



# KEYNOTES

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF  
THE EVANSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

LAWRENCE ECKERLING, MUSIC DIRECTOR

## Life, Love & Death

Join the ESO for an early Valentine's Day celebration with the "Life, Love & Death" concert. We open with Richard Wagner's Prelude und Liebestod from his operatic love story, *Tristan und Isolde*. Next, get a glimpse of the Napoleonic Wars with Ludwig van Beethoven's militaristic Piano Concerto No. 5 "Emperor." Finally, the concert concludes with Robert Schumann's restlessly passionate Symphony No. 4.

*Tristan und Isolde* is a tale of forbidden love and tragic destiny, where Tristan chooses death as the ultimate union with Isolde. Their relationship, once marked by rivalry, is transformed by a love potion, culminating in their deaths and the fulfillment of the "liebestod, or love through death." Richard Wagner (1813–1883), inspired by medieval Germanic poetry and Schopenhauer's philosophy exalting music, wrote the opera during a tumultuous period in his life, channeling personal heartbreak into the composition. The Prelude and Liebestod distill the opera's emotional arc, using unresolved harmonies and the famous "Tristan chord" to evoke longing and tension. Wagner's music ultimately resolves this tension in the Liebestod, delivering a transcendent sense of peace and unity as the lovers' yearning finds its final release.

Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770–1827) fifth and final piano concerto, known as the "Emperor," was commissioned by his friend and student, Archduke Rudolf. Composed in 1809 amid the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars, Beethoven finished the work despite Vienna's invasion, though the war delayed its premiere until 1811 with Frederich Schneider as soloist. By this time, Beethoven's hearing was deteriorating, making it difficult for him to perform with an orchestra, which likely led this to be his last piano concerto. Critics praised its originality and technical demands, and it later became a favorite of virtuoso Franz Liszt. Despite its grand nickname, the "Emperor" Concerto is not linked to any actual emperor; legend suggests a

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8


— 2:30 PM

**LIFE, LOVE  
& DEATH**



French army officer at the premiere called it "an emperor among concertos," inspiring its title.

Robert Schumann (1810–1856) was a German composer and pianist, renowned for his ability to express character and emotion in melody from a young age. He wrote extensively across all major genres, including works for piano, voice, orchestra, chamber ensembles, choir, and opera. His life was marked by creativity and severe mental illness, with periods of intense productivity offset by depression and eventual confinement in an asylum. After a lengthy courtship and legal struggle, he married the celebrated pianist, Clara Wieck, in 1840. In 1841, during a prolific period, he composed his Symphony No. 4, a groundbreaking work with four interconnected movements. The symphony's "Clara Theme" and emotional depth mirror Schumann's journey through turmoil and joy, culminating in a triumphant finale that reflects his personal and artistic transformation.

Prepare for Valentine's Day with these passionate, powerful pieces and feel the Power of Music on February 8. 



**MUSICAL INSIGHTS**

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2026

1:30 PM

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**MEET ALBERT CANO SMIT**

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# BEHIND THE SCENES



IMAGE COURTESY OF MARC BERLISH PHOTOGRAPHY

## Dear ESO Subscribers,

Approaching Robert Schumann's symphonies, and his orchestral music in general, presents unique and particular challenges that put Schumann in his own category.

It is often said that Schumann "wrote great music, but he was a terrible orchestrator." I don't agree. I don't think he was a "terrible" orchestrator, though his orchestrations do present some distinct challenges that must be addressed. I think his orchestrations can be colorful. However, while Schumann often orchestrated with color in mind — and here "color" refers to the timbre of an instrument, the unique qualities that define an instrument's sound, as well as the blend when instruments combine with one another — he didn't anticipate how loud or soft various instruments sound. As a result, the listener often can't hear certain instruments that were meant to be heard. Conductors have to make adjustments to the dynamics, the louds and softs, for various instruments so they can be heard. Many conductors actually change orchestrations in some places to help achieve that goal. In fact, composer/conductor Gustav Mahler reorchestrated all four of Schumann's symphonies from scratch to help the music come to life.

