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# Guest Artist



**Sterling Elliott**

Photo: Titilayo Ayangade

**A**claimed for his stellar stage presence and joyous musicianship, cellist Sterling Elliott is a 2021 Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient and the winner of the Senior Division of the 2019 National Sphinx Competition. Still in his mid-twenties, Elliott has appeared with orchestras including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Detroit Symphony and the Dallas Symphony, working with noted conductors including Yannick Nezet-Seguín, Thomas Wilkins, Jeffrey Kahane, and Mei Ann Chen, among others.

In 2025/2026 Sterling Elliott debuts with the Phoenix Symphony, the Buffalo Philharmonic, the BBC Scottish Symphony, and at the BBC Proms with Edwin Outwater. As featured soloist with the Sphinx Virtuosi, he takes part in a mutli-city tour with performances at Carnegie Hall, Shriver Concert Series, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the Gardner Museum,

and Schubert Club and more. As a chamber musician, he continues his residency in the Bowers Program of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, appearing with CMLSC at Alice Tully Hall and on tour throughout the United States, as well as in trio performances with Anthony McGill and Gloria Chien.

As the Robey Artist with the London-based Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) in partnership with Music Masters, Elliott regularly performs throughout the UK and Europe including at Wigmore Hall, Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, as well as on tour in New Zealand. In 2024, Elliott was named a BBC New Generation Artist.

He is an ambassador of the Young Strings of America, a string sponsorship operated by Shar Music. He performs on a 1741 Gennaro Gagliano cello on loan through the Robert F. Smith Fine String Patron Program, in partnership with the Sphinx Organization.

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Learn interesting insights about the music you'll hear at Opening Notes, a free pre-concert talk led by Maestro Lawrence Loh. Featured soloists and special guests often make an appearance. Location is in Recital Hall II within Waco Hall.

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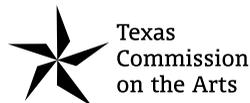


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**Program**

Sixty-Third Season  
 Fourth Subscription Concert

**Stellar, Sterling & Beethoven 5**

Thursday, March 19, 2026  
 Waco Hall, 7:30 p.m.

**LAWRENCE LOH, MUSIC DIRECTOR AND CONDUCTOR**

*Stellar:* Fanfare Prelude for Orchestra . . . . . Shawn Okpehlo  
 (b. 1981)

Cello Concerto No. 2 in D Major, Op. 101 . . . . . Joseph Haydn  
 (1732-1809)

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Adagio
- III. Rondo (Allegro)

**Sterling Elliott, cello**

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67 . . . . . Ludwig van Beethoven  
 (1770-1827)

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Scherzo: Allegro
- IV. Allegro

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## Program Notes By Peter J. Rabinowitz

“Charmful and challenging”: that’s how tonight’s soloist, cellist Sterling Elliott, describes the 1783 **Cello Concerto No. 2 in D** by **Franz Joseph Haydn** (1732–1809). And that pairing of adjectives neatly captures the paradoxical attraction of the work.

On the one hand, it’s one of Haydn’s sunniest pieces. There’s little trace of the vehement concentration found in what are often called his *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) works; there’s little trace of the meditative depth heard in his *Seven Last Words of Christ*. Nor, for that matter, is there any trace of his love of the colossal, evident in the huge forces he assembled for the 1799 premiere of *The Creation*. Much less does this concerto aim to project what Sterling calls the “grand scale of character, a larger-than-life, heroic quality” we’ve come to expect from the Romantic concertos to come—or even, one might argue, of some of the concertos Mozart was writing around this time. Haydn’s Second Cello Concerto is, rather, marked by “grace and lightness.” The work is in the traditional three movements, all in major keys: two faster movements surrounding an Adagio of exquisite tenderness but without much in the way of darkness. Indeed, for many listeners, the most somber music comes in the rondo finale, during its swerve into D Minor.

At the same time, though, behind its outward modesty, the concerto demands tremendous virtuosity. That’s partly because, says Sterling, “the instrument plays near the top of its range most of the time.” But to add to the problems facing the soloist, there’s the work’s stylistic transparency. This is, in many ways, a typical Classical work; and in contrast to the more Romantic works that followed, he points out, it doesn’t allow for the kind of vibrato (the short, quick fluctuation in pitch performers and singers use to give added richness to a sound) and even sliding into notes that can help cover your mistakes (especially faulty intonation). The difficulty is compounded because Haydn’s orchestration is extremely light and transparent, so “there’s not much textural support for the instrument” and little room to hide.

