



Beethoven under the microscope

This sort of musical examination calls for the expertise of a forensic specialist

By Roxana Popescu
SPECIAL TO THE UNION-TRIBUNE

Earlier this spring, Jennifer Shen, a forensic scientist with the San Diego County Medical Examiner, received an odd request in her e-mail inbox: A local music group was looking for help with a project.

It didn't involve reconstructing a crime scene spatter by bloody spatter and analyzing traces of evidence — the daily grind for this chemist. This assignment was more highbrow, but no less noir:

Orchestra Nova, which renders classical music with unconventional pep, needed an expert to speak at the season finale, "CSI: Beethoven - Inside Ludwig's Head." The program features the Leonore Overture, the Fidelio Overture and Symphony No. 4, and a conversation about musical forensics. The performances take place Friday, Saturday and Monday at venues across the county.

Shen, a natural teacher who gives public lectures about her field, loves Beethoven, so she agreed to participate. Her mother "snorted and rolled her eyes. She thought it was an odd combination," Shen recalled recently.

DETAILS

Orchestra Nova's "Beethoven: CSI - Inside Ludwig's Head"

When: Friday, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, 8 p.m., Monday, 7:30 p.m.

Where: St. Paul's Cathedral in Bankers Hill, Irwin M. Jacobs Qualcomm Hall in Sorrento Valley and Sherwood Auditorium in La Jolla, respectively.

Tickets: \$22 and up.

Phone: (858) 350-0290

Online: sdco.org

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She wondered what she was getting herself into. Then she started looking into research about how the maestro died. And that's when her obsession started.

Alongside Orchestra Nova's conductor Jung-Ho Pak, Shen will invite audiences to contemplate two enduring mysteries: What killed Beethoven? And what drove him to create some of the most moving music of all time?

Beethoven died in agony on a stormy day in 1827. Thanks to a lock of his hair and skull fragments that have survived, scientists in this century have performed tests that bring them closer to determining a cause of death.

Learning about that research "gave me

a true appreciation for Beethoven," Shen said. "He was in so much pain, completely deaf, and he produced this amazing, overwhelming music."

The rest of the performance will be devoted to understanding Beethoven's art by looking at a different kind of evidence. Pak will examine the Leonore Overture's many revisions, which render transparent Beethoven's thought process as he composed.

"He wrote it once, he wasn't satisfied with the product, and then he wrote it again. In the end he gave it all up and wrote an overture called Fidelio," Pak explained. "I'm going to take it apart like a coroner and show how Beethoven changed his mind and improved certain musical ideas, kind of like when you have a famous painting and see the layers of paint. We're going to peel away the layers."

The third piece, Symphony No. 4, is one of the most neglected and unappreciated of Beethoven's works.

"It's also one of the most fun symphonies," Pak said. "I think it's really the most rambunctious, before he turned around and wrote something so incredibly serious as the Fifth."

MUSICAL FORENSICS 101: A CRASH COURSE FOR THE PATHOLOGICALLY CURIOUS

We sat down with Jung-Ho Pak and Jennifer Shen separately to understand how their respective specialties — music and forensics — intersect.

What is the aim of forensics?

Shen: "Forensics unlocks mysteries. It unlocks mysteries of the present, which we do every day when we're trying to solve crimes, and it unlocks myster-

ies of the past, when you look at crime scenes."

Which is more fleeting, music or forensics?

Pak: At the end of a season, "it kind of feels like you've gone through each of these experiences but you don't have time to reflect on it because you're always thinking of the next one. It disappears like a dream."

Shen: "We always do things that are so traumatic and in the now. There's a lot of pressure to find out what happened and solve this crime or help get this person off the street or help let this person know he didn't do it."

What attracted you to this particular program concept?

Shen: "It's a fascinating forensics story. It gives me even more

appreciation for what we can do with evidence."

Pak: "I think it stemmed from my desire to share my kind of nutty enthusiasm for classical music. I wish I could take everyone out to a bar and sit over a beer or cup of coffee and open up a score and say look at this, look at this, look at this!"

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