PROGRAM PAGE

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

BEETHOVEN'S SYMPHONY NO. 9

Michael Francis, ***Conductor***
The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay
Heather Mitchell, *artistic director*

Fri, Mar 27, 8 pm, Straz Center, Ferguson
Sat, Mar 28, 8 pm, Mahaffey Theater
Sun, Mar 29, 2 pm, Mahaffey Theater ***Matinee***

Gustav Mahler (1860 - 1911)	***Adagio* from Symphony No. 10**
	Intermission
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827)	**Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 (Choral)** *I. Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso* *II. Molto vivace* *III. Adagio molto e cantabile* *IV. Presto — Allegro assai*

The Florida Orchestra dedicates Friday's performance to Mrs. Jane Strom with gratitude for her board and guild leadership and support.

The Florida Orchestra is grateful to longtime patron and donor Dr. Robert Wharton Jr. for his generous sponsorship of Saturday's performance.

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Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)
Adagio from Symphony No. 10
Duration: ca. 22 minutes

What to listen for:

· The adagio evolves into an intense crescendo that would be Mahler's last word as a composer.

Gustav Mahler believed the symphony as a musical form "must reflect the world." For the renowned Bohemian composer and conductor, it would mean a collision of art with a world of personal tragedy.

In 1907, doctors told Mahler of a serious health condition – mitral heart damage – a valve malfunction and blood leakage that, inevitably, would be fatal. Mahler already was grappling with the loss of his daughter, Putzi, who at age 5 succumbed to scarlet fever. The same year, he resigned from his coveted position as director of the Vienna Court Opera, in part due to a campaign of anti-Semitism. Tensions already were high, as his narcissistic wife, Alma, was embroiled in an affair with the Bauhaus School architect Walter Gropius, whom she would marry after Mahler's death.

The creator of magnificent symphonies and song cycles, Mahler knew whatever creative spark was left "would be written in the shadow of death." That shadow cast itself over the adagio from his unfinished Tenth Symphony – his final and most mythical work.

While the symphony as a whole is a fragmentary draft, Mahler completed the opening adagio and a third-movement short score, leaving musicologists to ruminate over the remaining sketches. A number of attempts to "finish" all five movements were made over the years – most notably by Deryck Cooke in 1960 – but performances today focus on the 275-bar, 22-minute adagio as a stand-alone concert piece.

Scored for full orchestra, the movement opens with a sorrowful pianissimo by the violas, who after a long harmonic exploration invite their colleagues to join in an escalating crescendo. Unlike the adagietto from Mahler's *Symphony No. 5*, this music is rife with dissonance and anguished outbursts before giving way to a tranquil landscape in sound, as if the composer had finally resigned himself, and accepted, his fate.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125
Duration: ca. 65 minutes

What to listen for:

· After three incomparable chapters of instrumental music, Beethoven introduces for the first time in a symphony a gigantic vocal coda, operatic in its dimension and impact.

The two works on this program are the last symphonic utterances of their composers, making them a fitting pair in concert. Another connection, however, is Mahler's attempt to bring Beethoven into the modern era by retrofitting some of his music for larger orchestras and halls.

After conducting his new account of the *Symphony No. 9* in Vienna in 1900, Mahler responded to criticism by saying "this is in no way a case of re-instrumentation or alteration, let alone improvement of the work of Beethoven." Rather, he wanted only to enhance clarity, dynamics and colors by doubling woodwinds and brass. You will hear this version on TFO's upcoming Masterworks program.

With or without Mahler's imprint, no single piece of music roared so loudly at its birth or influenced so many for so long, just as it continues to resound in concert halls to this day. The literature on the Ninth is exhaustive, as are recordings, cultural references and opinions. For good reason: This symphony represents a defining moment in Western music, a timeless expression that pushed the orchestra to its limits and introduced the voice as a conduit to the infinite.

Cast in four divergent movements, the work is known to millions through the concluding *Ode to Joy* hymn of praise. Here – and for the first time in a symphony – Beethoven presents vocal soloists and choir. Having exhausted the instrumental potential of the genre, he turned to them to express his most profound thoughts as a symphonic composer. Much of what he had left to say found its way into the late string quartets.

For a century after its premiere in 1824, the symphony held an almost-mythical grip on other composers, not only for its size and ominous key but because of number itself. Schubert, Bruckner, Dvorak, Mahler and Vaughan Williams all completed nine symphonies and may have sensed an omen. None completed a tenth.

"The Ninth Symphony came down like an avalanche," writes Lewis Lockwood in his book *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*. "No symphonist after Beethoven could avoid its impact, and many who were not symphonic composers were spellbound by it."

The score wasn't created in situ. It was loosely based on the *Choral Fantasy*, Op. 80, for piano, chorus and orchestra, from

more than a decade earlier (TFO performed it last November). Beethoven forged the finale of his last symphony from "the style of my fantasia but on a far grander scale, with vocal solos and choruses based on the words of Schiller's immortal song *An die Freude*."

Regardless, the Ninth is Beethoven's most futuristic canvas, its roiling, D-minor introduction alone bordering on a form of abstract expressionism. Like the opening "chaos" of Haydn's oratorio *The Creation*, the music appears from a primordial mist, as emerging life, and soon becomes a turbulent and forbidding *funerale* with an elusive tonal center. Descriptions of "cataclysmic" stick to this movement like glue.

The scherzo – which normally sits in the third slot of a conventional symphony – leverages its rhythmic might as kettledrums announce the strings in down-leaping octaves and agitated counterpoint, all running *moto perpetuo* from start to finish. Then, we come to the symphony's core, a sublime adagio, an oasis of calm that removes listeners from what just passed – and what is about to happen.

"Surely in music there has never been a more beautiful, a more profound evocation of tranquility, of freshness and perfection of gesture and pace," writes Jan Swafford, author of *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. "What follows is a rending scream."

The shattering opening of the finale, which ushers in the famed *Ode to Joy* hymn, mirrors the unsettled dissonance of the first movement but with a fusillade of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. Now, we realize that Beethoven has given us three incomparable essays with one purpose: to support a gigantic vocal coda, operatic in dimension and so vocally demanding as to test the limits of any choir.

But for all its strenuous and dark passages, the music turns poetic as Beethoven brings to life Friedrich Schiller's words, "O friends, no more these sounds! Let us sing more cheerful songs, more full of joy!" In an affirmation of universal brotherhood and freedom, the choir unites us, singing "You millions, I embrace you."

Beethoven never heard a note of this music. By then stone deaf, he composed the Ninth over six years in silence, his health declining from diseases of the liver and bowel. Following the symphony's first performance in Vienna, the audience erupted in tremendous applause, and Beethoven – standing on stage – couldn't hear a sound. Only after the soprano soloist turned him around to face a cheering crowd did the composer realize what mattered most: He was never beyond the world that he so sublimely altered.

Audiences never seem to tire of a new performance of the Ninth, but they might wonder what exactly makes this composer so mesmerizing, so impactful, and so timeless. The early 19th-century writer E.T.A. Hoffman may have said it best when he described Beethoven's music as a storm that "sets in motion the mechanism of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and wakens just that *infinite longing* which is the essence of Romanticism."

Kurt Loft is a journalist and music critic who has written for various newspapers, magazines and arts groups for more than 40 years. A member of the Music Critics Association of North America, he lives in St. Petersburg.