Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Beethoven's Violin Concerto

Michael Francis, *Conductor*
Alexi Kenney, *Violin*

Friday, Mar 14, 2025, Straz Center - Morsani Hall at 8:00 pm
Saturday, Mar 15, 2025, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm
Sunday, Mar 16, 2025, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)	**Violin Concerto in D Major, Op.61** I. Allegro ma non troppo II. Larghetto III. Rondo: Allegro **Alexi Kenney, *violin***
	Intermission
Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)	**Šárka from *Má Vlast***
Leoš Janáček (1854 – 1928)	**Taras Bulba** I. Death of Andril *(Smrt Andrijova)* II. Death of Ostap *(Smrt Ostapova)* III. Death and Prophesy of Taras Bulba *(Proroctví a smrt Bulby)*
Bedřich Smetana	**Vltava (The Moldau) from *Má Vlast***

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Saturday – Debbie and George Baxter
Sunday – Sandra Ruppel, and in memory of her late husband George Ruppel.

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61
Duration: ca. 42 minutes

What to listen for:

•The concerto is less a collection of long, flowing lines than a series of fragments, ingeniously woven together.

One of the many fascinating facets of Beethoven, aside from a bit of creative genius, was his stubbornness, which might have been his most resilient trait. 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 obduracy changed 19th century musical thought and action.

An example of this can be seen in the year 1806, when deafness forced him to compose in the "absence'' of sound, and Beethoven would begin writing his thoughts in sketchbooks to converse with friends. His resolve, however, gave us a remarkable outpouring of work that included the Razumovsky string quartets, the Appassionata piano sonata, the Fourth Symphony, the main elements of the Fourth Piano Concerto – and the work you are about to hear, the Violin Concerto.

Like that piano work, the Violin Concerto begins with a lengthy orchestral introduction that sets the stage for the solo instrument. From the onset, the music unfolds with a sense of spaciousness, its character more graceful than frenetic. Unlike the Brahms or Tchaikovsky violin concertos, which share the same key of D major, Beethoven's work is not about power and bravura but poise and spirituality.

At nearly 45 minutes, the concerto also requires stamina, and while the writing for the solo violin is, in essence, a series of fragmented themes, the work as a whole exhibits a remarkable cohesion. Listen how short motifs, fragments and details become part of a much bigger picture. Trying to understand and internalize its architecture is key to delivering a successful performance.

This unity begins at the very opening with five quiet taps on the kettle drum, and then settles into a lengthy conversation between violin and orchestra stretching for nearly half an hour. Like the four notes that ring throughout Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the timpani strokes that begin the concerto are critical to the transformation of themes throughout the entire piece, serving as the concerto's connective tissue.

A luscious and serene larghetto offers a set of variations against muted strings, and the soloist works through a cadenza that leads directly into the finale, an energetic rondo in 6/8 meter bursting with arpeggios, double stops, scale runs and a pair of delightful plucked notes from the violinist. Beethoven wrote no cadenzas for this concerto, and over the years many violinists have written their own or played the popular Fritz Kreisler treatments in the outer movements.

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)
Šárka and Die Moldau from Ma Vlast
Duration: ca. 9 minutes and 12 minutes

What to listen for:

• In Die Moldau, close your eyes and imagine a river flowing past woods and meadows, castles and ruins, until it vanishes in the distance.

If art is independent of the events in life, as some argue, they missed the back story on Smetana, who suffered a series of blows that would devastate most mortals. Between 1854 and 1856, Smetana lost three of his four daughters to illness, and in 1859 his wife died from tuberculosis. If this wasn't enough, by age 50, Smetana suffered from severe tinnitus and soon was stone deaf – the result of syphilis – and 10 years later was confined to an insane asylum in Prague, where he died of dementia.

But tragedy is the last thing that comes to mind when listening to Ma Vlast (My Country, or My Fatherland), his popular set of six tone poems depicting life and nature in Bohemia.

Šárka, the third of the mix, is named after the woman warrior from the Czech legend The Maiden's War. Šárka ties herself to a tree, pretending she is a captive, and waits for the knight Ctraid to free her. She then serves drugged beer to Ctraid and his men, and sounds a hunting horn call to alert her women soldiers, who sneak up and kill the men in their sleep.

Die Moldau is Smetana's most-performed work, as it so perfectly captures the flow of a great Bohemian river, the Vltava, beginning with two small springs. In the composer's own words, he says the music depicts the river through "woods and meadows, through landscapes where a farmer›s wedding is celebrated, the round dance of the mermaids in the night›s moonshine. On the nearby rocks loom proud castles, palaces and ruins. The Vltava swirls then it widens and flows toward Prague, and then majestically vanishes into the distance, ending at the Elbe.''

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)
Taras Bulba
Duration: ca. 23 minutes

What to listen for:

• Like so much of his music, this piece relies on contrasting sonorities, and his use of dissonance embraces rather than repels – no small feat.

Many of music's most creative minds composed their finest works at a relatively young age, and never quite rekindled the fire later in life. This is true of Rossini, Strauss, Sibelius, Stravinsky and Copland, although some chose a self-imposed exile from their careers.

On the opposite end is Janáček, whose creativity blossomed when others considered retirement. He penned the bulk of his best work after age 50 and wrote a handful of his most striking compositions leading up to his death at age 74. Remarkably, the music of his last years mirrors not the past, but the avant-garde trends of the early 20th century. He employed a highly advanced harmonic language full of daring modulations that are remarkably modern.

The son of a Moravian organist, Janáček at age 21 joined the faculty at the Brno Teacher Training College, and later founded the Brno Organ School. He spent much of his life collecting folk songs and composing in obscurity. With his opera Jenufa, first performed in 1894, he took on momentum as a serious artist.

More than two decades passed before Janáček met a woman named Kamilia Stosslova, 35 years younger and the object of an almost pathological infatuation. She was the inspiration behind such masterpieces as the Intimate Pages String Quartet, the Sinfonietta and Taras Bulba, the work you will hear on this latest Hough Family Foundation Masterworks program.

At its best, Janáček music is emotive, acerbic, tersely dramatic, jagged, eccentric and propelled by an erotic energy – some of which finds its way into Taras Bulba. Much of his work relies on contrasting sonorities, and his use of dissonance embraces rather than repels – no small feat.

Based on the novella by Nikolai Gogol, the music unfolds as a suite but actually is a rhapsody for orchestra. (Oddly, the 1962 film starring Yul Brynner and Tony Curtis used none of the composer's music, but rather a score by Franz Waxman). Janáček called his score a celebration of Slavonicism, and describes the feats of valor by the eponymous Ukrainian Cossack, a romanticized composite of different historical personalities. It unfolds in three sections:

I. Death of Andril – The opening describes Bulba's son, who falls for the daughter of a Polish general, their love music captured by the English horn, violin and oboe. A battle between two armies amps up the rhythmic heat. For his treacherous romance, his own father kills him.

II. Death of Ostap – Another son steps into the spotlight, overcome by his brother's death. He is captured in battle and taken to Warsaw, where he dies before his father can save him.

III. Death and Prophesy of Taras Bulba – The Cossacks fight to avenge the death of Ostap, and Bulba is captured and executed, but not before issuing a prophesy that a Cossack fears nothing. The music ends in a triumphant coda resplendent with organ, harp and bells.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a journalist and arts writer who has covered classical music in Florida for more than 40 years. A member of the Music Critics Association of North America, he lives in St. Petersburg.