

## Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

# Beethoven's Emperor Concerto

Michael Francis, *Conductor*  
Javier Perianes, *Piano*

Friday, Feb 23, 2024, Straz Center at 8:00 pm  
Saturday, Feb 24, 2024, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm  
Sunday, Feb 25, 2024, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

**Ludwig van Beethoven**  
(1770-1827)

### **Concerto for Piano No. 5, Op. 73 "Emperor"**

I. Allegro  
II. Adagio un poco mosso  
III. Rondo: Allegro  
Javier Perianes, *piano*

*Intermission*

**Richard Strauss**  
(1864-1949)

### **Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40 "A Hero's Life"**

#### **Straz Friday, Feb. 23rd:**

**With gratitude to Carol Balkcom and Ed Kaloust, generous patrons, donors, and sponsors of this concert.**

#### **Mahaffey Saturday, Feb. 24th:**

**With gratitude to Dr. Gordon Gilbert and Michele Gilbert, generous patrons, donors and sponsors of this concert.**

***Saturday night's concert is part of  
St. Petersburg's Celebration of the Arts***

\* Mystery piece rental by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers

*Javier Perianes plays the Steinway Piano from the Music Gallery, exclusive agents for Steinway & Sons.*

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## **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

### ***Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73, Emperor***

Duration: ca. 37 minutes

The evolution of Beethoven's creative genius makes for one of the more intriguing 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 19<sup>th</sup> century musical thought and action.

An example of this persistence can be heard and felt in his *Piano Concerto No. 5*, the famed *Emperor*, written when deafness forced him to compose in the "absence" of sound and rely on conversation books to communicate. His resolve, however, overcame his liability, evident in a work of unprecedented depth and expression.

Cast in the majestic key of E-flat major, the concerto is a dialog among equals – soloist and orchestra carry the same assertive weight throughout – although the piano is the hero of this story. Its war-like rhythms, pointed melodies and bold character led the musicologist Alfred Einstein to call it the "apotheosis of the military concept" in Beethoven's creative output.

Unlike most concertos up to this time (1809), Beethoven introduces the soloist at the onset, overturning the tradition of a lengthy orchestral exposition. The piano enters like a wave crashing on shore as it unleashes a wash of notes in all directions. Yes, Beethoven also begins his *Piano Concerto No. 4* with the soloist in the driver's seat, but not on such a dramatic path.

"A challenge is finding the right balance between poetry and the heroic and establishing a fluid communication with the orchestra," says the Spanish pianist Javier Perianes, guest soloist in the upcoming TFO concerts. "I like to consider this concerto as a great chamber music piece in terms of articulation, phrasing, and sound."

Beethoven's popularity rests in part on his power – the full-throttled energy of so many of his orchestral and chamber works. But the *Emperor* reveals something else: a tenderness and lyricism that serve to deepen the surrounding struggle. Imagine the opening and closing movements of his *Ninth Symphony* unmoored from the central adagio that brings them to life. The *Emperor* is no different.

The adagio is Beethoven on a spiritual high, the piano's delicate, ascending melody set against muted strings in what sounds like a hymn. Leonard Bernstein was so enamored by this music that he borrowed its initial theme for the song *Somewhere* in his musical *West Side Story*.

"This movement is one of the most sublime in the repertoire," Perianes adds, "and in its simplicity resides the difficulty."

Then, emerging from a few suggestive chords, the concerto concludes with a burst, the keyboard's offbeat tune riding atop insistent rhythms from the orchestra, a bluster of brass, and bold strokes by the kettledrums. After a moment of reflection, the work ends as exuberantly as it began.

An early 19<sup>th</sup>-century review in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* summed up the *Emperor* as the "most original, most inventive, most effective, most difficult of all concertos." But it also would symbolize – as it does more than two centuries after its premiere – the ideal in Romanticism of emotions rather than stylistic concepts.

"The concerto encapsulates the heroic struggle of the individual," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis, "and how one determined soul can influence the world around him to a magnificent degree."

## **Richard Strauss (1864-1949)**

### ***Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life), Op. 40***

Duration: ca. 45 minutes

Had Richard Strauss written an autobiography, he might have called it *My Brilliant Career*. He was, after all, an enormous talent (with an ego to match) whose sensuous and often bombastic storytelling symphonies and operatic shockers commanded the stages of Europe for three decades. He continued the legacy of Franz Liszt by taking the tone poem to new heights, and made quite a racket along the way. You don't need to be inside a concert hall to enjoy Strauss; his music can be heard a mile away.

After the success of *Don Juan* in 1889, Strauss was crowned the heir to Wagner, and from then on was more or less unstoppable, giving us *Death and Transfiguration*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *A Hero's Life*, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, *Salome*, *Symphonia Domestica*, *Elektra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – the opening theme immortalized in the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. By the 1920s, Strauss was not only the most famous composer alive, but the wealthiest.

Completed in 1898, *Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life)* is a work of ferocious size, virtuosity and extravagant expression. It pairs with the other work on this program, Beethoven's *Emperor*, in that both carry a "heroic" theme in the key of E-flat major.

The arc-like structure adds to the weight of the work, as its six sections are interconnected and played without pause, like a single-movement symphony in sonata form: statement of themes, development, recapitulation and coda. Here is an episodic summary:

*The Hero* introduces the protagonist with a broad, romantic melody, a muscular motif that connects us with the character until the end – nearly 120 measures later. *The Hero's Adversities* turns the light on seven of his enemies (music critics, no less), portrayed through bleating, raspy woodwinds and brass. *The Hero's Companion* introduces a love relationship, played by the solo violin in G flat, and *The Hero at Battle* is sheer war music in its rhythmic savagery, with a trio of off-stage trumpets leading the charge.

*The Hero's Works of Peace* celebrates the victory with quotes from previous Strauss works, including *Don Juan*, *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Death and Transfiguration*. Finally, we arrive at *The Hero's Retirement and Completion*, a reflection on a life well lived and full of grand accomplishments.

"It's an example of what is a hero," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "For the orchestra, it's a great showcase. This concert is about celebrating the orchestra, and this is one of the big monsters."

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