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Beethoven reframed

Gianandrea Nosedà's new symphony cycle reevaluates the composer through the music of George Walker and the art of Mo Willems, as he tells **Charlotte Smith**



A modern trailblazer: the composer George Walker whose Sinfonias are being programmed with Beethoven

Conquering the Beethoven symphonies is a 'familiar rite of passage' for any serious conductor. So says Gianandrea Nosedà, currently midway through recording his second cycle of the works. Now in his sixth season as music director of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) in Washington DC, the Italian maestro first recorded the Beethovens live in 2005 as then principal conductor of the BBC Philharmonic in Manchester – interpretations that attracted 1.4 million download requests in a BBC trial, offered as part of Radio 3's 'The Beethoven Experience'.

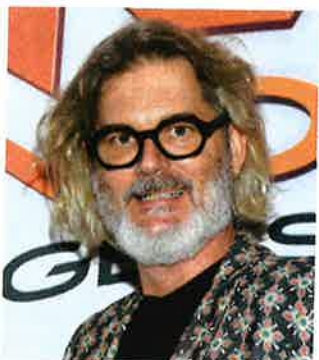
Nosedà's current Beethoven symphony cycle is being released digitally throughout 2023 and '24 on the National Symphony Orchestra's own label – launched four years ago in collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), of which Nosedà also serves as principal guest conductor – and the first album in the

set, Symphonies Nos 1 and 3, was released in September 2022. So far, so standard.

Yet, Nosedà isn't content with standard. Instead, he's found ways to look at Beethoven through the prism of two striking and individual lenses: first, through the musical language of pioneering composer George Walker; and second, through the visual imaginings of Kennedy Center Education artist-in-residence Mo Willems, who has designed nine eye-catching panels – one to represent each of the symphonies. The originals are on display at the Center in Washington, while reproductions grace the covers of each of the digital releases.

A contemporaneous project to record and release Walker's five Sinfonias as separate digital downloads with the NSO throughout 2022-24 will culminate in the cycle's physical release, and in May and June of this year Nosedà will conduct Sinfonias Nos 2, 3 and 5 in three live concerts at the Kennedy Center alongside Beethoven Symphonies Nos 2, 7, 8 and 9.

'I often like to programme works together that place a different emphasis on familiar repertoire,' Nosedà tells me. 'So, in these concerts there will be a Beethoven work first and then a Walker Sinfonia, which will be followed by another Beethoven work. The new context should completely change the way the audience hears the familiar Beethoven symphony.'



I had the opportunity to see his technique change over his career and feel the journey of his musical notes

Visual counterparts: Mo Willems's 'Beethoven Abstracted' series of nine paintings, each panel numbered according to the symphony depicted, involved a year's preparation; (below) Willems, artist-in-residence at the Kennedy Center

'The Sinfonias have been an extraordinary musical discovery for me,' he reveals, 'and in fact I have Simon Rattle to thank for this, as he suggested I look at the works, since George Walker was a native of DC, and the NSO had co-commissioned the Fourth Sinfonia. When Simon suggests something, you do it!'

'The works are concise in expression, rigorous in structure, and they have their unique sound world. Yet despite their miniature form – No. 4, 'Strands', is just nine-and-a-half minutes – in their orchestration they are very symphonic. Walker uses a symphony orchestra in much the same way as Mahler or Bruckner – though the language is, of course, more advanced and revolutionary, as it encompasses the Second Viennese School and influences including Shostakovich and Bartók. But most importantly, Walker finds a personal voice in the symphonic form – these works may be small in scale, but the control of the orchestration is supreme.'

Beethoven's voice, too, is always evident in his works. The Second Symphony, for example, which Nosedo has programmed in the second of his Walker/Beethoven concerts, 'marked a new boldness in the composer's work,' says Nosedo. 'It pushes harmonic boundaries with energy, comedy and defiance.' And his Ninth Symphony, which forms the centrepiece of the final concert in the series, is an 'epic drama' with 'grand emotional melodies'.

To programme against these magnificent, ambitious works Walker's small, spare and concise Sinfonias may seem surprising, but Nosedo is confident that despite their 'dense and cerebral' quality, and the 'blocks of sound' which form Walker's musical language, there is 'something in these works that also invites the audience to engage with them – they are still approachable somehow. They are complicated technically for both orchestra and conductor, but so beautifully constructed, taking the audience on a perfectly controlled emotional journey – covering a lot of ground, but in miniature form.'

Perhaps, then, they have helped Nosedo to view the Beethoven symphonies from a different perspective too. Is this new NSO cycle of the works substantially different to his 2005 cycle from Manchester? 'I'm not consciously conducting them differently each time, but somehow the result is different,' he concedes. 'And, certainly, that must be the case as I am no longer the same person that I was 15 or 20 years ago. I am older, for one – and perhaps wiser!'

