

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)
Overture, “Leonore No. 3”

*Can a piece of music be too good? Beethoven’s **Leonore Overture No. 3** comes close. An opera overture is literally a curtain-raiser, building anticipation for what is about to unfold on stage. But Beethoven charged this overture with so much emotion and drama, and stretched the form to such near-symphonic proportions, that the actual raising of the curtain is bound to be an anticlimax. For this reason, the opera usually begins with the more compact “Fidelio” overture instead—although some conductors insert **Leonore No. 3** between the two scenes of the second act.*

In music, Beethoven seems able to achieve almost anything he wants. In love, however, he was not so fortunate, and suffered one rejection after another. While his hope of undying love was never to be realized in his life, it certainly found expression in his only opera, **Fidelio**.

The work was based on a French play whose subtitle might have struck an especially responsive chord with Beethoven: “Leonore, or conjugal love.” A “rescue drama” of the type then popular, the story glorified not just marital fidelity, but other ideals especially close to Beethoven’s heart—liberation from tyranny and selfless heroism.

While the content of **Fidelio** was close to Beethoven’s heart, creating the opera would not come easy; on the contrary, it was one of the most difficult tasks he ever attempted, taking ten years to reach its final form. Speaking of **Fidelio** to his friend, Anton Schindler, Beethoven confessed: “Of all my children, this is the one that cost me the worst birth pangs, the one that cost me the worst sorrows; and for that reason is the one most dear to me.”

By the time he was done, Beethoven had composed no fewer than four overtures to the opera. For the 1805 premiere, Beethoven wrote the overture now known as **Leonore No. 2**, which also has the effect of overpowering the lightweight opening scene that follows. Four months later, for a new performance, Beethoven revised the opera to make it shorter. At the same time, he substituted a new overture of even grander proportions—the one we will hear tonight.

A musical drama in its own right, **Leonore No. 3** is unconventional in substance as well as length. Where the typical overture of the time would have been constructed around material from the opera itself, Beethoven uses only two themes—most notably the offstage trumpet call that signals the deliverance of Fidelio, Florestan, and the prisoners. This is followed by a thrilling passage with rushing strings that begins in the deep basses and proceeds upward (as if emerging from the darkness of oppression to the light of freedom), through cellos, violas, and violins to a triumphant conclusion.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 - 1847)
Overture, The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)

*Beethoven, Mozart, Rossini, and all other composers of their time wrote overtures with the specific purpose of serving as an introduction to an opera. Then, in the early 19th century, a new musical form emerged: the “concert overture.” Instead of being tied to a stage work, the concert overture was intended to stand alone, and to be performed not in a theater, but in a concert hall. **The Hebrides** was one of the very first concert overtures ever written; it remains one of the most successful.*

Until his tragically premature death at the age of 38, Mendelssohn led an unusually blessed life. Born into a family of unusual achievement and influence, Felix was spared the financial struggles that artists such as Beethoven and Schubert had to endure. His grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was a famous writer and philosopher; his father a successful banker.

Mendelssohn's musical genius was evident at a very young age. He was just nine when he made his debut as a pianist. By the time he was fourteen, he had already written a dozen string symphonies, more than forty piano pieces, and a handful of comic operas.

In 1829, when he turned 21, Mendelssohn's parents encouraged him to broaden his education by traveling abroad. As part of his journey to Britain, he voyaged to the Hebrides Islands, off the western coast of Scotland, and visited a sea grotto known as Fingal's Cave. The cave's size and arched roof, and the haunting echoes of waves, combine to create the feeling of a huge natural cathedral. (The cave's Gaelic name, Uamh-Binn, translates as “cave of melody.”)

Mendelssohn's traveling companion, the poet Carl Klingemann, recalled: “Its many pillars made it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding, absolutely without purpose, and quite alone, the wide grey sea within and without.”

