

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

# A Midsummer Night's Dream

Feb 22 - 24

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

**PIANO CONCERTO NO. 27 IN B FLAT MAJOR, K. 595**

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

"If people could see into my heart, I would almost have to be ashamed," Mozart wrote to his wife in March 1791. "Everything is cold for me – ice cold."

Depressed and with less than nine months to live, Mozart lacked the support of a once-dedicated Viennese audience, and could no longer afford to produce his own concerts. In his final public appearance, in a hall on Vienna's *Gate-of-Heaven Street*, he took third billing behind two other performers, sitting at the keyboard for the last of his more than two dozen piano concertos. By December, his body lay in an unmarked grave, and his *Requiem* sat unfinished on his writing table.

If the *Piano No. 27 in B Flat Major* is Mozart's valedictory statement in the form, he doesn't go out with a splash. His final keyboard concerto expresses sadness and resignation, and with a subtle touch. There are few displays of virtuosity or fanfares announcing the triumph of the human spirit. It contains no percussion, and trumpets are absent. But a current of lyricism runs through all three movements, adding a conversational, chamber-like quality to the whole.

"There's a certain nostalgia in this concerto," said Anne-Marie McDermott, the soloist in this weekend's performances. "It's a miracle to me that for everything he had written up to this point, that he could create such profound simplicity. Maybe on some level he was aware that he would die soon, although it's a tough question to answer. But I have a sense that he was aware of how little time he had left. You hear it in the music."

The best of Mozart's piano concertos, particularly the late works, combine three essential elements – an instinctual feel for the keyboard, symphony and opera – which together elevate them to the highest level of the Classical-era tradition. The keyboard gave Mozart the vehicle to explore his prodigious skill, the symphonic writing clothed it, and from opera came the song.

The entrance of the piano after a delicate orchestral introduction feels as if the soloist is barely touching the keys. Flourishes in the minor keep the central theme from soaring too high, but the piano soon breaks away in a song of its own. Mozart provides a cadenza in the *allegro* but not in the sense of a virtuosic showpiece; this one is so understated as to be almost invisible. Fittingly, the movement closes as quietly as it begins.

The *larghetto* is the heart of the work, often called “childlike” in its simplicity, but no child could master the nuance needed for this to be convincing, as this is Mozart at his most serene. The third movement is in the form of a *rondo* because its opening theme keeps returning, but in different keys. Adding a bit of excitement are not one but *two* cadenzas that give the soloist a chance to improvise and carry the work to its stylish conclusion – ending one of the most loved compilations of concertos by any composer.

“It was not in the *Requiem* that he said his last word, but in this work, which belongs to a species in which he also said his greatest,” wrote Alfred Einstein in his seminal book, *Mozart: His Character, His Work*. “This is the musical counterpart to the confession he made in his letters that life had lost attraction for him.”

---

### **FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)**

#### **OVERTURE AND INCIDENTAL MUSIC TO A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM, Op. 21 and 61.**

Duration: ca. 50 minutes

The celebrated cellist Pablo Casals described Felix Mendelssohn as “a romantic who felt at ease within the mold of classicism.” Mendelssohn broke no new ground, nor did he compose revolutionary works. He wrote safely in his comfort zone, borrowing from the past rather than exploring the future. But what was born from his imagination was nothing less than astounding.

He was one of the most gifted musicians of his age, noted as much for his exacting craftsmanship as the opulent charm and tunefulness of his music. He was a loyalist to tradition, and believed in preserving the essential works of those who came before him, especially Bach. It was Mendelssohn who conducted the second performance of the monumental but forgotten *St. Matthew Passion*, leading to a revival of Bach throughout Europe.

At 16 he composed his famous *Octet*, and the following year his overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, what the music scholar George Grove called “the greatest marvel of early maturity that the world has ever seen in music.” Mendelssohn received a commission more than a decade later for what would be the *Incidental Music*, which he composed with no discernible gap in style.

Orchestras rarely play the *Overture* and *Incidental Music* together, but TFO Music Director Michael Francis wanted both in honor of this month’s Celebration of the Arts’ Shakespeare Festival, because “an effort like this is very much part of our cross-pollination with other artistic institutions in the Tampa Bay area,” he said.

The *Overture* is effervescent in its delicate dance of fairies, procession, and braying of the donkey. It’s also a marvel of transparency, musical figuration and harmonic balance. For the *Incidental Music*, Mendelssohn wrote 13 numbers – mixing vocal and instrumental sections. A sparkling *Scherzo* matches the elfin magic of the *Overture*, and leads into the first melodrama, and a *Fairy March* ushers the arrival of Oberon. Rarely performed in its entirety, the *Incidental*

*Music* usually includes *Ye spotted snakes*; a pair of *Intermezzos*; the *Nocturne* with its noble solo horn; a *Funeral March* that sounds downright Mahlerian; the spirited *Dance of the Clowns*; and of course, the *Wedding March* – a favorite of brides and grooms all over the world.

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