In addition to orchestration, I think there is another challenge with Schumann's symphonies that doesn't get mentioned nearly as often, and it is at least as significant

as the orchestration "balances" in various places in the music. It is the question of the freedom of time with which Schumann approached all of his music. With symphony scores, conductors are used to seeing a time signature and tempo indicated, and then try to follow the score strictly, just as one would do with Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven: pick a tempo and stick to it. But if you do that with Schumann, it doesn't work. That's because, for the first decade of his composing years, Schumann's work revolved around the piano, with solo piano music being a very large part of it. That music was created at the peak of the Romantic era, where music told stories and used time manipulation; going faster and slower (*rubato*) to tell the story was the norm. That style of composing was in Schumann's DNA. Therefore, both the conductor and the orchestra musicians have to approach his symphonies with his piano music style in mind. This is the only way his music comes to life — and that, after all, is the primary job of conductor and orchestra: to make the music come to life. Without making those adjustments, all you have is a bunch of empty notes. But once those adjustments are made, the music comes to life in glorious ways and makes performances equally satisfying for audiences and orchestras alike. 🎵

—Lawrence Eckerling

Music Director, Evanston Symphony Orchestra

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**THE MERION**

# Meet Albert Cano Smit, Pianista Extraordinario!



Albert Cano Smit is a delightful amalgam of several cultures, with one foot firmly planted in the Northern Europe of his Dutch mother, and the other firmly planted in the Southern Europe of his Spanish father — although several toes are attached to

England and quite a few more to the USA!

Albert's parents met when his mother left chilly Holland to study Spanish in the warmer Canary Islands, then encountered a young Spaniard from the Catalonian region of Spain who shared her core values (and yoga). The family lived in Geneva, where Albert was born, then in Asturias on Spain's Atlantic coast, finally settling in Barcelona on the Mediterranean coast of the country.

A big advantage of this type of background is that Albert is multi-lingual. The family primarily speaks Spanish at home, although his mother "made sure Dutch was floating around." Albert uses Dutch to speak with his cousins and grandmother in Holland, but adds that they all speak excellent English (as does he!). Albert also speaks Catalan, a Romance language that evolved from Latin and might be described as a first cousin to French, but only a first cousin once removed to Spanish.

Albert's parents weren't particularly happy with the schools in Barcelona. They were very crowded, and his mother, a psychologist, didn't think they were nurturing enough. A family friend recommended the Escolania Montserrat, a choir school at the Abbey of Montserrat about 30 miles from Barcelona. While the family wasn't particularly religious, his parents liked the idea of the structure, the spiritual values, and the emphasis on music.

The Escolania was founded in the 14th century to train a choir of boy sopranos to sing at masses honoring the Virgin Mary. Seven hundred years later, it is still performing the same function, but with a much more modern approach to education. In addition to voice classes and rehearsals, each boy is required to pick a primary instrument and to study piano. This is where Albert ran into a bit of a problem. He tried all of the wind instruments, but says he couldn't even make a sound with any of them, so he decided on the violin. However, "the violin didn't like me very much." After a year and a half of violin lessons his teacher suggested that it might be best if he just concentrated on piano. Happily, for us, he took his teacher's advice!

Albert said that he had a terrible voice to begin with and had to have extra voice lessons. They worked, and he ended up singing the lower alto or harmony part rather than the higher soprano melody. This was fortunate for him because it meant he had to listen very carefully to what the other boys were singing, which taught him to start listening to the structure of a composition to try to understand what the music is doing. And it was a tough musical repertoire — liturgical music sung in Catalan and Spanish, which has very specific rules. Albert says that

because he learned that music at a very impressionable age, it still speaks to him with the strongest connections. Boy sopranos are lovely, but they have a limited shelf life, and most age out of these programs in their teens when their voices change. By this time in Albert's life, it was clear that he had a great aptitude for both the piano and the organ, so he auditioned for a place and was accepted at Chetham's Music School in Manchester, England. (Founded in 1653. A mere upstart compared to the Escolania Montserrat.) Albert says Chetham's is where he experienced the biggest culture shock of his life! He had gone from a fairly rigid academic and music environment on a mountain top to a school in a much looser big city. "Lots of teenage angst — and lots of teenagers drinking lots of alcohol!" He survived by concentrating very hard on both academics and piano, and did quite well in both.

