

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Beethoven & Haydn

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FANNY MENDELSSOHN HENSEL (1805-1847)

OVERTURE IN C MAJOR

One of the more arresting creations of Felix Mendelssohn is the *String Quartet in F Minor*, his last major work and a requiem for his beloved sister, Fanny, who died of a heart attack just months earlier. The quartet is important not only for its status in the chamber music genre, but as a testament to how important Fanny was to her brother and his development as a composer.

Fanny played a pivotal role in shaping his creativity, serving as a sort of musical advisor and guiding him throughout his life. She was an accomplished composer, pianist and choral conductor, although the public seldom hears any of her nearly 500 works. Her domineering father forbid her from publishing her own compositions without severe personal sacrifice, although her talents were admired by many, include Goethe, who in a letter to Felix referred to her as “your equally talented sister.”

Fanny composed only one piece for orchestra, the *Overture in C*, a confident, delicate work that carries hints of her brother’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. First performed in 1830 at the Mendelssohn home in Berlin, the *Overture* never made the rounds; it collected dust until Judith Rosen, a board member with the Women’s Philharmonic of San Francisco, obtained permission to make copies of the score from a library in Germany. Soon afterward, in 1992, it was recorded for the first time.

The music begins quietly before the strings unite in an ascending theme full of propulsive rhythm that shows Fanny’s command of thematic development. A secondary melody introduces itself – as complement, not contrast – and the *Overture* stays on an even keel throughout, its passages always subtle and restrained.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN

At the end of the 19th century, composers in France began to rally against the weight of Wagner and channel their energies into a new school of thought. Debussy led the charge by composing works with free floating, constantly shifting harmonic landscapes, leaving the listener with an “impression” of a musical subject.

Ravel wasn’t far behind. While he mirrors Debussy in many ways, Ravel didn’t march with the progressives, preferring traditional form, structure and tonality. This could have rendered him obsolete, but in fact his music sparkled with a refined taste and clarity. A superb technician – Stravinsky sarcastically called him “a Swiss clock maker” – Ravel crafted music of remarkable detail and instrumental brilliance, and was fascinated by musical forms from an earlier age.

This certainly is the case with *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, which is essentially a Baroque suite in the style of the French harpsichord master Francois Couperin – a contemporary of Bach – but dressed in modern

clothing. Ravel wrote the six-movement work for piano and later orchestrated four sections, all indirectly influenced by his experiences as an ambulance driver during World War 1 and the tragedies he witnessed first-hand at Verdun.

He dedicated each section to a friend who died in battle, some during their first day on the front. The piano suite consists of a Prelude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet and Toccata – although Ravel’s orchestral version omits the Fugue and Toccata. For all its suggested melancholy, the music is bright and airy, because, as Ravel said, “The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence.”

Le Tombeau of Couperin today is regarded as a tour de force of instrumental finesse and understatement, notes Ethan Mordden in his *Guide to Orchestral Music*: “His effects are always embedded within the texture of mood, never thrown in for mere dazzle.”

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809) **TRUMPET CONCERTO IN E-FLAT MAJOR**

Haydn was a working man who put in plenty of overtime. His published works in the three-volume Hoboken catalog include 160 trios, 104 symphonies, nearly 70 string quartets, some 50 keyboard sonatas, 20 concertos, 15 operas, 12 masses and numerous vocal works.

He is regarded as the father of both the symphony and the string quartet by virtue of his experimental approaches. Haydn also has been unfairly reduced through the image of the courtly “Papa” who aimed to please royalty, was overshadowed by a genius named Mozart, and whose old-school musical philosophy was swept aside by the young lion, Beethoven.

“Such a reductive account completely distorts both his career and his life’s work,” notes Allan Kozinn in the *New York Times Essential Library of Classical Music*. “It overlooks the ample friction of his early court career, as well as the fact that for the last few decades of his life he was an independent, entrepreneurial composer with an enormous following all over Europe.”

The piano and violin dominated the concerto repertoire in Haydn’s time and long after, while the trumpet was limited until new designs and the addition of keys led to a full chromatic instrument with more possibilities to explore. This new keyed trumpet is what Haydn had in mind for his *Trumpet Concerto in E Flat Major*, composed in 1796 for the virtuoso Anton Weidlinger.

The work was not well received at first, in part because audiences were skeptical of this odd-sounding bugle. But today it stands among the most-performed classical works for trumpet, and its concise and appealing structure makes for a dashing addition to any live concert.

The opening movement is all show – a dazzling cadenza for the soloist – and follows with a slow movement that urges the soloist to show tasteful reserve. The finale offers a bit of pyrotechnics and high passages designed to bring the audience to its feet.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
SYMPHONY NO. 1 in C MAJOR, OP. 21

Sitting in the audience in Vienna in 1800, with Beethoven's *First Symphony* on the bill, listeners had no idea a flood gate was about to open on the music world.

Tame by the standards of his subsequent works, the *C Major Symphony* was Beethoven's initial foray into the new spirit of individualism, of breaking free from the chains of patronage and allowing music to speak for – and to – the inner self. No, the audience wasn't aware of it then, but by the time his *Third Symphony* rolled off the line, they would be.

This weekend, TFO continues its celebration of the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth. No traversal of the symphonies would stand up without the *First*, which serves as Beethoven's proving ground, and establishes his presence as a formidable orchestrator of original ideas that moved beyond the influence of Mozart and Haydn.

However, an atmosphere of innocence, of simplicity, sets it apart from the symphonies that follow, so it's often regarded as the child of the lot. "Beethoven played it safe rather than provoke his audience," notes Lewis Lockwood in his book *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*. "He avoids the quirks and eccentricities that had come to be the order of the day in his sonatas and chamber music. So the *First* remains a trial run ... a distant memory of an earlier, attractive and domesticated Beethoven."

The symphony begins by "backing" into the home key through a soft discord in the woodwinds. Moments into the opening *allegro con brio*, a new pulse makes itself felt, a dynamic energy that must have surprised those early Austrians. With a swift change in tempo, Beethoven creates harmonic tension across a canvas of traditional sonata form.

After a conventional slow movement peppered with overlapping themes, Beethoven plunges into a menuetto – the only one in any of his symphonies – although hardly reminiscent of the refined and courtly models of his predecessors. The rhythmic rush of the music suggests a full-blown scherzo hiding underneath. Beethoven exhibits humor in the finale: a fanfare in G that sets listeners up in one direction, then takes them in another. The orchestra rides a wave of constant renewal, full of contrapuntal spirit up and down the beat, and concludes with a romp to the finish line.

It's hard to imagine such a joyful, sunny creation from a composer grappling with the realization of deafness, and whose great musical journey from that point on would be haunted by the demons of illness and isolation.

Essentially a nonstop crescendo of shifting suspensions, the music reaches a climax and releases its tension before the strings repeat the opening theme, then fade into silence. Listeners can decide for themselves if the *Adagio* is about some deep sadness or resignation, or just a moment of serenity that always sounds fresh.

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