

“The Prometheus Project,” as seen and heard through the archives

by Mike Telin



In Greek mythology, Prometheus not only defied the gods by stealing fire, he gave that fire to humanity so that civilization could progress. “I think in a way everyone can be a Prometheus,” Cleveland Orchestra music director Franz Welser-Möst says during a [video](#) where he discusses examples of Promethean heroes and the difficulty of freedom. “MLK is one, Dr. King clearly...was extremely powerful in taking that fiery spark of an idea and carrying that torch with him to the very end of his life. When you read his speeches there’s constantly that talk that we have to empower people.”

This week at Severance Hall, The Cleveland Orchestra will conclude its centenary season with “[The Prometheus Project](#),” a festival celebrating Beethoven’s Promethean ideas about how art can transform humanity. On Wednesday, May 9 at 7:30

pm in Reinberger Hall, Franz Welser-Möst will discuss his conception for the project and the idea of re-examining Beethoven’s music for modern audiences by looking at the composer’s own thoughts, and the ideas and beliefs of the revolutionary era he lived in.

Welser-Möst will be joined by Mark Evan Bonds, professor of music at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who has written about that period and how the perception of music’s meaning changed during Beethoven’s lifetime. The free event will be moderated by Francesca Brittan, a professor at Case Western Reserve University.

From Thursday, May 10 through Saturday, May 19 at Severance Hall, Welser-Möst will lead the Orchestra in a series of concerts featuring Beethoven’s nine symphonies and

four overtures as well as the *Große Fuge*. Check our [Concert Listings](#) for program information, days, and times.

“When they announced the project last March, we thought that the best way to explore it would be through archival recordings,” Orchestra archivist Andria Hoy said during an interview. “We thought, what if we had a musicologist/essay writer research the symphonies and the philosophical connection to the myth, and pair that with historical recordings?”



With a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Hoy and assistant archivist Deborah Hefling were able to hire Alexander Lawler, a Ph.D. student in Historical Musicology at CWRU, who had having previously written “From the Archives” online essays and designed a photo digitization and metadata project. The funds were used to digitize historic recordings and some of the video footage, develop the area of the Orchestra’s website where it would be housed, and for the writer’s fee.

Hoy said there were 500 recordings of the symphonies. “We divided those into subsets of what had been digitized, then narrowed the list further by choosing performances that were conducted by music directors and important staff conductors, so Alex had around 130 recordings to listen to.”

Did Alex Lawler know what he was getting into when he took on the project? “I had no idea,” he said during a conversation at the archives. “I had done something like this before when I was an intern here two years ago. But there were a lot of recordings to sort through and different conductors to highlight, so it became a game and I needed to listen to everything. But I couldn’t just choose something because it was a great recording, I also needed to consider history. For example, for the Sixth Symphony I chose one from Kiev during the 1965 tour behind the Iron Curtain.”

When it came to the essays, Lawler tried to adopt a writing style that bridged the casual and academic. “There is a lot I left out because there is limited space, and there will also be in-depth program notes. What I wrote needed to tell people how a certain piece interacts with the Promethean idea of the transformative nature of art. It was difficult.”

By listening to so many recordings of Beethoven’s symphonies and overtures, Lawler said that he gained a greater appreciation for the different worlds that the composer creates. “And a greater appreciation for just how amazing those places are — his use of harmony, motive, and instrumentation to tell very different stories.”

Lawler was surprised at the amount of video footage there was. “I’m very proud of the video of the Fifth Symphony. It’s got Maazel from a 60th anniversary concert, Dohnányi at the Proms and in a live concert at Tower City, the 9/11 memorial with Jahja Ling, Szell during a Bell Telephone Hour classic, and one with Franz.”

Below is a list of “Prometheus Project” programs with corresponding recordings, videos, and essays, as well as commentary by Franz Welser-Möst.

May 10 - Thursday at 7:30 pm

Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*

[Symphony No. 1](#)

- 1: Adagio molto – Allegro con brio: Erich Leinsdorf at Severance Hall, March 15, 1979.
- 3: Menuetto: Allegro molto e vivace: Artur Rodzinski, recorded December 28, 1941, released Columbia Records, 1943.
- 3: Menuetto: Allegro molto e vivace: Lorin Maazel recorded April 29, 1978, released CBS Masterworks, 1979.

[Symphony No. 3](#) (“Eroica”)

2. Marcia funebre: George Szell at Severance Hall, October 17, 1946 and May 7, 1970.
4. Allegro Molto: Christoph von Dohnányi at Severance Hall, October 20, 1983.