His next stop was the Colburn's School of Music in Los Angeles, where he earned a BA in Piano Performance. In a fun coincidence, one of his classmates at Colburn was violinist Will Hagen, who was a soloist with the ESO several years ago and who also toured with Albert for about ten years. (Albert says Will had very nice things to say about the ESO. Thanks, Will!)

After Colburn, Albert earned his Artist Diploma and Master's Degree with Robert McDonald at the Juilliard School, where he was awarded the 2020 Rubinstein Prize for Piano. (See [albertcanosmit.com](http://albertcanosmit.com) for more information on Albert's awards and performances.)

Albert currently lives in New York City, which he enjoys thoroughly, especially all of the musical offerings. He also enjoys museums, Central Park, and discovering the best restaurants for Korean, Sichuan, Vietnamese, and Ethiopian food. His biggest disappointment is that he has yet to find a good Spanish restaurant that is also affordable!

When he's not performing, Albert enjoys playing chamber music and the organ. He also has a few private students and is currently the Iva Dee Hiatt Visiting Artist in Piano & Lecturer in Music at Smith College, where he teaches piano and organ.

Albert will be performing Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto with the ESO on February 8, 2026, a piece that he loves. "It's so noble and shows Beethoven's soul." He admits that, early on, he didn't like it much at all. "So, the soloist sits down and shows off. Yes, there's a nice melody in the second movement." The problem for him was that the piece was so often badly played. But then he started listening to it more closely and had a complete change of opinion. The piece, he says, expresses "gratitude for being alive. It's like a good virus that reaches deep inside you and lifts up your soul! It's so well written — like a good novel — a narration of emotions but more direct because you don't have to think about the meaning of the words...."

This past October, the Abbey and Monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat celebrated its 1,000th anniversary. How fitting that the celebrations featured an organ recital by a favorite son, Albert Cano Smit! 🎹

—Kelly Brest van Kempen

# Two Joyous Evanston Symphony Orchestra Holiday Concerts

We're excited to share the joy we experienced at our double-header holiday concerts.

Our "A Very Special Special Concert," a 45-minute version of the main concert for those who love music and the holidays but who channel their enjoyment in ways that might not be suitable for most concerts, was our first of this kind. About 125 people cheered and stomped with the music, grooved with the dancers from Evanston Dance Ensemble, and laughed along with Santa. Smiles, singing, jingling of bells, and dancing filled the auditorium.



Parents and grandparents sang along with their kids in ways they probably don't often get to experience together. The percussion section demonstrated the many instruments they used in the concert, including the "whip" used in "Sleigh Ride," glockenspiel, castanets, and many more from their bag of tricks. Maestro Eckerling led a holiday medley for the audience to sing along. Utter joy filled the room.

A parent of a young man from Misericordia said, "The ESO concert reinforces faith in humanity — that we are inclusive and do believe in doing something for the greater good."

A resident from Misericordia asked when the next concert was. The residents then sang holiday songs on the bus all the way home.

What a feeling of connection shared by the audience and performers alike!

Many thanks to all who made this possible, in addition to all who attended:

- Evanston Rotary Lighthouse
- Evanston Community Foundation
- Evanston Arts Council
- ComEd Powering the Arts
- And a number of generous individuals

Our annual Holiday Concert extravaganza, complete with dancers, choral groups, a gospel choir, and Santa, kept the audience rocking with the rhythmic music. Joining the symphony on stage:

- Evanston Dance Ensemble and EDE2
- Chicago Ballet Arts
- The North Shore Choral Society
- The Evanston Children's Choir
- TJC Choral Group, this year's gospel choir

The time flew with the constant surprise of new performers and comic interludes by Santa and Maestro Eckerling. During "Sleigh Ride," the percussionist playing the "whip" kept showing up unexpectedly at different parts of the stage — a surprise to even the conductor! The intricate and lively rhythms of the orchestra, singing, and dance numbers kept the audience on the edge of their seats.



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