Novelist Sir Walter Scott described Fingal's Cave as “...one of the most extraordinary places I ever beheld. It exceeded, in my mind, every description I had heard of it ...composed entirely of basaltic pillars as high as the roof of a cathedral, and running deep into the rock, eternally swept by a deep and swelling sea, and paved, as it were, with ruddy marble, baffles all description.”

How could Mendelssohn not be inspired? When he returned to his lodgings, he wrote a letter to his sister Fanny that included twenty bars of music that later became the opening theme of ***The Hebrides***. He told her, “In order for you to understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, the following came to my mind there.” This introduction, filled with mystery and evoking the heaving rhythm of the sea, sets the stage for one of the finest orchestral works Mendelssohn ever wrote.

Georges Enesco (1881 – 1955)
Romanian Rhapsody No. 1

*In the latter half of the 19th century, as once-formidable empires and political systems began to decline, a wave of nationalism swept through Europe. Composers, such as Smetana and Dvorak in Czechoslovakia, Grieg in Norway, Glinka in Russia, Liszt in Hungary, and others often turned to native sources for inspiration. Although of a later generation, Enesco also captured this spirit in his two **Romanian Rhapsodies**.*

Born in the same year that Romania finally achieved independent nationhood, Georges Enesco was one of the most accomplished musicians of the first half of the twentieth century. As a performer, he was an acclaimed violinist; as a teacher, he numbered Yehudi Menuhin among his pupils; as a conductor, he was once considered as a replacement for Toscanini; and as a composer, his works include three symphonies, an opera, and various chamber compositions. Enesco spent much of his life in Romania and Paris. After World War II and the Soviet takeover of Romania, he remained in Paris until his death.

Enesco's output, which extends only as far as 33 opus numbers, was limited by the demands of a busy performing career as well as a passion for perfectionism that led him to painstakingly revise existing works at the expense of new compositions (although he left many unfinished manuscripts at his death).

Composed in 1901, the two **Romanian Rhapsodies** are among his earliest works, and the **First Rhapsody** continues to be the piece for which he is best known. As he progressed as a composer and explored larger forms and more sophisticated styles, Enesco came to resent the way the **Rhapsodies** overshadowed his other works and distorted his reputation as a composer. He later observed that the only thing a composer could do with a piece of folk music was to “rhapsodize it, with repetitions and juxtapositions.”

Regardless of Enesco's later feelings toward the music, however, audiences still find the **Rhapsodies**—especially the livelier **First**—irresistible.

Like Dvorak, Enesco was able to create themes that were at once original, yet sounded like authentic folk tunes. In its wealth of melody, the **Rhapsody** expresses a fundamental principle of Enesco's musical philosophy. “I'm not a person,” he wrote in his autobiography, “for pretty successions of chords...a piece deserves to be called a musical composition only if it has a line, a melody, or, even better, melodies superimposed on one another...”

And, as if melody was not enough, Enesco suffuses the music with the exotic, almost Eastern rhythms and tonalities of Romania and the Balkans. As the **Rhapsody** ratchets up the tempo and accelerates toward its whirlwind conclusion, you may find it impossible to keep your toes from tapping—to which we say, “why not?”

If you're already sitting on the aisle, feel free to dance in it.

Gustav Mahler (1860 – 1911)
Symphony No. 1 (“Titan”)

During his lifetime, Mahler’s music was misunderstood by many, ridiculed by others, and scorned by some of the most influential critics of his day. But Mahler took a much longer view. “My time will come,” he insisted. And he was right. Where performances of Mahler were once among the rarest of occurrences, they are now routinely sell-out events, and conductors now are measured as much by their mastery of Mahler as by their way with Beethoven.

If any one person could be credited with the Mahler revival, it would have to be Leonard Bernstein. Although Mahler protégés such as the great conductors Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer kept his flame alive, it was Bernstein’s 1960 celebration of Mahler’s 100th birthday, during which he performed all the major works, that truly set it ablaze.