May 11 - Friday at 8:00 pm

Overture to *Egmont*

Franz discusses examples of Promethean heroes and the difficulty of freedom. Features an excerpt of the Orchestra’s 60th Anniversary TV Special (1978), with Lorin Maazel conducting.

Part 2: Louis Lane at Severance Hall, December 8, 1967.

Part 3: George Szell at Blossom Music Center, July 20, 1968.

[Symphony No. 4](#)

Franz discusses the “problem” of Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony, and how humor helps us to better understand the work.

2. Adagio: Lorin Maazel at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, September 1, 1977.
3. Allegro vivace: George Szell, Epic (Columbia), released in 1947.
4. Allegro ma non troppo: Jahja Ling at Blossom Music Center, July 2, 1999.

[Symphony No. 7](#)

1. Poco sostenuto – Vivace: Franz Welser-Möst at Severance Hall, October 6, 2007.
3. Presto – Assai meno presto: Christoph von Dohnányi at Royal Albert Hall, London, September 5, 1990.
4. Allegro con brio: Leonard Slatkin at Blossom Music Center, July 18, 1999.

May 12 - Saturday at 8:00 pm

Overture to [Coriolan](#)

Exposition: Lorin Maazel at Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, September 1, 1977.
end of recapitulation, coda: Franz Welser-Möst at Severance Hall, May 23, 2010

[Symphony No. 8](#)

Franz discusses how the Eighth Symphony is a reinvention of the symphonic past.

3. Tempo di minuetto: Christoph von Dohnányi at Severance Hall, February 6, 1983.
2. Allegretto Scherzando: Artur Rodzinski at Severance Hall, February 22, 1936.
2. Allegretto Scherzando: Franz Welser-Möst at Severance Hall, May 20, 2011.

[Symphony No. 5](#)

Franz Welser-Möst discusses what he hopes people will get from Beethoven’s music, leading into a series of archival clips of the Orchestra throughout its history performing the symphony.

May 13 - Sunday at 3:00 pm

[Symphony No. 6](#) (“Pastoral”)

Franz discusses another side to Beethoven’s style — pastoral and distinctly non-heroic — and connects it to Romantic-era ideas of sensation and feeling.

1. Allegretto, “Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside.” George Szell at The Palace of Culture, Kiev (USSR), April 23, 1965.
4. Allegro, “Thunder, Storm.” Franz Welser-Möst at Severance Hall, October 3, 2002.
5. Allegro, “Shepherd’s Song. Cheerful and Thankful Feelings after the Storm.” Christoph von Dohnányi at Severance Hall, December 12, 1986.

[Symphony No. 2](#)

1. Adagio molto – Allegro con brio: Pierre Boulez at Severance Hall, November 24, 1967.
2. Larghetto: Franz Welser-Möst at Severance Hall, January 20, 2004.
3. Scherzo: Allegro: Christoph von Dohnányi at Severance Hall, September 23, 1993.
4. Allegro Molto: Pierre Boulez at Severance Hall, November 24, 1967.

Leonore [Overture No. 3](#)

Franz Welser-Möst discusses the role of freedom in *Fidelio*, Beethoven’s only opera, and one of its overtures, *Leonore Overture No. 3*.

Christoph von Dohnányi at Severance Hall, September 30, 1993.

Christoph von Dohnányi at Severance Hall, February 6, 1983.

Franz Welser-Möst at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, September 27, 2015.

May 17 - Thursday at 7:30 pm, May 18 - Friday at 8:00 pm, and May 19 - Saturday at 8:00 pm

[Symphony No. 9](#) (“Choral”)

As Franz explains, the first three movements of the Ninth Symphony recall past ideas and themes that Beethoven had previously explored.

Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso: Christoph von Dohnányi at London’s Royal Albert Hall, February 5, 1986.

Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso: Franz Welser-Möst at Severance Hall, February 11, 2007.

Molto vivace (Trio): Robert Shaw at Blossom Music Center, July 23, 1995.

Adagio molto e cantabile: Christoph von Dohnányi at Severance Hall, March 10, 2012.

Adagio molto e cantabile: Erich Leinsdorf at Severance Hall, April 28, 1983.

Finale: George Szell at Blossom Music Center, July 21, 1968.

Finale: Leonard Slatkin at Blossom Music Center, July 11, 1993.

Finale: Erich Leinsdorf at Severance Hall, April 28, 1983.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 8, 2018.

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