

# BEETHOVEN TRANSFORMED

College of Charleston Sottile Theatre

June 3 at 7:30pm

SPONSORED BY SOUTH CAROLINA BANK AND TRUST

Spoletto Festival USA Orchestra  
John Kennedy, *conductor*

*The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven*  
for orchestra and ice cream vendor's bell (1970, American premiere) Louis Andriessen (*b* 1939)

Rewriting Beethoven's Seventh Symphony  
(2006, American premiere) Michael Gordon (*b* 1956)

## INTERMISSION

Symphony no. 7 in A Major, op. 92 (1812) Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)  
I. *Poco sostenuto—Vivace*  
II. *Allegretto*  
III. *Presto—Assai meno presto (trio)*  
IV. *Allegro con brio*

*This performance is made possible in part through funds from the Spoletto Festival USA Endowment, generously supported by BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina, Wells Fargo, and Bank of America.*

## PROGRAM NOTES

More than any other composer, Beethoven stands as an icon for classical music. Elevated to mythic status, his bust is on pianos everywhere. The poster boy of the heroic artist individual, his greatest hits such as the opening to the fifth symphony and the "Ode to Joy" theme from Symphony no. 9 pop up everywhere, out of context, as caricatures of classical music.

Subsequent generations of composers have felt his shadow over their work, and for decades his works in various forms and genres, especially the symphonies, have been taught as model templates. Beethoven was the Ideal. And it was inevitable that eventually, composers would rebel against this conception of his work in the same spirit of rebellion that he evinced in his amazing and innovative music.

Beethoven was, at heart, a very daring and revolutionary artist. An unconventional man whom Goethe described as "an untamed personality", Beethoven was ahead of his time in modeling defiant individualism, as well as a stubborn lack of obsequiousness to the upper class. Obsessed with a devotion to the creative life, he lived in a state of grunginess, and had an unkempt appearance that once led to his arrest for vagrancy. Driving Beethoven above all was a fierce devotion to the power of music—in all its possibilities—from emotional to spiritual to sheer sonic power. But sometimes, in the long arc of creative output, Beethoven's work slips into a parody of itself, relying on brutish tropes to proclaim a kind of musical triumph.

Among contemporary composers, it is not hard to find examples of this tension between a respect for Beethoven the artist, and a resentment of Beethoven the icon. It might even be said that this "Beethoven problem" symbolizes the state of contemporary classical music, and the ongoing effort to venerate the past while letting the present breathe through.

Louis Andriessen, who will be celebrating his 75th birthday

on June 6, is a Dutch composer and one of Europe's most eminent and influential composers. Andriessen has forged a highly unique personal style that is often driving, hard-edged, and brassy, and reimagines what a classical music ensemble is with the integration of instruments usually found in pop music and jazz.

His *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven* was a pivotal work in his evolution. Composed in 1970 for concerts celebrating Beethoven's bicentennial, the work was a kind of protest piece by Andriessen that led to him abandoning composing for orchestras, and instead developing his own style. In fact, Andriessen has only returned to composing for traditional orchestra in this 75th-birthday year, with a commission from Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra, which as a young man he denounced for its conservative programming.

Essentially a collage of musical quotations manipulated as parody, Andriessen quotes Beethoven's nine symphonies in order, and also inserts a number of other famous works: Beethoven's *Für Elise*, the "Moonlight" and "Pathétique" sonatas, Rossini's *Barber of Seville* (or, to some people, a theme from Bugs Bunny), and *L'Internationale*, the anthem of the socialist movement, interwoven with *Wilhelmus*, the Dutch national anthem.

Andriessen's approach subverts the listener, by disturbing familiar melodies with asymmetrical interjections, as well as by inserting tropes from pop music such as backbeats. He sets up the listener to hear a Beethoven symphony, and then undermines the listener's experience by desecrating the original with material from pop culture. So is he parodying Beethoven, or is he parodying the mainstream caricature of Beethoven?

In describing the work for musicologist Stephen Loy, Andriessen said, "...it was a kind of criticism, not toward Beethoven himself, because from the first to the last minute of my life, I admired the composer. Almost nothing wrong with the guy, except I worry about his sense of humor...the piece was not criticizing Beethoven, but was criticizing the bourgeois concertgoer or concert. The whole situation of the normal symphony orchestra concert."

He recalls the premiere: "When I stood there on the podium and the conductor shook hands with me, I thought: there is something utterly wrong with me, and if I'm not careful things are going to end up pretty badly...that made me sit on the couch for about a year, rethinking the sense of composing." From this experience, Andriessen evolved the roots of his own distinctive style, turning the political aspects of his artistry towards instrumentations and structures which modeled progressivism and collective action. His next work was the seminal *De Volharding* ("Perseverance"—also the name of his ensemble), which Spoleto audiences can hear on the June 5 Music in Time concert (see page 73).

Michael Gordon is a New York composer best-known for founding the musical organization Bang on a Can with fellow composers Julia Wolfe (his wife), and David Lang. While the trio share certain aesthetic affinities, Gordon's music is distinguished by an aggressive rawness, which he achieves through the use of microtones and slides, and a process-driven musical rhetoric.

