



Jessie Montgomery, *Banner*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Oboe Concerto in C major, K. 314

Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

Great music has the remarkable ability to speak across centuries, inviting each generation to hear familiar stories in new ways. Although tonight's program spans more than 240 years, each work explores how music can express identity and resilience.

Jessie Montgomery (b. 1981) is a GRAMMY® Award-winning composer, violinist, and educator whose work interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, poetry, and social consciousness, making her an acute interpreter of 21st-century American sound and experience. Named Performance Today's 2025 Classical Woman of the Year, her profound works have been described as "turbulent, wildly colorful, and exploding with life" (The Washington Post), and are performed regularly by leading orchestras, ensembles, and soloists around the world. In June 2024, Montgomery concluded a three-year appointment as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Mead Composer-in-Residence.

A founding member of PUBLIQuartet and former member of the Catalyst Quartet, Montgomery is a frequent and highly engaged collaborator with performing musicians, composers, choreographers, playwrights, poets, and visual artists alike. At the heart of Montgomery's work is a deep sense of community enrichment and a desire to create opportunities for young artists and underrepresented composers to broaden audience experiences in classical music spaces.

Montgomery has been recognized with many prestigious awards and fellowships, including the Civitella Ranieri Fellowship, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and Sphinx Virtuosi Composer-in-Residence, the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation, and Musical America's 2023 Composer of the Year.

The first piece on tonight's program is Montgomery's *Banner*, a celebratory musical tapestry for solo string quartet and string orchestra. In the composer's own words:

Banner is a tribute to the 200th Anniversary of the "Star Spangled Banner," which was officially declared the American National Anthem in 1814 under the penmanship of Francis Scott Key. Scored for solo string quartet and string orchestra, *Banner* is a rhapsody on the theme of the "Star Spangled Banner." Drawing on musical and historical sources from various world anthems and patriotic songs, I've made an attempt to answer the question: "What does an anthem for the 21st century sound like in today's multi-cultural environment?"

In 2009, I was commissioned by the Providence String Quartet and Community MusicWorks to write *Anthem: A tribute to the historical election of Barack Obama*. In that piece I wove together the theme from the “Star Spangled Banner” with the commonly named Black National Anthem *Lift Every Voice and Sing* by James Weldon Johnson (which coincidentally share the exact same phrase structure). *Banner* picks up where *Anthem* left off by using a similar backbone source in its middle section, but expands further both in the amount of references and also in the role play of the string quartet as the individual voice working both with and against the larger community of the orchestra behind them. The structure is loosely based on traditional marching band form where there are several strains or contrasting sections, preceded by an introduction, and I have drawn on the drum line chorus as a source for the rhythmic underpinning in the finale. Within the same tradition, I have attempted to evoke the breathing of a large brass choir as it approaches the climax of the “trio” section. A variety of other cultural Anthems and American folk songs and popular idioms interact to form various textures in the finale section, contributing to a multi-layered fanfare.

The “Star Spangled Banner” is an ideal subject for exploration in contradictions. For most Americans the song represents a paradigm of liberty and solidarity against fierce odds, and for others it implies a contradiction between the ideals of freedom and the realities of injustice and oppression. As a culture, it is my opinion that we Americans are perpetually in search of ways to express and celebrate our ideals of freedom — a way to proclaim, “we’ve made it!” as if the very action of saying it aloud makes it so. And for many of our nation’s people, that was the case: through work songs and spirituals, enslaved Africans promised themselves a way out and built the nerve to endure the most abominable treatment for the promise of a free life. Immigrants from Europe, Central America and the Pacific have sought out a safe haven here and though met with the trials of building a multi-cultured democracy, continue to find rooting in our nation and make significant contributions to our cultural landscape. In 2014, a tribute to the U.S. National Anthem means acknowledging the contradictions, leaps and bounds, and milestones that allow us to celebrate and maintain the tradition of our ideals.

During the 1770s, **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–1791) experienced both extraordinary artistic success and growing personal frustration in his hometown of Salzburg. While serving under Archbishop Colloredo, he composed an astonishing stream of music that quickly established his reputation far beyond his official duties as a court musician. Yet as the Mozart family's social standing rose, Wolfgang became increasingly restless with the limited opportunities Salzburg could offer, while his father, Leopold, repeatedly sought more prestigious appointments in Vienna, Italy, and elsewhere.