Given its attractiveness, given the popularity of its composer, you’d think the Concerto would

have been an immediate hit. That’s certainly what happened to many of Haydn’s works, including the so-called “Paris” symphonies (Nos. 82–87), which were written at about the same time. The relative rarity of cello concertos in the Classical era should only have helped. But oddly, after its first performance, this work essentially disappeared from view. It remained unpublished for decades and largely unheard for even longer—and the early editions (in particular, the 1890 Breitkopf and Härtel edition that was standard for more than half a century) were radically tampered with. (If you listen to an early recording, you might in spots think that you’re hearing a different piece.) But it became increasingly popular as the twentieth century wore on, getting an extra boost in 1951 when the manuscript was rediscovered—allowing, eventually, for editions and performances closer to what Haydn would have imagined. It has finally gained its rightful place among the most widely performed cello concertos—although its bumpy history reminds us that there are always great works, even great works by well-known composers, waiting to be rediscovered.

The **Symphony No. 5** (1808) by **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) could hardly be more different. Unlike the Haydn, it was widely acclaimed almost from the outset; unlike the Haydn, it has run into few editorial stumbling blocks. Most important, though, is the difference in temperament. It’s certainly not charming—and while it’s challenging, it’s challenging in a different way. Although it, too, poses some difficulties for the performers (as conductor Larry Loh says, it’s “terrifying to perform, because of its familiarity and exposure”), the real challenges are aimed at the listener.

Yes, Haydn was Beethoven’s teacher. But even as a student, Beethoven was rebellious, and by the time he wrote his Fifth, he was living in (or, more accurately, creating) a different musical world from that of his mentor, even though Haydn was still alive. What exactly was that different world? The Fifth has become so familiar, such a basic part of our cultural DNA (like *Hamlet*), that it’s hard to recreate the strangeness it had when it was new. But

## Program Notes

perhaps hearing it right after the Haydn can give us some insight into what features threw its listeners in 1808.

Most immediately apparent is what Sterling calls “the sheer difference of scale,” especially in the finale, where Beethoven breaks symphonic tradition by expanding the orchestra to include piccolo, contrabassoon, and three trombones, producing what must have been the loudest symphonic music heard until that time. Its rhythmic force, especially in the first movement, is unprecedented, too.

More important, the work was formally radical. For instance, there’s its intricate and obsessive development of short motifs—most obviously the now-familiar opening ‘Da-Da-Da-DUM’ gesture that has come to define the symphony, a gesture so short that many early listeners had trouble taking it seriously. Then, there are the links among the movements. As Larry puts it, “It’s one of these perfect symphonies that has a connection from

beginning to end.” The famous opening rhythm appears often throughout the work—and there are other thematic echoes among the movements as well. The most striking detail, though, may be the transition that leads from the third movement to the finale. Up until then, the Classical-period symphony (more or less codified by Haydn) had four discrete movements. Here, Beethoven runs two together, a technique that had tremendous ramifications for the Romantic period.

The concert begins with a short but scorching curtain raiser, **Stellar: Fanfare Prelude for Orchestra**, composed in 2024 by **Shawn Okpebholo** (b. 1981). Challenge marks this piece as well—although in this case, the challenge is found not only in the orchestral virtuosity it demands, but also in its subject. *Stellar* was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, but it was, according to the composer, “dedicated to the students of Morgan Park High School on Chicago’s South Side” and “inspired by

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## Program Notes

Dr. Mae Jemison.” Jemison, who graduated from Morgan Park, is a physician, chemical engineer, and astronaut; and having faced and overcome the challenges of discrimination throughout her life, she became the first African American woman in space. According to Okpebholo, “the piece plays on the dual meaning of ‘stellar,’ evoking both celestial brilliance and human excellence.” It’s possible to hear it as honoring Jemison in another way, too. Throughout her life, she was interested in dance as well as in science—and as you listen, you may well hear

flashes of dance-like spirit. In any case, as you might expect, it itself is a stellar piece—full of syncopated jazzy energy, confidence, and complex rhythmic superimpositions that never impede the forward momentum that’s appropriate for the launch of a rocket. Or the launch of a concert.

**Peter J. Rabinowitz**

Have any comments or questions? Please write to me at [notes@wacosymphony.com](mailto:notes@wacosymphony.com)

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See page 27 for a list of WSO Musicians and Fellows.



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