He writes about *Rewriting Beethoven's Seventh Symphony*: "Beethoven's brutish and loud music has always inspired me. At the time it was written, it was probably the loudest music on the planet. The raw power of his orchestral writing burned through the style of the time.

"A commission by the Beethoven-Fest Bonn gave me the opportunity to ask this question: What if someone, while writing a piece of music for orchestra, just happened to stumble over the same material that Beethoven used? What if someone unknowingly used this material in the course of writing his or her new work?

"In *Rewriting Beethoven's Seventh Symphony*, I retained one essential musical idea from each movement of the original work. From the first movement, I couldn't resist working with the huge barbaric opening chords. From the second movement, I took the divine and other-worldly theme, adjusting it slightly so that when it ends, it is a key one half-step higher. The theme continues to cycle around the slowly spirals up. From the third movement, I lifted the background accompaniment and brought it to the foreground. From the fourth movement I used the main theme.

"Did this 'rewriting' transform the music, or did the music transform me? Throughout the process I questioned, 'Who am I to take these precious notes and mash them into clay?' But at a certain point, I simply got lost in the material. I reveled in its power. I forgot about these questions in my mind. I forgot about Beethoven."

It seems important to give Beethoven himself the last word here. Beethoven's Symphony no. 7 is perhaps his most ebullient, joyous, and extroverted work. Its themes are centered more around rhythmic energy than melody, with a feeling of dance and movement throughout. Composed in 1811-12, and apparently coinciding with his series of "Immortal Beloved" love letters, Beethoven conducted the premiere in Vienna in 1813 with a fabulous roster of composers playing in the orchestra: Domenico Dragonetti, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Louis Spohr, and Antonio Salieri, among others.

The Symphony no. 7 is a feat of compositional virtuosity, perhaps his most perfect work, and Beethoven knew it, calling it "one of the happiest products of my poor talents". It boldly explores the possibilities of symphonic form, at the same time displaying an unyielding developmental logic and even simple, process-driven architecture. While centered in A Major, it transforms remote harmonic centers into brightly-hued complements. The first movement's introduction (the longest yet in the history of the symphony), is draped in grandeur but somehow winnows itself down to just one pitch: a single "E",

which through iteration catches fire as the dance rhythm which underlies the remaining movement.

The well-known second movement *Allegretto* uses a motive of long-short-short-long-long, which relates to the dactylic hexameter poetic rhythm of Greek epic poems. Though unconfirmed, it is speculated that Beethoven may have composed this as an ode to his favorite book, Homer's *Odyssey*. The third movement *Presto* is impulsively playful, alternately hard-edged and light, with a secondary theme that speaks softness and longing. And the finale is simply driven, with a relentless sense of forward movement and celebration.

The composer Richard Wagner famously described Beethoven's 7th as "the Apotheosis of the Dance itself: it is Dance in its highest aspect, the loftiest deed of bodily motion, incorporated into an ideal mold of tone." This notion of the music itself dancing, evolving to a place where it assumes its own destiny, is seemingly the transformation that Beethoven aspired to, and worked so hard to facilitate through the lengthy reworking of notes on paper. In taking the storm and stress of his life, and transforming it into musical energy much bigger than himself, Beethoven gave us music which dances on—ever radical and invigorating, and with enough substance that others can take a spin with it.

—John Kennedy

## ARTISTS



JOHN KENNEDY (conductor), Spoleto Festival USA Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities, has led acclaimed performances and premieres worldwide of opera, ballet, orchestral, and new music. Kennedy has had a long association with Spoleto Festival USA, first as a member of the Festival Orchestra and later as director of the Music in Time series. In recent seasons

he has conducted the Festival's widely-regarded recent American premiere productions of the operas *Faustus*, *the Last Night* by Pascal Dusapin (2007), *Proserpina* by Wolfgang Rihm (2010), *Émilie* by Kaija Saariaho (2011), *Kepler* by Philip Glass (2012), and *Matsukaze* by Toshio Hosokawa (2013). As artistic director of New York's Essential Music from 1988-2001 and Santa Fe New Music from 2001-2012, he has for many years been a visionary leader in the integration of new and classic repertoire and in contextualizing it for today's audiences. A regular guest at the Lincoln Center Festival, Kennedy has guest conducted at festivals worldwide and with organizations from the Santa Fe Opera to New York City Ballet. A resident artist of the music department at Santa Clara University in Silicon Valley, he has also served as guest conductor in residence at Oberlin Conservatory. Kennedy is the composer of over 90 works, including opera, orchestral, chamber, and experimental works that have been performed throughout the world. Kennedy's work was selected as the official US entry at the ISCM World New Music Days in Sydney, and is available on several CDs. He has been commissioned by numerous organizations, including Sarasota Opera for the opera *The Language of the Birds* and the Santa Fe Opera for *Trinity*.

THE SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA ORCHESTRA appears at the Festival in many different configurations, performing in opera, symphonic, choral, chamber, and contemporary music performances. Formed anew each year through nationwide auditions, the orchestra is largely comprised of young professionals or players in advanced degree programs. Alumni of the Spoleto Festival USA Orchestra are on the rosters of leading orchestras throughout the world, including the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, and San Francisco Symphony, among others.