

## EMPEROR

7.30PM, Thursday 13 February  
Auckland Town Hall

# Programme Notes

**Claire Cowan** (1983-)

*My Alphabet of Light* (2005; rev. 2025)

DURATION: c.6'

"In music and art I admire simplicity, emotion and originality," writes multi-award-winning composer Claire Cowan. These qualities are evident in *My Alphabet of Light*, Cowan's first piece to be programmed by a professional orchestra and written while she was still studying orchestration at university. The title, Cowan says, "Is a metaphor for the language of music, and the personal way I express myself through the light and shades of harmony, rhythm and melodic movement."

The rising melodic gesture that opens the work recurs throughout, each time with a different colouring and each time extended further. Translucent and fluctuating harmonic textures allow each instrumental voice to sing through as the melody passes between them, a constantly evolving diaphanous spectrum of sound.

**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

Piano Concerto No.5 'Emperor' (1809)

- I. *Allegro con brio*
- II. *Adagio un poco mosso*
- III. *Rondo: Allegro*

*Second and third movements played continuously*

DURATION: c.40'

Beethoven's fifth and final piano concerto was written on an Erhard piano gifted to him by the manufacturer, with technical improvements that provided greater resonance and a powerful, more legato-oriented tone. If the power of this instrument can be heard in the first movement, then the central Adagio gives ample opportunity for exercising smooth legato. The rhythmically driven finale, by contrast, requires immaculate attention to the sprightly articulation in the Rondo theme.

The score opens with a dramatic  $E_b$  chord from the orchestra, echoing Beethoven's Symphony No.3 'Eroica' with its opening  $E_b$  major chordal punctuation; here however, the sustained chord gives way to a rippling cadenza before the orchestra announces the main themes.

Although Beethoven had begun his career in Vienna as a pianist, by 1809 his deafness had progressed to a point that he could no longer perform as soloist. The concerto was first performed privately by Beethoven's patron Archduke Rudolph (to whom it is dedicated) before receiving later public premieres. Although Beethoven the performer was legendary for his improvisatory skills, Beethoven the composer distrusted other performers and wrote out the cadenzas in full. He even went so far as to publish in the score — at the traditional moment where a pianist might have improvised a cadenza — "do not play a cadenza; play the following passage". When the work was finally heard in public, its compositional and virtuoso strengths were immediately praised: "It is without doubt one of the most original, imaginative and effective but also one of the most difficult of existing concertos."

**Conductor** Giordano Bellincampi  
**Piano** Haochen Zhang

## INTERVAL

**Richard Strauss** (1864-1949)

*Ein Heldenleben* (1898)

- I. *The Hero*
  - II. *The Hero's Adversaries*
  - III. *The Hero's Companion*
  - IV. *The Battlefield*
  - V. *The Hero's Peaceful Labours*
  - VI. *The Hero's Withdrawal from the World and Fulfilment*
- Movements played continuously*

DURATION: c.50'

Composed on the cusp of the 20th century and at the zenith of the orchestra's evolution from courtly string ensemble to mighty collection of massed strings and newly-established concert instruments (including fully-valved brass, keyed woodwinds, harp and broad array of percussion), Richard Strauss' tone poem *Ein Heldenleben* ('A Hero's Life') was hailed as "an extraordinary work, drunk with heroism, colossal, irregular, trivial, and sublime."

Despite a detailed scenario for the tone-poem, Strauss discouraged listeners from following it too closely. "It is sufficient" he said, "to feel the two elements: the hero, and his enemies."

'The Hero' is perhaps better termed 'the Artist' as the work is autobiographical: Strauss depicts himself with a melody that constantly strives upwards, invoking Beethoven's Symphony No.3 'Eroica', while the adversaries, scathing music-critics, are portrayed in chattering woodwind over ungainly tubas.

In the third section — a violin concerto in all but name — Strauss depicts his wife, the celebrated and mercurial soprano Pauline de Ahna, describing her as, "very complex... never twice alike, every minute different to what she was the minute before." Trumpet fanfares introduce the battlefield section, a snare drum bringing militaristic drive to the clashing orchestral forces which so thrilled audiences at the first performance.

Rather than leave the hero victorious on the battlefield, Strauss narrates peace-time activities, quoting over 30 of his own works, before portraying withdrawal from the world, his projection of a hero tired in old age. Menacing tubas sink into a hush of sound over which the cor anglais meditates on the opening 'heroic' theme. Critic Romain Rolland complained to Strauss that he wanted the rousing and innovative battle music to close but Strauss rejected this: "I am not a hero..."

I haven't enough genius. I lack the strength of health and willpower... At the moment I need to create gentle, happy music. No more heroic things."

How true was Strauss' vision? Well, the violent and horrifying music of Salome and Elektra yet lay in his future.

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