

Program notes for the Lewisville Lake Symphony Orchestra Friday, April 12, 2024

**Violin Concerto in E Minor, Op 64 (1838-1844, revised 1845)
Mendelssohn, Felix (1809-1847)
Featuring Elim Wong, Violin**

- I. Allegro molto appassionato**
- II. Andante - Allegretto non troppo**
- III. Allegro molto vivace**

179 years ago, the great Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, Op. 64, was premiered by the superb violinist Ferdinand David, the composer's dear friend, in Leipzig on March 13, 1845. Mendelssohn, who was ill, could not conduct his new work, so the orchestra was led instead by Mendelssohn's assistant Niels Gade. The performance of this Concerto two years later, in 1847, by the 16-year-old virtuoso and protégé of the composer, Joseph Joachim, was a particularly emotional one as well as memorable because Mendelssohn died a month later.

Mendelssohn's greatness was widely acknowledged. Finished in the fall of 1844 after many years of work, the concerto was the product of a man at the height of his artistic powers. At the time, Mendelssohn was literally the toast of Europe, composing passionately, visiting everywhere as guest conductor and composer, serving as music administrator of a new conservatory in Leipzig, and all the while trying to discern the confusing requirements of an official appointment at the Prussian court at Berlin and Potsdam. He was literally working himself to death, and his life, indeed only lasted a few more years. The death of his beloved sister, Fanny, in 1847 drove him to an emotional breakdown; that plus his arduous professional schedule led to a series of strokes that killed him just six months after his sister's death.

The Violin Concerto is a key work of the 19th century, adhering to the classical style of Beethoven while pointing the way to the Romantic ethos of Brahms and is a vibrant source of pleasure for music lovers. This, however, has not always been the case. A century ago, the playwright George Bernard Shaw had no misgivings about insulting Mendelssohn's music, stating that it contained nothing more than "conventional sentimentality." Composer Richard Wagner wrote that his music was "sweet and tinkling without depth." Opinions such as Shaw's and Wagner's, unfortunately, left their mark, and for a long time. It was normal for criticism to recite the usual litany of clichés: the child prodigy that had inherited Mozart's "angelic" features; the disciple of Goethe still attached in the 1830s to a classicism the more "original composers" had made passé; the devout archeologist of the Baroque; the son of wealth and high culture whose sole tragedy in life was the loss of his beloved sister. Those opinions, however, did not sway the rest of the world as to its beauty and significance.

The concerto's enduring popularity is ensured by its intrinsic beauty and musicality, but there are some interesting points about it that led to its place as a model for later composers of violin concertos, including Tchaikovsky and Sibelius. Foremost is the entry of the solo violin right at the beginning; traditionally, the orchestra begins with a section that announces the themes, and then is joined somewhat later by the entrance of the soloist. In addition, Mendelssohn moved the place of the solo cadenza to a point earlier in the first movement, just before the recapitulation, rather than nearer the end, before the coda. Finally, the composer wrote out exactly what he wanted the soloist to play in the cadenza, rather than leaving it to the compositional skills (and taste) of the soloist, as in the traditional manner.

Although cast in the familiar three movements of a concerto, it was written in such a way as to move seamlessly from one to the other without a break. Audiences in those days were used to applauding between movements and this feature probably came as a bit of surprise to them. The bridge between the first two movements is a low note sustained by the bassoon that moves up to the key of the charming melody of the second movement. The third movement is transitioned into with a passage for solo violin and strings, out of which bursts the main theme of the rondo, announced by a kind of trumpet fanfare.

Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 67 (1804-1808)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

- I. Allegro con brio**
- II. Andante con moto**
- III. Scherzo: Allegro**
- IV. Allegro – Presto**

There simply is no classical music work more iconic than the 5th Symphony of Beethoven. Its opening four notes of the first movement have been used in commercials, athletic events, movies, pop songs, cartoons, parodies, and has even been taught as the proper protocol for door knocking. It is symbolic of strength and victory. In a sad way it is almost impossible to escape all of these associations connected to the work itself and to focus only on Beethoven's composition. But try to distance yourself from it all and listen to the symphony tonight as if hearing it for the first time. It is pure musical joy.