For Bernstein, the essence of Mahler and his music is contrast and conflict. “Mahler,” he said, was “split right down the middle... Think of it: Mahler the Creator vs. Mahler the Performer; the Jew vs. the Christian; the Believer vs. the Doubter; the Naïf vs. the Sophisticate; the provincial Bohemian vs. the Viennese man of the world; the Faustian Philosopher vs. the Oriental Mystic; the Operatic Symphonist who never wrote an opera.”

This duality is present in Mahler almost from the start, and may account for the bewilderment that late 19th-century audiences felt when they heard his *First Symphony* for the first time. Here was no classical idea of a cohesive and harmonious whole, but a rambunctious canvas that juxtaposed evocations of bird calls, military bands, sentimental songs, Jewish fiddlers, dancing peasants, and, at the same time, the pain of lost love, strivings for truth and immortality, and triumphant chorales. Plus, a slow movement in which the children’s tune “Frère Jacques” is turned into a macabre and sardonic funeral march.

Of all Mahler’s symphonies, the *First* gave him the most difficulties. As Beethoven did with *Fidelio*, he re-thought and revised it repeatedly. In its original form, there was an additional movement, pastoral in feeling, and titled “Blumine.” In his final version, Mahler discarded it, as well as a program he had written to help people understand the music.

The finale, which we will hear tonight, was characterized by Bruno Walter as filled with “raging vehemence.” In a letter to Walter, Mahler struck a similar tone: “Both the Funeral March and the storm that breaks out immediately afterward strike me as burning accusations hurled at the Creator,” he wrote.

As the movement progresses, the vehemence of this opening alternates with episodes recalling the innocence and youthful passions of the first movement. Midway through, a chorale theme (with echoes of Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus), emerges, only to be swept away by another great orchestral outburst. But, in the end, it proves victorious and brings the symphony to a glorious conclusion.

Leroy Anderson (1908 - 1975)
Overture from *Goldilocks*

You may not have heard of Leroy Anderson, but you can instantly recall his most famous composition when you read these words:

*Just hear those sleigh bells jing jing jingle-ing
Ring ting tingle-ing too
Come on, it's lovely weather
For a sleigh ride together with you*

Chances are, ***Sleigh Ride*** is not the only Anderson tune locked away in your head. At one time, it seemed that every late night movie show on TV used ***The Syncopated Clock*** as its musical theme. And, his ***Blue Tango*** was the first instrumental composition to reach Number One on the “Hit Parade.”

Yet, for someone whose melodies are so firmly embedded in the American landscape, Leroy Anderson is far less known than the music he wrote. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Anderson received his first music lesson from his mother, a church organist. Later, he studied piano and double bass at the New England Conservatory of Music. By the time he was twelve, he made his first effort at composing, a minuet for a string quartet. In his more advanced music studies, his teachers included Walter Piston and Georges Enesco.

In 1938, Arthur Fiedler programmed one of Anderson’s compositions for a Boston Pops concert, an event that marked the beginning of a long association with the orchestra. From 1946 to 1950, Anderson served as the Pops’ orchestrator and arranger. He conducted the group in occasional concerts and, in May of 1972, was a guest of honor on a program that highlighted his works.

Although best known for light classic, humorous, and sentimental pieces, Anderson found time to write “serious” music, including a ***Piano Concerto in C***. But works such as ***Sleigh Ride***, ***Fiddle Faddle***, ***The Irish Washerwoman***, ***The Typewriter***, and ***The Belle of the Ball*** brought him the widest audience.

In his only Broadway venture, Anderson collaborated with theater critic Walter Kerr and his wife, Jean, in a retelling of the classic Goldilocks tale, this time set in the Hollywood of silent films. The musical, which featured Don Ameche, Elaine Stritch, and Margaret Hamilton (the “Wicked Witch of the West”), was not a hit—but nobody blamed Anderson’s tuneful score.