

# Alon Goldstein, Pianist

## Beethoven Five Concertos Project



“By now, the audience had truly bonded with Goldstein as well as him with the RSO. The patrons were mesmerized by the brilliant technique, the gentle touch in the very pianissimo middle movements, the extraordinary poise and grace in every move, the virtuosic ability rivaled by few and the warmth and humbleness that made him everyone’s friend. The orchestra and pianist were always in perfect dynamic balance, performing as one (...)

The five-minute standing ovation with cheers and bravos said it all. Graciously, and of interest to all, he performed the final movement of the first concerto of the festival as an encore. The 16-year journey of Beethoven’s concertos had come to an end. Every patron left the concert hall aware that they had experienced something very special that would last in their collective memories for years to come.”

*Rockford Register Star, May 14, 2007*

**ALON GOLDSTEIN**, piano – **ROCKFORD SYMPHONY** (Steven Larson, conductor)

Rockford IL, May 2007: ***A multi-media presentation contextualizing Beethoven's life and work through his 5 piano concerti.***

### The Project

*I wanted to share with you my experience with the Rockford Symphony (Rockford, IL) in May playing the five Beethoven concerti and the ‘Choral Fantasy’. Owing to the breadth of the repertoire and the sheer size of the forces involved, this Beethoven project resulted in important discoveries for me personally as well as for the orchestra and the community.*

*When first discussing this project with Brian Ritter (the orchestra’s Executive Director) and with Steven Larsen (the orchestra’s Music Director), we decided to structure the festival chronologically in order to present a narrative through Beethoven’s life and work. After this week-long festival, we—the orchestra, its staff, its patrons, the audiences, and I—discovered that this journey changed us in many different ways: we were different persons after experiencing all of this music in this context.*

*The Executive Director of the orchestra came to me after the second concert saying, “They got it (the audience), the journey that we were undertaking.” He felt, as I did, that this second concert, after having the perspective of the first, allowed everyone to begin to experience the process and progress of Beethoven’s life and music AND to be able to relate and create one’s own internal dialogue when listening.*

*Brian and Steve had the wonderful idea of engaging in a brief discussion before each concerto. After careful preparation, we presented each concerto in its historical, biographical, and creative contexts. This transformed the concert hall into an intimate living room (a very large one at that) in which we were inviting people to experience something that we felt so passionate about. In addition to the concerts and pre-performance talks on stage, the orchestra organized lectures, film screenings, and panel discussions throughout the week.*

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### *How it was done –*

- \*\* Three concerts within a week in which the five piano concerti were played chronologically, to give the sense of a journey.
- \*\* Prior to each concerto, there was a short five minute discussion between the conductor and the soloist about the era (in the first half each concert), and more specifically about Beethoven's characteristics (in the second half of each concert).
- \*\* During these short presentations, related slides were shown in the background of key figures (Haydn, Mozart, Napoleon), places (Bonn in 1770, Vienna in 1792), artifacts (the ear trumpet), facsimiles and more.
- \*\* As an encore, we played a little teaser – a movement from a concerto that will be played at the following concert.
- \*\* within that week or during the preceding week related movies were shown ("Immortal Beloved" and "Copying Beethoven") as well as lectures on interesting topics such as Beethoven's cause of deafness.
- \*\* School visits during the week by the soloist in which a 40-minute program on Beethoven was offered with a performance of one of his sonatas.

### *What made the difference –*

- \*\* the short discussions by the soloist and the conductor allowed for a more direct and personal connection with the audience.
- \*\* having the concerts in close proximity (within a week) gave the audience perspective and a point of reference. They could put what they have heard into a larger context.
- \*\* The related slides gave a much more human feel to the subject – these are the real artifacts, the real people allowing the audience to identify with them.
- \*\* The lectures and movies gave the larger picture of the time, people and places in which this remarkable repertoire was created.
- \*\* The encores generated anticipation.

