OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879-1936)
FOUNTAINS OF ROME
Duration: ca. 15 minutes

Western music owes a great deal to Italy and the traditions set down more than 400 years ago by an innovative group of musicians known as the Florentine Camerata. It laid the cornerstone for what would become the modern opera, and for generations any patriotic Italian composer evolved his art through its voice. Respighi was no exception, attempting 10 unsuccessful projects such as Semirama, Belfagor and La Fiamma. These works, which contain many fine moments, aren’t staged today, much less remembered. But Respighi’s talents would be found elsewhere, and his best and brightest works for orchestra are savoried by anyone who enjoys refined, instrumental color.

Unlike his forward-thinking contemporary, Puccini, Respighi sided with a group of composers who sought to preserve tradition through Renaissance and Baroque forms, an example being his Ancient Airs and Dances. He even turned against his more progressive colleagues when, in 1932, he signed a petition condemning modernistic trends in Italian music.

As a composer, Respighi emphasized clarity in his orchestration, the interplay of light and shade, and melodic invention, and the influence of Rimsky-Korsakov is never far behind. Respighi’s trademark remains the famed triptych of Roman tone poems – Fountains, Pines and Festivals – which unfold like prisms of color in the late afternoon sun. With Fountains, Respighi enjoyed his first artistic and financial success, and the music’s inherent quality – a vivaciousness not found in his earlier works – shows an affinity for formal clarity.

Completed in 1916, Fountains depicts four of the city’s more than 280 landmark fountains, each at different times of the day. It opens with a pastoral Valle Giulia Fountain at Dawn; then a chorus of horns and bells introduces Triton Fountain at morning; followed by the grandiose Trevi Fountain at Noon. It ends with the subtle Villa Medici Fountain at Sunset, highlighted by the clarinet and flute mimicking birds as night gives way to a quiet peace.

NICCOLO PAGANINI (1782-1840)
VIOLIN CONCERTO NO. 1 IN D MAJOR, OP. 6
Duration: ca. 35 minutes

Paganini was classical music’s first true rock star. He knew the power of stage presence, of how to raise and lower the curtain, and possessed the virtuosity of a Mephistopheles. In fact, part of the myth was his pact with the devil himself, a demonic bargain for immortality. It must have worked, because he hasn’t been forgotten.
Gaunt, with a large nose, fiery eyes and personal magnetism to spare, Paganini was an intimidating figure who sold out concerts and entranced listeners with his pyrotechnic fiddle playing. An exhibitionist, he often would cut the strings on his violin until he was down to one, yet still able to be acrobatic. Critics poo-pooed such trickery but it made him a fortune on tours throughout Europe, devoted almost exclusively to his own music. By refusing to publish his original works, he ran his own monopoly, and violinists had to wait until the 1850s before his scores began to circulate.

Fame and travel eventually wore Paganini down, and he lost most of his savings by investing in a Paris casino before dying at age 58 from venereal disease. Because of his refusal to recognize the church (and his alleged association with the devil), his body was not buried in consecrated ground for another 36 years.

Paganini wrote six concertos for the violin, all seldom played, but the Concerto No. 1 remains the best of the bunch. Completed in 1818, the work hints of Rossini and opens with an extended introduction by the orchestra (and plenty of crashing cymbals) before the soloist appears in a virtuosic dazzle. A dark slow movement follows before the fireworks of the finale. Here, Paganini is at his showy best, exploiting the violin with brilliant scales, percussive effects and “ricochets,” where notes are played by bouncing the bow against the strings.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN B FLAT MAJOR, OP. 60
Duration: ca. 37 minutes

The even-numbered symphonies of Beethoven have always gotten a bad rap. No wonder – they have to stand up against the heroic Third, the ever-popular Fifth, the Seventh and the most imposing of all, the Ninth. But let’s not sell them short. Igor Stravinsky once said he would take even-over-odd Beethoven any day. More importantly, each of the nine are a chapter in Beethoven’s evolution as a symphonist.

The Fourth Symphony, then, is not an extension of the Third any more than a prelude to the Fifth. It stands alone, notably for its lyricism, although there’s no denying its place between two giants. “He was aiming to broaden his new symphonic framework still further by showing that the epic, heroic model was only one of a number of alternatives,” notes Lewis Lockwood in his book Beethoven: The Music and the Life. “The Fourth shows that less could be as much, perhaps more.”

It was composed during a time of tremendous productivity that included the Razumovsky quartets, the Appassionata sonata, the Violin Concerto and the Piano Concerto No. 4. Its tranquil nature offers no hint of the brutish behavior Beethoven exhibited in the summer of 1806 while composing it as a guest in the summer castle of Prince Lichnowsky. He barricaded himself in his room, refusing visitors, bellowing musical ideas like a crazed opera singer.

The scoring is essentially that of a Mozart orchestra: one flute; winds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani; and strings. The atmosphere is simple and without contrapuntal flourish. For all its apparent lightness, the symphony opens mysteriously and by the allegro vivace achieves moments of emotional depth, especially in how Beethoven treats harmony. The adagio is a lilting cantabile unmatched in anything he wrote up to this time, and the finale introduces a romp of fleeting 16th notes, a moto perpetuo that nearly trips over itself in a race to the end.
Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.