

ARTS

'Orchestra's finest hour': Pianist Anton Nel joins symphony for sublime Beethoven cycle



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International soloist and longtime Austinite Anton Nel rehearses on the Austin Symphony Orchestra's new Steinway concert grand earlier this year. Ricardo B. Brazziell/American-Statesman

It will be remembered as a historic weekend for Austin entertainment and culture.

Willie Nelson galvanized 3,500 music lovers for the 50th anniversary of "[Austin City Limits](#)" on Thursday on the [Long Center for the Performing Arts](#) lawn. Later, more than 100,000 sports fans watched the [University of Texas Longhorns](#) face off against the University of Georgia [Bulldogs](#) at DK Royal Memorial Stadium, and another 120,000 attended the [United States Grand Prix](#) at the Circuit of the Americas. (Some memories will linger more happily than others.)

Consider yet another historic cultural event last weekend: Some 5,000 guests cheered madly as Austin soloist [Anton Nel](#) and the [Austin Symphony Orchestra](#), led by [Peter Bay](#), performed all five Beethoven piano concertos at the Long Center's Dell Hall over the course of two concerts on Friday and Saturday.

It might have been this orchestra's finest hour.

5 superstars supercharge 5 piano concertos

Arranged as a chamber orchestra — a smaller ensemble harking back to those of Beethoven's day — the musicians treated each of these concertos almost as symphonies, so closely did they engage in a harmonic partnership with the soloist for a cycle that foregrounded five superstars.

- **Ludwig van Beethoven:** It is easy to forget how radically Beethoven revolutionized Western music. Although in the first two concertos, he keeps one foot firmly in the musical world of the previous 100 years, the evolution of his discoveries is made eminently clear as one hears the five of them performed virtually back to back. By the time we experience No. 5, the "Emperor," at the end of the program, it's as if we have arrived in a new universe.
- **Anton Nel:** How lucky is Austin to be home to a concert pianist of Nel's stature? While he travels often to play with the world's great orchestras, he has devoted at least 20 concert pairs to his hometown ensemble, a testament to his warm, collaborative friendship with Bay and his team. "This week has been one of the happiest of my life," Nel announced before the first concert commenced. "Making music with all these friends."
- **Peter Bay:** Since he was named music director and conductor in 1998, Bay has transformed the classical scene in this city. Not just through the strength of his sterling musicianship, but also because Bay is a decent and amiable guy who is curious about the world around him, interested in more than just musical technique. In other words, a perfect fit for Austin. No wonder more than 80 orchestras have pressed him to conduct in their cities. Again, how lucky can we get?
- **Dell Hall:** I recently vacationed in Belgium and the Netherlands. On my first full day there, I fulfilled a life-long ambition to hear music, including Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, "Eroica," in the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, acoustically one of the most expressive halls in the world. The Dell at the Long Center is not in that league, but in our seats near the front of the mezzanine, we were treated to a rich sound that allowed each instrument and section their own clear voices.
- **The new Steinway:** Earlier this year, Nel introduced a new 9-foot [American Steinway](#), the first concert piano owned outright by the orchestra. I could swear that this instrument's singular character makes a difference, not just filling the big hall when required, but also rendering as whole the lightest brush of the pianist's fingers on the keys, an effect that gathered the listening audience into a sort of gentle rapture.

What about those 5 concertos?

The program did not follow a strictly chronological order. Friday night was given over to Beethoven's first, second and fourth concertos; on Saturday, the third and the fifth, and those were preceded by the overture to the composer's "The Creatures of Prometheus," a rarely heard or seen 1801 ballet, which made me all the more curious to experience the entire thing.

- **Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major:** Clear and unambiguous, this piece first balances the architectural precision of the orchestra with the fluid play of the piano. Then it slows down to spark stirrings of romance between these two partners before romping to an exuberant conclusion.
- **Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major:** Here Beethoven is already moving beyond tradition by unfurling little surprises in the opening movement. Then pianist and orchestra intertwine in conversation during the second. The concerto ends with another romp that competes with the first's playfulness.
- **Piano Concert No. 4 in G Major:** No wonder Nel called this music "the most beautiful thing made by human beings." It's hard to argue with him. While the basic concerto structure remains nearly the same, the piano takes charge, leading us and the orchestra to the ecstatic second and third movements. For me, after staring so long at piano and pianist, it felt as though the instrument fairly levitated above the stage.
- **Piano Concert No. 3 in C Minor:** It seemed a little weird hearing this out of chronological order because for all its charms, the third is, unsurprisingly, not as mature as the fourth. To be sure, the first movement was inventive, intricate, and the second intimate, introspective. The third bopped up and down — and all around — for peak fun.
- **Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major "Emperor":** Nel did not merely muscle his way through any of the concertos, even this grandly imperial one. Oh, there was plenty of drama — spiky changes of rhythm, unexpected emotional interchanges between piano and orchestra. By this time, however, any possible reservations by the audience had been worn away, so the magnificent music just poured through us like the clear water of a flooded stream.

What to make of all this?

After the Olympian achievement of executing five concertos — each at least 30 minutes of nonstop performance in the space of a little over 24 hours — Nel and Bay appeared relieved, happy, exhausted. For his final encore, Nel played the heartbreakingly simple second movement of Beethoven's "Pathetique" sonata.

No flowery speeches, no elaborate cadenzas, no godlike manipulation of 10 extraordinary fingers plied across a keyboard. Just benevolent music unfolding softly like the night sky.

Although this orchestra has climbed many a Mount Everest, including similar gargantuan musical cycles, this one felt different. While all of Austin was abuzz with cultural activity last weekend, here the oldest arts group in town, [founded in 1911](#), proved that it could make history with a sublime gift to the city.