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**François-Frédéric Guy's Beethoven piano concerti marathon proved an extraordinary event offering a delighted and informative audience a demonstration of technical prowess at the keyboard**

Labels: [by Tony Cooper](#), [concert review](#), [Paris](#)



Francois-Frederic Guy (Photo Caroline Dautre)

Beethoven complete *Piano Concertos*; François-Frédéric Guy, Orchestre de chambre de Paris; Théâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris

Reviewed by Tony Cooper on 18 January 2020 Star rating: 5.0 (★★★★★)

**In this extraordinary concert, François-Frédéric Guy performed all of Beethoven's five piano concerti in one evening to a packed and excited house in the stylised art deco Théâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris, in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth.**

I first became aware of Parisian-based pianist, François-Frédéric Guy, when he joined the BBC New Generation Artists' Scheme in 1999 but I immediately got hooked on him after he made his first visit to my home city of Norwich in 2011. Under the auspices of the Norfolk & Norwich Music Club, he performed the complete cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas over a nine-day period.

He quickly returned to Norwich later the same year at short notice to replace an indisposed Radu Lupu and played Debussy's *Preludes*, Liszt's *Benediction* and Schubert's penultimate *Piano Sonata, D 959*. Four years later, he was back in the city - once more at the invitation of the Norfolk & Norwich Music Club - offering a weekend of music for two pianos working alongside his fellow countryman, Geoffrey Couteau, an exceptional and gifted performer.

They played works by Brahms and Mozart but most memorable of all they concluded their weekend with a salutary performance of Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen*, a work that Roger Rowe - former programme director of the Music Club - says that no one who was there will ever forget! 'The 2011-12 season, in fact, turned out to be a vintage one for the Music Club,' enthused Roger, who's now series producer of Norwich Assembly House classical lunchtime concerts. 'During that season we also enjoyed visits from Paul Lewis and the Belcea and Jerusalem string quartets.'

Over the years, therefore, François-Frédéric Guy has grown upon me especially in relation to his interpretation and playing of Beethoven. Therefore, I felt it a great privilege to travel to Paris to hear him on home ground performing his Beethoven marathon of the five piano concerti in one evening. And what an evening it turned out to be. Unforgettable, that's for sure!

So, on 18 January 2020 at the [Théâtre des Champs Elysées](#), Paris, François-Frédéric Guy was accompanied by the [Orchestre de chambre de Paris](#) in all of Beethoven's *Piano Concertos*, directing them from the keyboard.

But you can always expect the best from Monsieur Guy and without a shadow of doubt he gave of his best delivering Beethoven in no uncertain terms performing magnificently while conducting the 42-piece Orchestre de chambre de Paris (so confidently led by Deborah Nemtanu) from the keyboard positioned on stage with his back towards the audience thus connecting so intimately with his players whilst offering audience members the chance to witness him at work as (probably) never before.

Casually and smartly dressed in a black tailored frock-coat as befitting the style of dress so popular in Beethoven's time coupled with a white open-necked loose-fitting shirt, Monsieur Guy looked the part à la Beethoven. He coupled the *First Concerto* (a very good place to start!) with the *Third Concerto* followed by an hour's interval. After the break, the *Second Concerto* partnered the *Fourth Concerto* and following a twenty-minute interval a performance of the *Fifth Concerto* completed a truly enlightening and satisfying programme.

With the *First Concerto in C major, Op.15*, hugging faithfully to the classicism of Haydn and Mozart, Monsieur Guy, whose delicate touch at the keyboard seems to colour every note, travelled with sure comfort and ease to Beethoven's *Fifth Concerto in E flat major, Op.73*, performing the entire canon of Beethoven's piano concerti with total commitment and dedication but, above all, with sheer enthusiasm.

