

[BEETHOVEN, "SYMPHONY NO. 5"]

NINA MOINI: Well, that piece really needs no introduction, but it's Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*. And while it's one of Beethoven's most infamous pieces, it's just one of hundreds of compositions written by the legendary pianist and composer. For nearly 20 years, Winona has been celebrating Beethoven with the Minnesota Beethoven Festival. The three-week long celebration began on Sunday and goes through July 19th. And joining me now is Ned Kirk, the artistic and managing director of the festival. Thanks for being here, Ned.

NED KIRK: Yeah, my pleasure. Thanks.

NINA MOINI: I love that this is a three-week long celebration. And I mean, Beethoven has earned it. This is the 19th season of the festival. I'm seeing that you've been around since day one, which is amazing. You're clearly the person to talk to. Tell us a little bit about how this festival came to be and why is it so long.

NED KIRK: Yeah, it's amazing that it's been 19 years already.

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

NED KIRK: This is the vision of a local businessman, Hugh Miller's passion for his whole life was Beethoven. And I don't know, he came up with this idea 20 years ago to say, hey, I'd really like to contribute something additional to the community, and I'd love to do it through this love of music that I have, and of course, through Beethoven in particular.

And honestly, it's as simple as that. We just sort of-- he came up with this idea, we talked about it, and there's little more details on that. But essentially that's honestly how it started. It was that fast, even. I recall also the conversation took place in February, and we talked about it for a month or so, and it was like, OK, let's do this.

And I was like, great, we'll start in the following year, 18 months later. He said, no, let's do this in four months. I was like, OK.

[LAUGHTER]

So we pulled together a small season and on short notice. And I actually had the entire 2008 season booked before we even had one concert in 2007.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

NED KIRK: Quite the juggernaut there.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. You made it happen, though. And then every year it's like, I'm sure you perfect things and you make little tweaks and you add things. Where does your passion, though, for classical music come from?

NED KIRK: Well, I'm a classically trained pianist my whole life. I went to college for it and performed a lot for many, many years. So yeah, that's from childhood, to answer that question.

NINA MOINI: You just always had a love for music. But what do you love about Beethoven, I wonder?

NED KIRK: Well, he's sort of timeless, right? I mean, he's one of the composers that sort of everybody has heard of him, no matter what. So I think that I'm not sure too many composers have a reputation quite so extreme and global.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And I bet that's why people continue to show up year after year. Even if you don't know a ton about classical music. It's a part of the culture. It's just something that's iconic in a way. Do you think people of all backgrounds come, or do you find mostly people who have a lot of knowledge in the area?

NED KIRK: Oh, it's actually both. And just to be clear, even though Beethoven is our middle name, right, Minnesota Beethoven Festival, and I do try to have the occasional all Beethoven program, but frankly, it's more of a namesake and it's a presence. But we have plenty of programs, that either the instrument or voice or whatever it is, there's nothing written for that by Beethoven. And so we do offer other things as well.

Time for Three has been here, which is an unusual group of two violins and bass. And nothing's written for them. And we've had saxophone. We've had flute. We've had a variety of other groups for which there's no Beethoven. So it's all of it. I guess this summer, just a quick answer, this summer, we have one program that's all Beethoven, but we also have one program that's no Beethoven.

NINA MOINI: No, that's good to know. I'm glad you clarified that. So there's really something for everybody. We're going to get to take a listen to one of the artists. This is pianist Aristo Sham, who is wonderful and extremely talented, with his performance of Beethoven's *Sonata No. 29*.

["SONATA NO. 29" PLAYING]

So I know his show is sold out. But tell us about this artist, if you would, Aristo Sham.

NED KIRK: Sure. Actually, his concert is not sold out, just FYI.

NINA MOINI: Oh, OK. Oh, good to know.

NED KIRK: No, it's fine. We have lots of sold out concerts this summer, but that particular one's not quite sold out. Yeah, he's a Cliburn gold medalist from just last year. And we've been featuring Cliburn medalists for many, many years.

We follow the competitions. I try to have the top three players come, if we can pull it off. We don't quite manage it for everybody. But there's such a great history with the Cliburn and the pianists that have come out of it.

And Aristo Sham is just the latest incredible talent that I'm so grateful we have a chance to feature him this summer. It's a little different than traditional in the sense that he's not this over-the-top showman, kind of wunderkind kind of pianist. He's a little bit older. He's a little more aristocratic.

He's a little more-- I don't know-- a deeper thinker. I don't know what to call it. That sounds corny to say that, but his performances are a little deeper and more thoughtful, and less flashy, I guess, even though he can do it all. So I'm very excited to have him with us this summer.

NINA MOINI: So I understand, too, that this festival is a part of a growing art scene in Winona. Can you tell us a little bit about that? How is that going?

NED KIRK: It's incredible what's going on in this town. There are so many different arts organizations that have grown up in the last 25 years. And I'm hesitant to mention any of them because I know I'll leave four of them out. But there's Shakespeare, and there's film, and yes, there's Beethoven, and there's art museums, and there's Bluegrass, and on and on.

And of course, one of the new things on the scene is, which I'm also part of this project, is we're building a concert hall and museum here called Minnesota Masterpiece Hall. So a 70,000-square foot building with a state-of-the-art concert hall that is acoustically designed for live music, specifically.

NINA MOINI: Cool.

NED KIRK: And it also has art galleries in the buildings. So that's the latest exciting project. It's more than just a building. It's an organization, meaning that we will have original programming for both music and art, and educational programming to wrap it together. And I could go on for a few hours.

NINA MOINI: No. No, this is wonderful. Well, we'll have to have you back to see how that's going. I'm seeing that it's set to finish construction this fall and open in 2027. So, hopefully, that'll be on schedule and everything. We only have about a minute left, Ned, and I want to make sure we can tell people how they can attend the festival over the next few weeks. And I don't want to say anything else is sold out if it's not. So let people know where they can get the up-to-date info.

NED KIRK: Sure. Everything's on our website, mnbeethovenfestival.org. Most tickets are purchased online, but even if a concert is sold out, I do encourage people, if they don't have to drive too far, come on down. Get their name on the waiting list, which we start an hour and a half before concert time, because we always have a few turn backs. People can't always attend everything they're trying to. So that's the easiest way, website or just come on down.

NINA MOINI: All right, Ned, thanks so much. Wishing you a great time over the course of the festival. Thank you so much.

NED KIRK: Thanks very much. Great to be here.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Ned Kirk is the artistic and managing director of the Minnesota Beethoven Festival.