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Music

# Beethoven 'Emperor' concerto highlight of Pioneer Valley Symphony performance (review)

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Pianist Jiayan Sun Third-Party-Submitted

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By [Clifton Noble Jr. | Special to The Republican](#)



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NORTHAMPTON — In the second orchestral concert of its 81st season, the Pioneer Valley Symphony, led by Music Director Tianhui Ng, featured pianist Jiayan Sun, the Iva Dee Hiatt Visiting Artist in Piano at Smith College, as soloist in Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5 "Emperor."*

Maestro Ng surrounded the Beethoven with Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor* Overture and Felix Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 5 "Reformation."*

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Amherst College Professor David Schneider offered an engaging and informative introduction to the evening's repertoire prior to the concert. Of particular interest in Schneider's remarks was the attention he drew to pianist Sun's intention to play throughout the course of the concerto, not only delivering his solo portions, but playing during the orchestral tuttis as well.

According to Schneider, the original manuscripts of the *"Emperor" Concerto* contain figured bass lines for the soloist during the orchestral sections, suggesting that the pianist was to play throughout, according to Beethoven's specific instructions. Schneider said he had never heard the concerto presented this way, thus Saturday evening represented an historic occasion, since performances from the middle of the 19th century onward have disregarded those instructions.

Beethoven was also almost completely deaf by the time of the *"Emperor"* and could not have played with an orchestra, according to Schneider, so he would have surely made his intentions as clear as possible for the soloist (the dedicatee, Archduke Rudolf, both a student and patron of Beethoven, gave the first performance in 1811).



Many of the 310 music lovers in Saturday's PVS audience in Smith College's John M. Greene Hall had certainly attended Sun's complete chronological cycle of Beethoven Sonatas last season, and have returned to enjoy his *Schubertiade* this fall.

Sun's playing commands attention. It is bursting with character and imagination born of thorough study and thoughtful preparation. Power and dexterity are the province of many young pianists, but few build beyond that foundation with the kind of probing wonder and insight that Sun brings to his music-making. Sun brought every bit of that depth and intensity to the *Emperor*, giving a riveting performance.

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Maestro Ng, in his second season at the helm of the PVS, partnered Sun perfectly, weaving an ear-catching tapestry of sound with his orchestra. The sublime slow movement of the Beethoven flowed like a timeless river of sound from the muted PVS strings. The outer movements strode with giant steps, the first fueled by grand gestures, the third galloping to the limits of clarity, with Sun evoking stardust one moment and a meteor storm the next at the keyboard.

Borodin's *Prince Igor* Overture launched the concert with some impressive orchestral fireworks. It featured nimble, sparkling clarinet work from Principal Kara Peterman, and a lovely French horn solo by Principal Jean Jeffries. Ng drew a clean, luminous sound from his players, balancing fiercely energetic encouragement with refined, precise motion.

The thick, often contrapuntal textures of Mendelssohn's *Reformation* Symphony texted the mettle of everyone on stage. Once again, Ng and his musicians achieved an admirable clarity and flexibility. Conductor and performers obviously understood and



The PVS's next event is a Holiday Pops Family Concert on December 14 at 3 p.m. at Greenfield High School. The Orchestra is joined by the Chorus, Chamber Choir, and Youth Orchestra. For more information about the Orchestra and the current season, visit them online at [www.pvsoc.org](http://www.pvsoc.org)

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