LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
CORIOLAN OVERTURE, OP. 62
Duration: ca. 8 minutes

Composed in 1807 for Heinrich Joseph von Collin’s play Coriolanus – about an alienated Roman general – this overture was anything but a complement to the action. In fact, it was so dramatically top heavy it rendered the play impotent. Here was an overture that felt like a compact symphony (and a model for the tone poems of Liszt and Strauss much later), and became a stand-alone concert piece independent of text or action.

While the play has vanished, the music lives on as one of Beethoven’s most-performed short works, and for good reason, notes Jan Swafford in his biography Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph. “With this piece, Beethoven more or less invented what came to be called the concert overture and no less what was to be called the symphonic poem. Since the overture needed to evoke the story somehow, and since it was intended to have its own life outside the play, Beethoven could indulge in music with less risk of being condemned for it.”

From the powerful opening chords, listeners immediately feel the urgent pull of Beethoven in his full heroic-era mode. This is music of turbulence, the harmonies intentionally unstable, a fight between two majestic themes in the keys of C minor and E-flat major that struggle to resolve before giving way to pianissimo strings.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
VIOLIN CONCERTO IN D MAJOR, OP. 61
Duration: ca. 42 minutes

The evolution of Beethoven’s creative genius makes for one of the more interesting biographies of any artist. Plagued by financial troubles most of his life, deafness by age 30, a variety of illnesses, and a paradoxical relationship with those around him, Beethoven could easily have given into what he called his “unfavorable fate.” Instead, he persisted, and his stubbornness – his most resilient trait – literally changed 19th century musical thought and action.

An example of his persistence can be seen in the year 1806, when deafness forced him to compose in the “absence” of sound, and he had to rely on conversation books to communicate. His resolve, however, overcame his liability, evident in a remarkable outpouring of work that included the Razumovsky string quartets, the Appassionata piano sonata, the Fourth Symphony, the main elements of the Fourth Piano Concerto – and the work you will hear tonight, the Violin Concerto.

The Fourth Piano Concerto and Violin Concerto share similar openings: lengthy orchestral introductions that set the stage for the solo instrument. They also share a sense of spaciousness and are more graceful
than frenetic. Unlike the Brahms or Tchaikovsky violin concertos – which share the same key of D major – Beethoven’s work is not about power and bravura but poise and spirituality.

“I personally feel this is the violin concerto of all time, a real monument,” said Simone Lamsma, soloist in this weekend’s concerts. “There’s a grandeur combined with such elegance throughout.”

At about 45 minutes, the concerto requires stamina, and while the writing for the violin is, in essence, a series of fragmented themes, it exhibits a remarkable cohesion. “Part of the genius of this work is how well constructed it is and how many shorter lines, fragments and details are all part of a much bigger whole,” Lamsma said. “Trying to understand and internalize the architecture is key to delivering a successful performance.”

This unity begins at the very opening with five quiet taps on the kettledrum and then settles into a lengthy conversation between violin and orchestra stretching for nearly half an hour. Like the four notes that ring throughout Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, the timpani strokes are heard in different ways throughout, beginning with the strings in the introduction.

This motif serves as the concerto’s connective tissue. A luscious and serene larghetto offers a set of variations against muted strings, and the soloist works through a cadenza that leads directly into the finale – an energetic gypsy-like rondo in 6/8 meter bursting with arpeggios, double stops, scale runs, and quick-silver plucked notes from the violinist. Beethoven wrote no cadenzas for this concerto, and over the years many violinists have added their own, most playing those by Fritz Kreisler in the outer movements.

Above all, the concerto is a work of breathtaking beauty and a true partnership between soloist and orchestra. Lamsma never tires of playing it, and always strives to make each performance personal.

“The fact that I have such deep respect for this music makes the challenge even greater,” she said. “The greatness in this music is that I will always continue to find new insights, because this is a journey that will never end.”

**BELA BARTOK (1881-1945)**

**CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA**

Duration: ca. 38 minutes

By the 1930s, American orchestras were becoming formidable artistic institutions that would soon be as good as any in Europe. The big guns in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston accumulated deep endowments and support, and musicians were paid well – incentive to finish a career in one place. All this translated to precise, well-oiled groups that could turn on a dime and wax virtuosic in the most challenging repertoire.

After moving to the United States from his native Hungary in 1940, Béla Bartók was aware of just how good American ensembles had become, and decided to compose a new piece to showcase the talent of these remarkable ensembles. Although he was struggling with leukemia, he gathered the strength to complete one last large-scale piece, his *Concerto for Orchestra*, which he finished in 1944 on a commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s music director, Serge Koussevitzky. As the title suggests, the work is an instrumental *tour de force*, but also something else: a polyglot of international styles that come together, like musical immigrants, in a single voice.
“Almost every instrument in the orchestra has a solo, even as the collective emotion swells,” notes music critic Alex Ross in his book *The Rest is Noise*. “Bartók’s parting gift to his adopted country is a portrait of democracy in action.”

Bartók cast the work in five movements, each contrasting the other. A darkly ominous introduction seems to grow from some primeval source and sets an anxious tone. Bartók called the second movement “Game of the Pairs,” a chain of five short, independent sections that each pair two bassoons, oboes, clarinets, flutes, and trumpets. A haunting “song of death” follows, and then the concerto’s most surreal section, an “Interrupted Intermezzo” that mocks through sneering trombone slides the vulgar Nazi war march of Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony*. The piece concludes with a life-affirming fugue in 2/4 time that Bartók called a “whirling folk festival.”

TFO has proven its mastery of this work over the years, including standout performances in 1994 under the baton of Jahja Ling and in 2003 under Stefan Sanderling.

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