### *Signs of success –*

- \*\* Each concert had more audience attendance. The last concert was practically sold-out.
- \*\* On the day of the second concert, the Chicago Tribune listed this festival as "critics pick" for the week.
- \*\* The reviews throughout the festival: "People will remember this in years to come"
- \*\* The Orchestra received an award for programming this project.
- \*\* The decision to plan another festival for the succeeding season - "Schumann and Brahms": three concerts within a week – the first two feature solo and chamber works with members of the orchestra.
  - the first concert about Clara and Robert Schumann
  - the second concert focused on Brahms
  - the festival finale included Schumann concerto and Brahms concerto no. 1

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### The Concerts

#### Concert 1: *Concerto n. 1 & 2*

The first concert (Sunday matinee) was titled *Beethoven Revealed*. We began with a brief discussion about Bonn in 1770, Beethoven's early education, his admiration of Mozart, the move to Vienna, and his studies with Haydn. Slides of Bonn, Vienna, the meeting with Mozart, the princes' salons in Vienna, and Beethoven at 25 were projected on stage behind us. Following this short presentation was the performance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> piano concerto, which, in fact, was the first chronologically speaking that Beethoven composed. On the second half, we discussed the characteristics of Beethoven's early compositions: virtuosity, improvisation, the influence of Haydn and Mozart, the originality of his ideas, all accompanied by related slides, and then delved into the 1<sup>st</sup> piano concerto.

As an encore, we decided to do a "teaser" to set the mood for the up-coming concert entitled *Beethoven Betrayed*, so we played the second movement of the 4<sup>th</sup> piano concerto.

The *Chicago Tribune* mentioned the up-coming two concerts and selected them as "Critics Picks". This, along with the interviews on TV and radio, breathed even more excitement into the community.

#### Concert 2: *Concerto n. 3 & 4*

The next concert -*Beethoven Betrayed*-, was on Tuesday evening. It included the 3<sup>rd</sup> piano concerto on the first half and the 4<sup>th</sup> piano concerto on the second. We discussed Beethoven's deafness resulting in despair that ultimately led him to write the famous Heiligenstadt Testimony, which we read in parts. The slides in the background were of Beethoven at 34, his ear trumpet, the city of Heiligenstadt, and a facsimile of the Testament. Before tackling this beautiful and haunting work, we talked about the "Heroic" Beethoven as well as the mystery of the "Immortal Beloved". The audience was ready for another encore, which was (in the spirit of the previous idea), the Recapitulation of the last movement of the 5<sup>th</sup> piano concerto.

#### **Interlude**

With three days between the second and third concerts, I offered to do some 'outreach' activities for the orchestra and the community, especially since I am strongly committed to sharing this incredible music with everyone. The orchestra organized all sorts of events: classes at local schools, house concerts, lunches with patrons... These activities were extremely rewarding because they allowed me to go into the community and interact with persons of all ages and interests in music. In other words, this allowed me to get even closer to the community and place where I was performing.

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### Concert 3: *Concerto n. 5*

The third and final concert—*Beethoven Triumphant*—took place that Saturday evening. Before tackling the ‘Emperor’ concerto on the second half, the orchestra performed all of the incidental music for *Egmont* before the intermission. To put the music in its historical context, we talked about Napoleon and Vienna during the wars of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We also revisited some of the compositional characteristics of the earlier concerti and demonstrated how they were further developed in the 5<sup>th</sup> concerto (‘Emperor’).

For the encore that evening, my idea was to play the last movement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> concerto, which was the first work of the festival, in order to close the circular journey. The level of commitment from everyone for all of this to succeed was just so thrilling and inspiring. The Executive Director knew we needed to find a way to get the music, and he did. I shared this story with the audience after the performance of the “Emperor”. We then returned to that movement and closed the circle. During the applause, all of us in the hall felt that we did not want this journey to come to an end. It was intense; it was human; it had its ups and downs, ambition and promise, tragedy and despair, triumph and hope. It was indeed a festival devoted to Beethoven’s music and thus really a festival devoted to us as human beings.