By the time that Beethoven had composed this work he was a well-respected composer in Vienna, but not really hailed as a genius. It took him rather a long time, almost four years, as he interrupted his work frequently to compose some income-producing commissioned pieces. He finally ground out the completion of the fifth symphony and presented it on a concert at the Theater an der Wien on December 22, 1808. It was an all-Beethoven affair, presenting the premières of not only the Fifth Symphony, but also the Sixth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, and the Choral Fantasy (a precursor to his Ninth Symphony), as well as various other compositions. The concert was four hours long and the hall was literally freezing. Moreover, Beethoven, who was conducting, had to start over in one work after a mistake derailed things. The proceedings were not helped by his awkward, grand-eloquent conducting which led to knocking over some lamps and accidentally smacking an unfortunate stagehand in the face. All of this was soon forgotten and the written record shows that Beethoven's fifth symphony was quickly accorded general acclaim, and was on its way to immortality.

During World War II, the opening motif of Beethoven's 5th Symphony became a powerful symbol for the Allied forces. The short-short-short-long rhythmic pattern corresponded in Morse code to the letter 'V' for Victory, which was an acknowledged symbol of the war effort, most famously made by Winston Churchill forming a 'V' with the first and second fingers of his raised right hand. It was also adopted as the American national symbol after the war, along with the bald eagle. Although it is perhaps ironic that a German piece of music became a source of comfort during the War, in particular to British troops during the bombings of England, many people relished the irony of German music providing a galvanizing force for the war effort. Beethoven was himself a champion of personal liberty and a symbol of resistance to dictatorship, turning away from Napoleon in 1804 when the latter named himself Emperor of the French.

The French, too, adopted Beethoven's 5th Symphony as an icon of solidarity and resistance.

During the worst of the German blitz on London in the spring of 1941, Maurice van Moppes wrote lyrics to the opening bars of the symphony, calling it 'La chanson des V' (The song of V). The song was broadcast on Radio-Londres, most influentially on June 1, 1944, when the Allied forces sent the first messages to France to prepare for attack. It was also included in a pamphlet entitled *Chansons de la BBC* which was parachuted by the RAF into France in order to raise morale, encourage resistance, and demonstrate support for the British.

The defining characteristics of the work are well known, and focus on rhythmic vitality, a sense of drama, and imaginative structural details--but most of all, on a stunning coherence and economy of elements. The latter is the foundation of the first movement, famous for its four-note motto beginning and the "wringing" almost to death of every musical possibility of the short idea.

The second movement is an elegant set of variations on two themes. The key of the movement is A-flat Major, and it just "sounds" fresh and unexpected when the cellos and violas enter with one of Beethoven's most likeable melodies in that particular key. The second theme is a triumphant one, in C Major, another remote and refreshing key. The variations gracefully work themselves out with these contrasting themes in a movement quite different from the first.

The third movement is the traditional dance movement, here cast in Beethoven's innovative "scherzo" rhythm—the stately dance of his predecessors, but considerably faster. It opens with a mysterious arpeggio in the low strings that ends shortly on some chords with enigmatic meaning. Soon this is interrupted by the unison horns in a virile melody that seems related to the opening of the symphony. The middle of the movement, called the trio, is usually an opportunity for contrast, and we do get it. It starts out contrapuntally with a vigorous and challenging passage for the cellos and double basses—it's a famous one! Ultimately, a truncated version of the opening returns, but even softer, and here is where real magic occurs.

Beethoven "bridges" the transition into the last movement with a delicate solo passage in the first violins played over pianissimo sustained notes in the seconds and violas—the basses and timpani softly beat. In one of the most eerie and tension-building passages in all the literature the melody snakes up and down in a crescendo that leads jubilantly to the C major theme that resolves all previous troubling thought. For this glorious moment Beethoven brings in three trombones, a contra-bassoon, and a piccolo—heretofore found only in the opera orchestra. The last movement is long, as three themes are worked over, interrupted only by the striking innovation of a brief reference to the third movement. The recapitulation ensues, followed by an enormous coda—longer than any other section so far. We hear the main three themes again, only in a kind of reverse order. The long coda is needed to erase all doubt as to what prevails over the diversions and dark moods of the other three movements. Victory is ours, and the multitudes of emphatic C major chords seal the finale.

"Many assert that every minor piece must end in the minor," Beethoven wrote of his own symphony later on. "On the contrary, I find that ... the major has a glorious effect. Joy follows sorrow, sunshine—rain."

It was revolutionary.