Of course, Nosedo also brings a large and varied experience from his other conducting

The concept of programming a modern work amid more 'traditional' concert fare certainly isn't new, but Nosedo has very specific reasons for programming Beethoven and Walker together – beyond the obvious desire to celebrate Walker's work following his 100th anniversary in 2022. For Nosedo, Beethoven's music was 'ground-breaking, original and provocative' when premiered during his lifetime, and Walker, too, was 'a trailblazer', his career a string of quite stunning 'firsts'.

A child prodigy, Walker enrolled in Oberlin Conservatory at the age of 14 and went on to become the first Black student to earn an Artist Diploma at the Curtis Institute in 1945. In the same year, he also became the first Black instrumentalist to play a recital at New York's Town Hall, sponsored by the violinist Efrem Zimbalist, and later became the first Black soloist to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy. Subsequent accolades include his Doctorate in Musical Arts from the Eastman School of Music in 1956 and the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his 1996 composition for voice and orchestra, *Lilacs* – the first time a Black composer had received the award.

But this catalogue of honours would be nothing if Nosedo failed to see a connection between the music of Beethoven and Walker. What does he find compelling in the Sinfonias?

MO WILLEMS, GETTY



Prize-winner: Stephen Albert

At the cutting edge Promoting new works

The National Symphony Orchestra has a history of commissioning new works, beginning in 1956 with Paul Creston's Symphony No 5, performed under the baton of then principal conductor Howard Mitchell.

The orchestra has since commissioned and premiered 127 works over the years, due in no small part by the Hechinger Foundation's commissioning project, established in 1983, which has fostered more than 70 works by more than 50 American composers.

Among these are the Pulitzer Prize-winning 'RiverRun' Symphony No. 1 by Stephen Albert, premiered in 1985, and George Walker's 2012 Sinfonia No. 4, 'Strands', a co-commission with the Cincinnati, New Jersey and Pittsburgh Symphonies.

More recently, the NSO gave the November 2019 DC premiere of Kevin Puts's *The Brightness of Light*, inspired by letters between American artist Georgia O'Keeffe and her husband, photographer Alfred Stieglitz – and in March 2019, Teddy Abrams conducted Lera Auerbach's *ARCTICA*, a meditation on climate change featuring the composer herself at the piano, a chorus singing in Inuit languages and a percussionist playing ice blocks.

ELMAN STUDIO/GETTY



Europeans at heart: Gianandrea Noseda feels a connection with the NSO

roles, both current and previous, to this project and to the NSO in general. Not only is he often in London at the helm of the LSO, but also in Switzerland, where he is general director of Zurich Opera, and in fact, he is currently recording another large cycle – of Shostakovich's complete symphonies – with the LSO. But despite the NSO's American home, he believes the orchestra retains a 'European sensibility' in terms of its sound, mainly because of its heritage of principal conductors, including Christoph

'The players speak my language – but also have a certain way of articulating phrases'

Eschenbach, Mstislav Rostropovich, Antal Doráti and its founder Hans Kindler. 'So, the players speak my language,' he says. 'But they also have a particular way of articulating notes and phrases – a certain crispness that is their own. They are a wonderful orchestra.'

To this very European sensibility comes Chicago-born Mo Willems, a writer, animator, voice actor and children's author, whose credits include the animated television series *Sheep in the Big City* for Cartoon Network, the children's book series *Elephant and Piggie* and his work on *Sesame Street*, for which he received six Emmy Awards. His artist-in-residence position at Kennedy Center involves developing and presenting multidisciplinary programming and performances across all its strands – and

his colourful 'Beethoven Abstracted' series of paintings, representing the Beethoven Symphonies, is just one of these projects.

Hardly a straightforward enterprise, Willems's panels required a great deal of time and thought. 'The idea of creating art specifically to view while listening to Beethoven's symphonies compelled me to spend a year researching, listening and painting,' he explains. 'The result is these nine abstractions, a visual art piece for each symphony, rendered in panels whose sizes represent the lengths of each movement.'

Willems believes the project enabled him to 'get to know Beethoven in a new way' and to 'dialogue' with the composer. 'I had the opportunity to see his technique change over his career and feel the journey of his musical notes.'

A case in point is the difference between his first panel, for Symphony No 1 – which 'borrows liberally from constructivism, an early, formal abstraction style', just as Beethoven is ' beholden to his predecessors, Haydn and Mozart' – and his second panel: 'As Beethoven loosens up in his Second Symphony, so does the painting, with fundamental circles being guided throughout the work in and on waves of coloured ink.'

Nosedá, clearly, is pleased with the panels, which he regards both as an insight and reflection. 'Beethoven masterfully combined colour and form' in these works, he says, 'and Mo has vividly captured this in his paintings.' And just as Willems hopes the artwork will 'spark something' in audiences, Nosedá is sure this interdisciplinary project will help to cast new focuses on the much-loved symphonies. Between Walker and Willems, Beethoven resonates 'with even greater brilliance'. ☺