

**EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
**JANUARY 19 & 20, 2024**  
**PROGRAM NOTES**

**Ludwig van Beethoven**

Born December 17, 1770 — Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 — Vienna, Austria

***Fidelio Overture, op. 72c in E minor***

If you analyze the compositional habits of the many great composers from past centuries, you will find two consistent patterns: Program music composers (music with a clear theme that is defined for the audience), and absolute music composers (music that stands alone and is defined by the listener). Ludwig van Beethoven falls quite obviously into the latter category.

These musical philosophies and quality music are not mutually exclusive. Great champions from all eras of music history exist in either category and some individuals were evenly comfortable in both. Mozart, for example, is one of the finest examples of someone who was a great master across all genres and musical philosophies, having completed hundreds of sonata-form based works in addition to twenty-two operas. Franz Schubert is also excellent here — his masterful symphonies and sonatas versus his numerous German songs — two sides of Schubert's compositional output that represent two different eras of music history.

Beethoven, as we know, was one of the most crucial musical figures, having brought us out of classicism and into romanticism. He also gifted us with some of the world's most listened-to music, such as the *Moonlight Sonata* and *Symphony No. 5*. However, Beethoven quite clearly showed us he was most comfortable sticking to one, not both, of the musical philosophies mentioned earlier: Absolute music.

The key to this realization lies in Beethoven's opera output (or lack thereof). Beethoven completed only a single opera, *Fidelio*, which premiered in 1805. It's curious that Beethoven contributed so lightly to a beloved genre that his musical hero, Mozart, masterfully dominated. However, *Fidelio* is a highly respected and often performed work that should not be overlooked.

*Fidelio* is a love story infused with political commentary — a predictable setting for a work by Beethoven, who was actively interested in worldwide current events and politics. While the full opera is loved and performed regularly, the work's overture, or should I say overture(s), can easily cause confusion.

Beethoven would eventually complete four overtures for *Fidelio*. The final version that is now formally paired with the opera (and the version you will hear this evening) is simply known as the *Fidelio Overture*. It was not written until 1814, nine years after *Fidelio*'s first performance, which adds to the confusion. The remaining three overtures are performed just as often as *Fidelio*'s "official" overture but are known as *Lenore 1-3* ("Lenore" was *Fidelio*'s original title). Interestingly enough, the *Lenore* overtures are far grander and twice as long as the *Fidelio Overture* proper, pointing again to the idea that Beethoven was not entirely comfortable composing opera; his knack for monumentally grand orchestral works for the concert hall was coming through even as he was trying to simply set down an introduction for an opera.

Nevertheless, Beethoven triumphed over the project. He claimed many times throughout the rest of his life that he despised the experience of *Fidelio* and that it was the most miserable labor of his career. However, Beethoven did not let his annoyances get the better of the project, and we're certainly glad about that today.

### **Felix Mendelssohn**

February 3, 1809 Hamburg, Germany

November 4, 1847 Leipzig, Germany

### ***Concerto for Piano, Violin & Strings, D minor***

Tragically, Felix Mendelssohn was one of several composers whom society did not get to enjoy for very long. He died in Leipzig at the age of 38 due to complications caused by multiple strokes. Thankfully, the body of work he left us is extraordinary, showing tremendous mastery and respect towards the style of music that built him.

Mendelssohn is considered an early “neo-classicist,” meaning he chose to pursue work in the style of an era he did not reside in. In this case, the classical era which was dominated by the sounds of Haydn and Mozart. Keeping with the “old ways” was by no means a negative trait — while being quickly launched into a new realm of creativity via the work of Ludwig van Beethoven, it was refreshing to see what classicism would have evolved into if given the chance to mature for longer. This is the void that Mendelssohn fills.

The *Concerto for Piano, Violin, and Strings in D Minor* is rarely performed, but fits the Mendelssohn bill to a tee. Written when Mendelssohn was 14, it is a clear nod to the concertos of the past, more specifically the very late Baroque and early Classical eras. Concertos during those time periods typically featured only strings as accompaniment and utilized “ritornello” form, a structure that fell out of style by the second half of the 18th century. Both of these traits are present in Mendelssohn’s *Double Concerto*. Although Mendelssohn did eventually add woodwinds to the orchestral accompaniment, it exists today in its original form as a triumphant 19th century example of a “blast to the past.”

### **Claude Debussy**

Born August 22, 1862 — Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died March 25, 1918 — Paris, France

### ***La Mer***

Like many popular composers, Claude Debussy is often plagued by a select collection of his own works that have garnered the mass attention of the general public for generations. *Claire de lune* (Moonlight), *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair), and *Arabesque No. 1* are short piano pieces that we all can’t help but smile at when we encounter them. They are prime examples of the unmistakable joyous tones that only Debussy can deliver.

However, to only focus on Debussy’s ever-so-charming piano works is to miss out on the composer’s much more elusive and rarer projects — compositions that require any given composer’s full creative palette: Orchestral compositions.

Excluding the composer's opera *Pelleas et Melisande*, Debussy's orchestral output is slightly complicated. There are sixteen orchestral compositions crediting Debussy's name, but the vast majority of these are arrangements of piano music. If we are looking for works that were intended from their inception to be solely orchestral, the number drops to three, a number that would not usually reflect a composer's liking of the format in question. However, these three works are genuine treats that fully represent Debussy's popular soundscape, but on the grand scale.

*La mer* (The Sea) was completed in 1905 and is the last of the set of three works previously mentioned. It is a three-movement tone poem with the same objective as the majority of Debussy's works: Create a soundscape depicting a beauty in everyday life or nature. The movements title as follows: "De l'aube a midi sur la mer" (From Dawn to Noon on the Sea), "Jeux de vagues" (Play of the Waves), and "Dialogue du vent et de la mer" (Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea).

Debussy never fails in the area of melodic and harmonic creativity, and there is no doubt that *La mer* is a work of genius that shows us the skills of Debussy at his best. The real question is ... does *La mer* deliver on its mission?

The work's premiere in 1905 brought mostly disappointment, but for curious reasons. Critiques came in the form of ire directed at Debussy's supposedly poor attempt at depicting the ocean. Little was said about *La mer*'s actual quality as a piece of symphonic music.

This brings forth the classic debate over the benefits and drawbacks of program music versus absolute music: Is it better to put an idea into an audience's head for them, or let the audience define what they hear themselves? Ironically, no matter which route a piece forces you to travel, it is ultimately your decision as to whether you are convinced or not. Today, we most certainly are by *La mer* — a stunning achievement by one of our favorite composers. A simply gorgeous piece of music.

**Nathan Black** is the general manager of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP's *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast*, and as of 2022 is the resident lecturer of EPSO's "Opening Notes" series.