and prior to this work largely unknown and unheard outside specialist circles. Also featuring is Wagner's own beautiful masterpiece for chamber orchestra, *Siegfried Idyll*. The CD is available at today's performance.

Tomas Leakey (conductor)

Founder and Music Director of the Mahler Players, Tomas also works with the Aberdeen City Orchestra and Highland Regional Youth Orchestra. He has a particular interest in the music of Wagner and his performances have included complete acts from *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal* as well as excerpts from *Tannhäuser*, *Lobengrin*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Götterdämmerung*. In 2022 he was awarded the Bayreuth Scholarship by the Wagner Society of Scotland and attended the Bayreuth Festival in this capacity.

Tomas began his musical life as a trombonist, playing in the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland. He studied with and was encouraged in his conducting by the formidable late George Hurst and undertook additional study with Denise Ham at the London Conducting Academy and at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. He further developed his craft through attending masterclasses, including with Johannes Schlaefli, Alexander Vedernikov and Toby Purser. Another important influence has been the conductor Anthony Negus.

Emma Donald (leader)

Originally from the Highlands, Emma Donald has been playing the violin since the age of 8. Growing up, she enjoyed learning both classical and traditional Scottish music, and has strived to keep both passions running simultaneously. She has a first class honours degree in music from the University of Edinburgh, and she works full time as a freelance musician based in Glasgow.

Emma is very passionate about chamber music and she is a founding member of the Fyrish String Quartet who have performed across Scotland since 2017. She is also an accomplished composer under the name Emma Jean. Her piece “The Sound of Sleepless Kings” was premiered in April 2023 by the Fyrish String Quartet. Emma is one half of the contemporary folk duo with harpist Isbel Pendlebury. Their first album *Arenite* is available online and their original music was featured as part of “The Farewell Glacier”, a programme broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in February 2024.

The Orchestra

FIRST VIOLIN

Emma Donald (leader), Emily Birse,
Simon Evans, Maureen Burnett,
Christian Badetz, Lorna Ungoad-
Thomas, Paula Starritt, Matthew
Gallacher

DOUBLE BASS Tam Darlugdach,
Chris Sergeant

FLUTE Ruth Binks, Babs Crocker

OBOE Leslie Callander, Krys
Hawryszczuk

SECOND VIOLIN

Andrew Birse, Aden Mazur, Hazel
Younger, Ellis Ash, Rachel Mackison,
Cristina D'Arrigo, Rachel Farmer

CLARINET Mhairi Callander,
Mike Weare

BASSOON Bruce Gordon, Kate Smith

VIOLA

Adam Csenki, Vanessa Turner,
Bernhard Nicolás Ersfeld Mandujano,
Berent Korfker, Catherine Mackay

FRENCH HORN William Jamieson,
Emma Winchester

TRUMPET Alasdair Grant, David
Cooper

CELLO

Kate Ellingson, Steve Collisson, Louise
Cooper, Hana Bristow

TIMPANI Ally Russell

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CHARTERED
ARCHITECTS
& DESIGN
CONSULTANTS

+44 (0)1463 240066
@hri_munro_architects
info@hri-architects.com
hri-architects.com



Parsifal

We warmly invite you to join us in late May as we undertake our biggest challenge yet: two semi-staged performances of Wagner's final work, *Parsifal*. In 2024 and 2025 we performed Acts 2 and 3 as standalone items and we are excited now to take things to the next level. Cast members include the legendary Sir John Tomlinson in his signature role of Gurnemanz alongside our fantastic orchestra and chorus, conducted by Tomas Leakey. These will be the first complete performances of *Parsifal* in Scotland since 2003.

Wednesday 27th May 2026, 4pm at Inverness Cathedral

Sunday 31st May 2026, 4pm at Inverness Cathedral

Audience members will be able to book a specific seat for these performances. There will be meal options via a collaboration with the restaurant *Eight on the River* at the Palace Hotel for the long interval (Sunday performance only), with drinks and snacks available from *Highland Bouchon* on site in the grounds of the Cathedral. We also assure attendees of our recent Cathedral concerts that, for *Parsifal*, there will be suitable toilet facilities!

Tickets are on sale now and as a loyal audience member you can secure a special Earlybird discount of 20% with the discount code PARSIFAL26. This discount code will be valid until Tuesday 31st March.

Naturally a project of this scope and scale requires a considerable amount of support and we are hugely grateful to our benefactors for your generosity.

If you would be interested in assisting us to realise this project we'd greatly appreciate your help. If this might be of interest you can get in touch with us using the email address contact@mahlerplayers.co.uk, or please feel free to come and speak with a member of the orchestra after the concert. There is also the option of becoming a member of the Mahler Circle, our supporters' network.

With warm thanks to

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The Mahler Circle - members

Sandra and John Black
David and Fiona Johnson
Ash Johnston
Thomas Baxter and Benjamin Mawston

Professor Sue Lightman
Alan Maitland
Leo and Cathy McClymont
Dr Helen Robinson

Benefits of the Mahler Circle membership include complimentary tickets with reserved seating, acknowledgement in our programmes and occasional invitations to post-concert receptions. If you would be interested in finding out more about the Mahler Circle please get in touch: contact@mahlerplayers.co.uk.

HRI | Munro architecture

Autumn 2026 concerts for your diaries (tickets will go on sale later in the year)

**Saturday 19th September, 8pm at Inverness Cathedral and
Sunday 20th September, 3pm at Strathpeffer Pavilion**

Programme to be announced

Sunday 22nd November, 4pm at Inverness Cathedral

Bruckner Symphony No. 5
Conductor - Tomas Leakey

The Mahler Players is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) Charity
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