A totally different work in texture and style to the First, the *Fifth Concerto* was published almost 15 years after it. Dedicated to Archduke Rudolf, Beethoven's friend, pupil and patron, the concerto was, incidentally, named 'The Emperor' by Johann Baptist Cramer, the English publisher of the work.

However, it was the *Third Concerto in C minor, Op.37* - generally thought to have been composed in 1800 - that really grabbed my attention and my imagination while thoroughly testing my inner senses. Beethoven seemed alive, I thought. Beethoven at its best! And Beethoven played to his best by what I consider a flawless and gratifying performance by Monsieur Guy who was fully conversant and in complete harmony with members of the Orchestre de chambre de Paris, an orchestra in which he has been associated with for several years now. He has just recorded all of the Beethoven piano concerti with them for Printemps des Arts de Monte Carlo.

The Third was first performed on 5th April 1803 with the composer as soloist and during the same performance the Second Symphony and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives* were also premièred. The composition - dedicated to Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia - was published in 1804. Incidentally, the first primary theme is reminiscent of Mozart's 24th piano concerto.

The *Second Concerto in B flat major, Op.19* - in which Monsieur Guy seem to revel in particularly with regard to the popular and tuneful last movement enjoying a nice conversation with the orchestra in some effortless and unhurried playing - was composed primarily between 1787 and 1789 although it did not attain the form in which it was published until 1795.

This work became an important display piece for the young Beethoven as he sought to establish himself after moving from Bonn to Vienna. He was the soloist at its première on 29th March 1795 at Vienna's Burgtheater in a concert marking his public début. Prior to that, he had only performed the piece in the comfort of the private salons of Viennese nobility.

As a whole, the work's also very much in the style of Mozart but there's a sense of drama and contrast that would be present in many of Beethoven's later works. And if there's any pianist to bring out the drama of the composer's piano concerti, you can certainly rely on Monsieur Guy to do so. Interestingly, Beethoven himself apparently did not rate this work particularly highly remarking to the publisher, Franz Anton Hoffmeister, that, along with the *First Concerto*, it was 'not one of my best'.

Interestingly, with all of the concerti that Monsieur Guy played, he used the cadenzas as written by Beethoven apart from the *Fourth Concerto in G major, Op.58*, in which he used the cadenza written by Brahms. Composed in 1805-06, it received its première in March 1807 at a private concert of the home

of Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz. The *Coriolan Overture* and the *Fourth Symphony* were also heard for the first time in the same concert.

However, the public première fell to Vienna's Theater an der Wien on 22nd December 1808 with Beethoven as soloist. A marathon concert - which also saw the first performances of the *Choral Fantasy* and the *Fifth* and *Sixth symphonies*, it was Beethoven's last appearance as a soloist with an orchestra. Beethoven dedicated the concerto to his friend, student and patron, the Archduke Rudolph.

A review in the May 1809 edition of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* stated 'that the work is the most admirable, singular, artistic and complex Beethoven concerto ever'. However, after its first performance, the piece was neglected until 1836, when it was revived by Felix Mendelssohn. Today, the work's widely performed and recorded and is considered to be one of the central works of the piano concerti repertoire.

With the *Fifth Concerto* - most probably the 'favourite' of the bunch to so many Beethoven aficionados - Monsieur Guy excelled in some rich and spirited playing particularly in the last movement capturing the true essence of Beethoven's marvellous score punctuated by those middle and last movements played without a break.

The flourish of bars at the end of the piece were executed by Monsieur Guy in an exciting fashion drawing instant applause from a full house that truly recognised the importance of this Beethoven marathon in what promises to be a memorable year for the birthday boy from Bonn and a busy year for François-Frédéric Guy, a Beethovenian of great importance and one of great standing.

And the last word goes to Monsieur Guy. It has too, really: 'For a few years now I have conducted Beethoven concerti from the keyboard trying to get back to the original spirit of these masterpieces. It's an experience which is constantly yielding new perspectives. Put simply, it's a lifetime's work.' Indeed, it is!