Music lovers will forever argue over the best of Beethoven’s piano concertos, the Fourth or the Fifth. Preparing for the debate requires hours of listening to both, and in the end, a truce has to be called. Each is a musical watershed and complement one another like loving siblings.

Where the Emperor is majestic, the Fourth is graceful – even sublime. With this inward-looking work, completed when Beethoven was 36 years old, the genre of the piano concerto entered a new phase, one that reflects the composer showing us his full emotional range, and a unique ability to blend intense vitality with tranquility. But what makes the concerto so exceptional for its time is its sense of improvisation: It sounds as if soloist and orchestra are feeling their way through the music for the first time, exploring rather than following notes on a page.

The work opens with soft piano chords that introduce a pulsating theme in the strings and woodwinds, followed by an exposition designed to create suspense as the piano waits for its turn to reappear. Then begins an elegant improvisation that sets a definitive tone: the piano owns this concerto. The slow movement is a pensive call and response: a stern declaration by the orchestra and a soft reply by the keyboard. But as the movement unfolds, the orchestra moves further into the background and the piano takes a dominate if quietly expressive role.

The last movement jumps forward on a march-like theme, with the first appearance of trumpets and drums. This is the most aggressive music of the entire work, a rondo that repeats its spirited theme and ends on a triumphant upbeat.

Brahms was a self-critical artist who tossed many a flawed or unfinished score into the fire. Second-rate music had no place in his world, and little can be found in his masterful chamber pieces, symphonies, overtures, concertos, sonatas, songs and choral works. He labored for 15 years over his C Minor Symphony, possibly daunted by public expectations of him as the heir to Beethoven.

The Symphony No. 2 enjoyed an easier birth and contains little of the angst of the earlier work. Similar in mood to Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, the D Major Symphony is buoyant, idyllic, and conveys a flowing warmth that culminates in a dazzling brass fanfare. Oddly, Brahms described it as “so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it; I have never written anything so sad.” How can something so radiant be sad? Such is the ambiguity of Brahms, where deeper meaning can be found just below the surface, says TFO Music Director Michael Francis.
“Especially when hearing it after the Beethoven concerto on this program,” he said. “That will bring out some of the dark elements in the symphony, which is full of pathos and profundity. And it wraps up with an astonishingly brilliant ending.”

Brahms composed the work in the summer of 1877 in the Austrian lakeside town of Portschach, where he swam in the mornings and hiked in the afternoons. Feeling fresh and creative, he knocked out the symphony in four months, saying that “the melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one.”

All four movements are in major keys – D, B, G and D, respectively – supported by relaxed tempos that create a *plein air* quality. The symphony softly develops its principle theme in different instrument guises, and at one point quotes the melody of his famous *Lullaby*. The adagio is the longest Brahms ever wrote and among his loveliest creations, ushered in by cellos and bassoons.

A tune by the oboe, rising out of plucked cellos, opens the third movement and the orchestra soon whips up a Slavonic-like dance. A hushed intensity in the strings sets the finale in motion. Then Brahms slows things down as a set up to his most spirited climax: a blaze of brass in the home key of D major.

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