LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
CONSECRATION OF THE HOUSE OVERTURE, OP. 124
Duration: ca. 12 minutes

For Beethoven, the overture was more than a preamble to the action of an opera or ballet; it was a musical world unto itself, linked to the action ahead but independent of it. The overture in Beethoven’s hands stood by itself, and gave birth to the symphonic poems of Liszt, Wagner, and Strauss.

Beethoven’s creative output is divided into three periods – early, middle and late – and his Consecration of the House Overture came in his final years, a time of Herculean effort considering the works surrounding it: the Missa Solemnis, Ninth Symphony, Hammerklavier, Diabelli Variations, and the last three piano sonatas. All of this, mind you, when Beethoven was almost completely deaf and in failing health.

He completed the overture in 1822 on a breakneck deadline to celebrate the opening of the Josefstadt Theater in Vienna. It was the last of a long string of overtures and holds a special place in music history, having been performed on May 9, 1824, at the premiere of the Ninth Symphony and three movements of the Missa Solemnis. The audience went bonkers, and Beethoven had to be turned around on stage to acknowledge the applause.

Beethoven had always admired the two kings of the late Baroque era – Bach and Handel – and their mastery of the fugue, a form that can be heard prominently in many of Beethoven’s late works. This includes the Consecration of the House, which makes use of an energetic double fugue in C major that Beethoven said he “conceived after Handel.”

The overture opens with five stentorian calls from the full orchestra before settling into a solemn processional. A series of distant-sounding fanfares follow in a majestic and stately rhythm, as if a king or queen was slowly entering a hall. A second section, which Beethoven wanted played in high spirits, teems with dramatic counterpoint as instruments scamper through a grand fugue – another tribute to the Baroque – that brings the music to a rousing close.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)
CLARINET CONCERTO IN A MAJOR, K. 622
Duration: ca. 24 minutes

They say when the angels play music for God, they play Bach. When they play for themselves, they choose Mozart. Sadly, those heavenly sounds ended far too soon, and by his 35th year, the revered Austrian composer knew time was running short.

“Everything is cold for me – ice cold,” he wrote to his wife, Constanze, in March of 1791, citing financial struggles, lack of support for his concerts, and failing health. By December, his body lay in an unmarked grave in Vienna. On a desk at home sat his unfinished Requiem.
But the Requiem would not be his valedictory statement. That belongs to the Clarinet Concerto, the last major piece Mozart completed, and one of the splendors in all of music: So simple, a tapestry of transcendental beauty, tinged with struggle, and, as you will hear tonight, a sigh of resignation. Ask anyone who plays the clarinet to describe it and they seldom refer to it as a concerto.

“It feels like a compact opera,” said Natalie Hoe, TFO’s principal clarinetist and this weekend’s soloist. “Unlike a lot of other clarinet concertos that are filled with acrobatics, this is full of human emotions and characters. It depicts how human-like the clarinet is, and imitates all of the inflections in our voice.”

Whether for clarinet, piano or violin, Mozart’s concertos reflect his genius in portraying characters in music, with a solo becoming an arioso, sung by instruments with personalities of their own.

Mozart actually began writing the score in 1789 as a concerto in G Major for the basset horn, which he left incomplete. Never one to leave good material on the cutting room floor, Mozart used 191 bars of it for the allegro of the Clarinet Concerto, which he completed three months before his death. The opening movement begins with a lilting theme in the strings to lay the groundwork for the soloist, who soon takes the handoff and treats listeners to a full range of highs and lows. The music is relaxed, sunny and effortless, but also reveals an intimate relationship between soloist and orchestra. To keep the clarinet’s sound at the forefront, the orchestra is scored without oboes.

In an elegantly balanced slow movement, the clarinet develops themes introduced earlier in what undoubtedly is one of the composer’s most lyrical adagios. Mozart exploits the instrument to its full potential but without virtuosity or even a cadenza – no easy task. This is music of quiet reflection, and profoundly human.

“The middle movement really shows how the clarinet can ultimately be like a voice,” Hoe said. “You can really showcase how beautiful the clarinet can sound.”

Soloist and orchestra come back into the light with a lively rondo in 6/8 time, but not without the clarinet offering a lament in the contrasting key of F sharp minor. The final movement, then, seems to balance happiness and sadness, mirth and melancholy, one masking the other as if Mozart wanted us to decide on a mood for ourselves. Above all, Hoe said, the music tells a story.

“It’s a very approachable for an audience because it takes you on a journey,” she said. “And it’s been a journey for me to figure out what I want to do with it and make it my own. I’m still working on that.”

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)
SYMPHONY NO. 6, PATHETIQUE
Duration: ca. 46 minutes

“Without exaggeration, I have put my entire soul into this symphony,” Tchaikovsky wrote after completing his Symphony No. 6. “I have never felt such self-satisfaction, such pride, such happiness, as in the consciousness that I am really the creator of this beautiful work.”

It would be his last. Just over a week after its premiere in October 1893, Tchaikovsky died, having drunk a glass of unboiled water during a cholera outbreak in St. Petersburg (Russia, not Florida). The Pathetique – his symphony of suffering, of pathos – would become his requiem, a last will and testament of a composer whose music comes directly and unabashedly from the heart.

Tchaikovsky has never been viewed as herculean, much less heroic, in the sense of Beethoven or Mahler. His brand of romantic expression is more about vulnerability, of personal pain, of sentiment and sensitivity. Along with a supreme technique and gift for melody and orchestral color, his emotionalism is
a powerful tonic that makes the concertos, ballet scores, tone poems and last three symphonies central to the orchestral repertoire.

Tchaikovsky’s final work remains popular for another reason: Its resilience. It stands up to most any interpretation, to any choice of tempo, to any exaggeration. No wonder it’s among the most recorded of all symphonies; no two performances are alike, and the best are nothing less than gut-wrenching. After a performance of the Pathetique with the New York Philharmonic, conductor Leonard Bernstein stepped off the podium, white faced, and said, “I have been on the brink.’’

The first movement opens from the depths, the strings barely audible as a mournful bassoon rises from below. More and more instruments slowly join the dirge, adding color as the pace quickens, hints of a main theme, then unleashes a tempest. After a brief struggle, Tchaikovsky lets loose one of his most ardent melodies. It doesn’t last. An outburst by the brass begins a descent into chaos, followed by a brief return to song, then quiet.

The second movement, a waltz with five beats per measure, takes the place where a slow movement would normally reside. An exhilarating scherzo follows, a triumphant march where the woodwinds, and the clarinet in particular, exploit the music’s energy and colors to the fullest. Don’t be surprised to hear applause from the audience after the rousing finish.

Tchaikovsky concludes with a lament, making it the first major symphony to end in a slow movement. Listeners will hear a quote from the opening movement and two arresting climaxes. But the mood is one of profound despair, and as the music winds to a close, it grows weaker and more solemn, the trombones and tuba finally running short of breath, then the bassoon, before the last notes of the orchestra fade into darkness.

“You really feel this is his last piece, a farewell to the world,’’ said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “There’s a very clear narrative throughout. It’s an extraordinary work of drama and pain on a level of honesty we haven’t heard before.’’

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.