

# Chicago Tribune

## Music review: John Eliot Gardiner changes how we hear Beethoven in a revelatory Chicago concert

By HOWARD REICH

CHICAGO TRIBUNE | FEB 29, 2020 | 9:31 AM



John Eliot Gardiner conducts the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique at the Harris Theater on Friday evening. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

For listeners accustomed to hearing Beethoven performed by a modern orchestra, Friday night's concert at the Harris Theater likely was a revelation.

For those attuned to hearing Beethoven from a period instruments ensemble, the experience surely was a balm.

Not that there's anything remotely wrong with encountering Beethoven as interpreted by today's formidable orchestras, which benefit from the immense force their instruments can produce en masse. It seems fair to guess that Beethoven would have reveled in the enormous dynamic range and sumptuous sound that today's best orchestras routinely yield.

But there's considerable value in hearing musicians playing Beethoven's music on period instruments and with performance practices of his era. That's exactly what [John Eliot Gardiner](#) and the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique offered during the Harris Theater's Beethoven Festival, an ongoing cycle of Beethoven's nine symphonies and other repertoire.

It's a fitting way to celebrate this year's 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth (in December): taking us back to how this music sounded when Beethoven was alive. Or at least as close as we can approximate at this late date.

From the concert's opening selection, excerpts of Beethoven's rarely performed ballet music for "The Creatures of Prometheus," listeners had to recalibrate aural expectations. Rather than the mighty blocks of orchestral sound we're used to hearing, Gardiner and friends produced a far more transparent, less bombastic sonority. This was Beethoven on a human scale, the orchestra addressing the audience as if on an even footing rather than from an Olympian position of power.

Once you adjusted to the scaled-down dynamics, a remarkable transformation occurred: pianissimos seemed softer, fortissimos louder, crescendos more striking. Subtle nuances often lost when modern orchestras roar suddenly became crisply apparent. The inner workings of the music – in which individual voices intermingled – signaled the real drama inside the score.

It was enlightening to discern each individual note in fast-running scalar passages, to behold themes rippling across the orchestra's full breadth. This was Beethoven in his most direct expression, unencumbered by sonic overload.

The evening's high point came in the form of the composer's Symphony No. 1, which observers often deem rooted in the earlier achievements of Haydn and Mozart. I've always considered this a forward-looking work, and Gardiner's performance affirmed that view. For Beethoven's rhythmic tension, fierce syncopations, galvanic downbeats and other foreshadowing of music yet to come rang out more clearly than ever when dispatched by Gardiner's tautly disciplined ensemble (with violins and violas standing throughout this performance).

It's true that one could not bask in the sensuousness of the finest modern wind sections, nor the tonal glow of contemporary strings (which the [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) consistently provides in its own ongoing Beethoven symphonies cycle). But there was much to be learned from the sheer clarity of ensemble sound and the comprehensive musicianship of these instrumentalists.



Soprano Lucy Crowe sings as John Eliot Gardiner conducts the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique in Beethoven's "Ah! Perfido" at the Harris Theater Friday, Feb. 28, 2020, in Chicago. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

The evening also featured soprano Lucy Crowe in “Ah! Perfido” and two “Leonore” excerpts: “Ach, Bricht Noch Nicht, Du Mattes Herz!” and “Komm, Hoffnung, Lass Den Letzten Stern.” Crowe brought palpable drama to each while negotiating unforgiving technical demands.

Gardiner also offered the “Leonore” Overture No. 1, which doesn’t generate quite the intensity of the more frequently performed Overture No. 3. But Gardiner made a strong case for it, if only because there’s ample excitement to be had when you can hear every note Beethoven wrote.

**Program note:** The evening’s opulently produced program book contained an insert from the Harris Theater staff: “There is one person who played an immeasurable role in bringing the Beethoven Festival to Chicago who is not here with us tonight. Patricia Barretto has led the Harris Theater through three remarkable seasons as our president and CEO, while undergoing treatment for breast cancer. She is unable to attend tonight’s performance, but she is in our thoughts.”

*John Eliot Gardiner and the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique will perform through March 3 at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St.; ticket prices vary; 312-334-7777 or [www.harristheaterchicago.org](http://www.harristheaterchicago.org).*

*Howard Reich is a Tribune critic.*