These tensions finally came to a head in the summer of 1777. Eager to pursue a career as an independent composer, Mozart requested his release from court service, and Colloredo responded by dismissing both father and son. Soon afterward, the twenty-one-year-old composer set out with his mother on a journey to Mannheim in search of a position worthy of his talents, carrying with him a brand-new oboe concerto that would become one of the instrument's greatest masterpieces.

One of the delights of Mozart's Oboe Concerto is how naturally and effortlessly the music communicates. The first movement, *Allegro aperto* (fast and “open”), brims with youthful energy. The orchestra introduces the main musical ideas before the oboe enters to embellish, comment on, and transform them. Throughout the movement, listen for the charming contrasts between dazzling, athletic passages and moments of graceful lyricism, as well as the playful musical conversation between the soloist and the orchestra.

In the second movement, *Adagio non troppo* (slowly, but not too much), the oboe becomes a singer, spinning long, expressive melodies over a gentle orchestral accompaniment. The instrument's warm, sustained tone and the natural rise and fall of each phrase create an atmosphere of serene beauty that seems suspended in time.

The third and final movement, *Rondo: Allegretto* (moderately quick) opens with a cheerful tune that returns throughout the movement like an old friend. Between each return, Mozart introduces contrasting episodes that allow the oboe to display its agility and elegance. The concerto closes with the joy and optimism that has made Mozart's music beloved for more than two centuries.

Between 1806 and 1808, **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) was composing at an astonishing pace, producing some of his greatest masterpieces even as he struggled with a precarious income. Without a steady job, he relied on commissions, patrons, and occasional benefit concerts—a situation that left him anxious about his future. Determined to showcase his latest works and raise much-needed funds, Beethoven organized an ambitious concert in Vienna on December 22, 1808. Lasting more than four hours in an unheated theater, this marathon program premiered both the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, and featured Beethoven as piano soloist in the hastily composed *Choral Fantasy* and Fourth Piano Concerto. Despite inadequate rehearsal, onstage mishaps, and frigid conditions in the theater, the concert remains one of the most legendary evenings in the history of classical music.

The most rewarding way to experience Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (1808) is not as a famous collection of melodies, but as a gripping musical journey. Across its four movements, Beethoven transforms a simple rhythmic idea into a powerful emotional narrative, leading the listener from tension and uncertainty to joy and triumph.

The first movement, *Allegro con brio* (fast with spirit), begins with the four most famous notes in all of classical music. Notice how this simple rhythmic idea seems to permeate the entire movement: it interrupts, propels, and reshapes nearly every musical thought that follows, creating an irresistible sense of momentum. Beethoven balances explosive orchestral outbursts with quieter moments of suspense, keeping the music in almost constant motion.

After the intensity of the opening, the second movement, *Andante con moto* (walking pace, with motion), offers a moment of reflection. Two contrasting themes—one graceful and lyrical, the other broad and noble—unfold through a series of imaginative variations. As the melodies return, Beethoven subtly transforms them, adding new colors and emotional weight while alternating passages of quiet contemplation with moments of growing confidence.

The third movement, *Scherzo: Allegro* (fast, joking) begins in mystery. Low strings quietly introduce an uneasy idea before the horns answer with a bold, unforgettable call. The music shifts repeatedly between shadow and strength, creating an atmosphere that is both playful and unsettling. One of the most extraordinary moments in all of orchestral music comes at the movement's close, as Beethoven lets the music fade to a whisper, as though the entire orchestra is holding its breath. Then, without pause, the finale bursts forth in a blaze of sound, like stepping from a long, dark tunnel into brilliant sunlight.

Beethoven expands the orchestra in the final *Allegro* movement by adding piccolo, contrabassoon, and trombones—the first time these instruments ever appeared in a symphony—creating a richer, more brilliant sound than anything heard earlier. The music is bold and exuberant, filled with fanfare-like themes, driving rhythms, and a radiant sense of achievement. Yet Beethoven resists making the finale a simple victory lap. Midway through, the shadowy music of the third movement briefly returns, reminding us of the struggle that came before. Only after confronting that memory does the symphony surge towards its jubilant conclusion.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.