

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY
FATE AND DEFIANCE – MARCH 22, 2026
DANIEL WILEY, MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR
PROGRAM NOTES

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony must be the most famous symphony ever written; the four-note motto which opens it is recognized even by people who don't like classical music. But the symphony bewildered and amused its first audiences. When the Philharmonic Society of London first read the symphony, the players laughed openly, and the conductor, none other than J.P. Salomon, called it "rubbish." He was eventually won over by the extraordinary power of the symphony. As Thayer relates, several years later, after another attempt at playing the first movement, "Salomon laid his violin upon the pianoforte, walked to the front and, turning to the orchestra said, 'Gentlemen, some years ago I called this symphony rubbish; I wish to retract every word I then said, as I now consider it one of the greatest compositions I have ever heard.'"

Beethoven struggled for many years on the symphony. His sketchbooks reveal that he began sketching ideas as early as 1801, even before writing the Third Symphony. Serious work began in 1805, and the symphony was completed in late 1807 or early 1808. The entire first movement evolves from the famous opening four-note motto, which Beethoven described as "Fate is knocking at the door." It is a masterful demonstration of symphonic thinking and development. The gentler and more lyrical second movement is a theme and variations. The third movement opens mysteriously with lower strings and winds and then the horns belt out the motto rhythm. The music subsides to a whisper and then, without interruption, the magnificent finale begins. At the end, the motto appears again, this time inverted, as the symphony ends in a blaze of glory.

The Fifth Symphony was a remarkable achievement and broke new ground in symphonic thinking. It introduced the idea of progressive tonality: the symphony begins in C minor but ends triumphantly in C Major. He used the novel idea of blending two movements together, and more than just playing them without interruption, Beethoven brings back themes from the third movement and uses them in the fourth. For the first time the orchestration would use instruments not heard in a symphony before: the piccolo, contrabassoon, and trombones. The Fifth Symphony was dedicated to two of his patrons, Prince von Lobkowitz and Count Rasumovsky. The Fifth was first performed in Vienna's Theater-an-der-Wien on December 12th, 1808, with Beethoven conducting.

Georges Bizet (1838-75) wrote the opera *Carmen* in 1874, which was first performed at the Opéra-Comique on March 3, 1875. Inspired by real, scandalous tales collected by the author of the original 1845 novella written by Prosper Mérimée while travelling in Spain, *Carmen* is a dramatic tale of love, jealousy and tragedy. It tells the story of a hopeless soldier, Don José, who is seduced by Carmen, a fiery gypsy woman with an appetite for smuggling. Abandoning his childhood sweetheart and turning his back on his military career, the opera follows José in his pursuit of Carmen's attention. Though despite his efforts and desperation, Don José's quest for love doesn't end quite how he'd hoped...

Due to the subject matter, scandal ensued. But success came quickly and made *Carmen* the most performed French opera in the world. Bizet couldn't enjoy this success: he died on June 3, 1875, the day of the 33rd performance. After his death, his close friend, the American-born Ernest Giraud, made two well-known and popular suites for concert performance. But Giraud made many changes to Bizet's score, including the orchestration. Nor does the order of the movements in the suites follow the sequence of events in the opera.

In creating his *Carmen Symphony*, composer and conductor José Serebrier largely retained Bizet's original orchestration with the music as Bizet intended it. He reallocated some of the voice parts to instruments closer in range to the characters that sing each respective number in the opera. For example, Carmen's Habañera goes to the alto saxophone, and Escamillo's big Toreador number features solo trombone. The *Carmen Symphony* also stays mostly true to the original plot, following the thread of the opera in a sequence of 12 movements, containing all the music in two Giraud suites plus some additional music, such as the "The Wedding" from the opening of Act 4 and the sinister little Fugato from the end of Act 1.

Serebrier has recorded the *Carmen Symphony* twice: the first recording is on the Bis label with the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra and the second on Naxos with the United States Marine Band in a transcription made for winds.

~~~Marty Haub