JAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)
SYMPHONY NO. 7 IN C MAJOR, OP. 105
Duration: ca. 21 minutes

For most concertgoers, Sibelius is best known for his riveting tone poem of 1900, Finlandia, which evokes the struggle of the Finnish people and quickly became a symbol of nationalism. Sibelius was essentially a romantic composer who bridged the 19th and 20th centuries, and whose best work is perfumed with the mists of his homeland, its terrain, forests, and cold winters. Like Wagner, he was fascinated by myth and legend, and wove ancient characters into many of his foreboding tone poems.

Although uniquely gifted and long lived, his musical career lay fallow the last three decades of his life. After composing seven symphonies – and hundreds of songs and piano pieces – he retired in 1929, living out his days on a government stipend. What shut off the creative spigot? Why would a composer of such iconic status, and with so much time to explore and develop, suddenly close the book?

Historians have posited a number of theories: the composer’s hypercritical attitude toward his work, depression, a sense of accomplishment and completion, creative exhaustion, and alcoholism. Sibelius answered the question himself: “My drinking has genuine roots that are both dangerous and go deep. In order to survive, I have to have alcohol. And that’s where all my problems begin.”

His problem came to a head the night he tried to conduct his Sixth Symphony in Gothenburg, Sweden. Shortly before curtain, Sibelius went missing. Panicked managers searched the neighborhood, only to find the composer in a restaurant, drunk on champagne. Ushered back to the hall, Sibelius attempted to lead the orchestra, but with disastrous results. His wife, Aino – who was in attendance – never forgave him.

Sibelius had one symphony left to write, finishing it in 1924 alongside the bottle. Originally titled Fantasia Sinfonica, it would be his most unusual. Although it shares the glacier-like feel of so much of his orchestra work, with suspended crescendos and climaxes, the Seventh is cast as a single movement without a break. Its free-flowing structure leaves the traditional sonata form – intro, development, recap – behind, and challenges listeners to follow where a theme might go.

The music begins with a barely heard beat on the kettledrums and a slow rise from the strings. Soon, the full orchestra opens its arms as if to embrace some great expanse, inviting listeners on an uninterrupted sonic experience over the next 20 minutes. A vibrant unrest links the four sections together, and a main theme is developed through a solo trombone rising above the orchestra. This is ripe, expressive music from start to finish, its impact all the more remarkable through its hyper-concentration.

“It’s really a perfect symphony, like the Beethoven Eighth on this program,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “Even though it’s short, there’s this amazing sense of perfection, of being on a symphonic journey.”
Hearing Beethoven’s Symphony No. 8 for the first time, not knowing who composed it, a curious listener might think it belongs to Haydn, for it fits snugly into the classical-era framework that Beethoven would both master and move past.

Like the Fourth, the Eighth is something of an orphan in Beethoven’s canon, often ignored in comparison to the more powerful odd-numbered works. The shortest of his symphonies, the Eighth is almost polite in character, introducing itself from the get-go without a mood-setting preamble. In a salute to tradition, Beethoven cast the four brief movements in a cheerful light that belies what’s underneath: a potent originality that packs a lot into a little.

“Many people believe it’s his most perfect symphony,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “It’s his most condensed and pure symphony, like the Sibelius on this program. There’s not a single wasted note.”

The symphony opens with a dance-like theme Beethoven had originally sketched for a piano concerto, but this isn’t the sound of Haydn’s time. The richer texture comes from the larger forces Beethoven organized for the premiere in 1814: 36 violins, 14 violas, a dozen cellos, and seven basses. In the brief allegretto, Beethoven parodies the newly invented metronome of the time by scoring much of the movement in abrupt “tick-tock” staccatos. The third movement minuet echoes the feel of a courtly dance, and the finale explodes in high spirits and sends the musicians scurrying to an energetic climax.

Like Mozart and Beethoven before him, Rachmaninoff was a highly respected pianist in his day, and his talent earned him sizeable sums on concert tours. He was a connoisseur’s artist, impeccably trained from a young age and armed with a formidable musical mind, large hands, and perfect pitch. He also was dismissed by some critics as a gushing romantic.

His favor in today’s concert halls is no quirk or stylish trend. He never turned his back on the romantic in music, and he may be regarded as the most impassioned of all 20th-century composers. He spent his life exploring the creative possibilities of the piano, and with his knack for writing a nostalgic tune – and a penchant for melancholy – he has remained an audience favorite. In fact, the single most performed piece of classical music among American orchestras today is his Piano Concerto No. 2.

Although less popular, the Piano Concerto No. 3 is a deeper, more cohesive work with a mature development of themes. Completed in 1909, it unfolds on a grand scale, with a sweeping emotional range and lyricism. The first movement opens with a foreboding diatonic melody that eventually leads to a series of furious climaxes and a knuckle-breaking keyboard cadenza – one reason the Third was called the Mount Everest of piano concertos in the 1996 Academy Award-winning film Shine.

If the soloist survives, woodwinds take up the action with a return to the main theme and a gentle close
by the orchestra. The middle movement revolves around a poignant melody in F sharp minor, and the finale flows without pause into a set of variations on ideas introduced earlier, which lends an organic wholeness to the entire work.

“It’s the leviathan of piano concertos,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “And it balances the two symphonies on this program very well.”

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