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Sonata in A Major for Violin and Piano
César Franck (1822-1890)

In the violin/piano repertoire, this splendid work ranks high. So secure a place does it hold on the programs of virtuoso violinists that musicians speak its title with the initial capitals already in verbal place: The Franck Sonata. One of the lengthiest pieces of its kind, it can intimidate by its sheer size even before one has begun to assimilate Franck’s musical message. But when we take the time to savor the improvisatory, questioning, tentative ideas, then listen to the skillful manner in which Franck planned and navigated this remarkable work with such refined musical language, our reaction shifts to one of wonderment.

César Franck composed the sonata for the prominent Belgian violin virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931) and the French pianist Léontine Marie Bordes-Pène (1858-1924). One of the better kept secrets about this remarkable sonata is its astonishing difficulty for the pianist as well as the violinist. The opening *Allegretto*, a modified sonata form, has a yearning and restrained feeling, its musical vocabulary tentative and chromatic. Franck’s opening idea introduces a falling third motive from which the entire movement grows. In fact, the interval of the third proves essential to all four movements, and is a strong structural binder contributing to the cyclic unity of the sonata.

The ensuing *Allegro* is a piano showpiece in D minor that pulls out all the virtuoso stops. Aggressive and splendidly pianistic, this movement is magnificently written for both instruments. Franck’s genius lies in his ability to write a virtuosic keyboard part that permits the violin to sing forth clearly without being overpowered. Again, highly chromatic, the music surges forward, this time fired by passion rather than by questioning. But the basic character of the musical material — improvisatory and harmonically unresolved until the final cadence — is remarkably like that in the opening movement. Franck’s treatment of the material may differ dramatically, but his ideas remain consistent and unified.

The third movement returns to the inquisitive, diffident mode of the first, even freer in its queries. Entitled *Recitativo-Fantasia*, it embodies the flexibility and drama of the operatic stage, melded to the virtuosic self-confidence of the skilled improviser. Psychologically, this movement provides a necessary bridge, relieving the rage of the second movement and clearing a path for the transparent serenity of the finale. Among Franck’s more daring ploys here is his shift from the opening tonality, D minor, to a final cadence in F# minor.

The marvelous A major finale is a free sonata-rondo whose main theme is a delicious, melodious canon. Laurence Davies calls it:

. . . a gentle *Allegretto* upon which most admirers of Franck would be happy to rest all their claims. The canon with which it begins is certainly a perfect example of the composer's powers, while the principle of interchange between the instruments makes for a real element of flexibility.

The pianist establishes the lead from the first measure, always introducing the new phrase of the canon. Violin is clearly following the leader. Critics of the finale cite the coda, arguing that Franck overemphasized the keyboard at the expense of the violin, which must struggle to be heard amid the clangor of the piano figuration. But what glorious clangor!

Franck's strong reliance upon traditional sonata structure lends this piece its coherence and strengthens the architecture. Technically, his secure understanding of each instrument's capabilities allowed him to marry them in music of engaging contrapuntal interest. The emotional appeal of the Franck Sonata--and the real secret to its popularity--lies in the sensual musical language that probes and inquires so gently, then lashes forth with such impetuous abandon. With the Violin Sonata, Franck created a musical apotheosis for the romantic soul.

Sonata for Violoncello and Piano (1915) Claude-Achille Debussy (1862-1918)

Claude Debussy was almost 52 when the Great War erupted. Obviously too old for military service, he sought other ways to express his staunch patriotism. The French publisher Durand had undertaken to publish replacement editions for the now unavailable (and undesirable) German editions of the great musical classics. Debussy assumed the gigantic task of preparing such an edition of Frédéric Chopin's works, and threw himself into his newfound project.

Delighted to have enlisted the prominent composer's participation, Durand urged Debussy to take on the editing of the Bach sonatas as well. The composer demurred, apparently having been inspired by his work on the Chopin volumes with some new musical ideas of his own. He started composing, producing in a short time the suite for two pianos, *En Blanc et Noir*, and the Cello Sonata. The sonata was the first of a series. Debussy originally intended to compose six sonatas "for diverse instruments"; he completed only three before his death in 1918. The inscription at the head of the score includes the self-conscious sobriquet "*Musicien français*".

The movement titles are a clue to the spirit of this sonata. All three are reflective and Baroque, evoking the memory of the French *clavecinistes*. One is hard pressed to find a striking relationship in these movements to the 19th-century romantic sonata; even the connection to traditional sonata/allegro form is marginal. Debussy maintained that the sonata was "almost classical" in its proportions and form; certainly, it has cyclic elements in its reworking of rhythmic and melodic motifs among its three sections.

The form of the sonata is compact, truncated to two movements. The opening *Prologue* is a rhapsodic slow movement, free and declamatory. Despite its key signature of one flat, implying

d-minor, the movement is more modal than tonal. Debussy's *Sérénade*, which opens the bipartite second movement, is unlike a traditional serenade: would-be lover with mandolin, lute, or guitar beneath the lady's window. The composer originally intended to call this movement "*Pierrot fâché avec la lune*" ["Pierrot angry at the moon"]. The cello uses a mandolin-like pizzicato. But these plucked strings have a mocking ring to them; we are not quite certain how seriously to take this suitor.

Debussy's *Finale* is the most conventional movement in this highly unconventional work. Its rippling piano part provides elegant, flowing accompaniment to the song-like cello lines. The score is filled with specific, detailed instructions in both French and Italian as to the tempo and spirit of the music, for example, the indication *Molto rubato con morbidezza* [very freely and flexibly, with softness and tenderness] at one point. Did Debussy not trust performers of his music, or had the conventional language of music ceased to accommodate his creative imagination? Or was he merely having fun with us? This work asks more questions than it answers. In composing this one work for cello and piano, Debussy revealed a new facet of his musical self.

Three Songs for Viola and Piano (1952) **Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984)**

Born in Germany – his family name was originally Frankenburger – Paul Ben-Haim attended the Munich Academy of Music after serving in World War I. He served as choral director and vocal coach at the Bavarian State Opera under Bruno Walter, later taking on the Kapellmeister position at the Augsburg Opera.

Frankenburger earned recognition as a composer in the 1920s, drawing on elements of jazz and neoclassicism, though by about 1930 he showed a predilection for Old Testament choral settings. With the rise of Nazism, he emigrated to Palestine in autumn 1933 and changed his last name to Ben-Haim. He was soon deeply embedded in Palestinian musical culture, teaching at the Shulamit Music School, Jerusalem Academy of Music, and the Music Teachers' Training College. After he mastered Hebrew, he began setting modern Hebrew poetry, later expanding his repertoire to traditional Middle Eastern music. After World War II, he was commissioned by such luminaries as Yehudi Menuhin, Jascha Heifetz, and Menahem Pressler.

Ben-Haim's Three Songs originated as wordless vocalises with piano. He subsequently arranged them for several individual instruments plus piano. He referred to the three segments as tone-pictures of an oriental mood. At the time, 'oriental' referred globally to the Middle East as well as Asia. The composer's later observations make clear that he was thinking of Palestine and present-day Israel.

Whoever's imagination needs additional prompting may think that the long-breathed melodies of the 'Arioso' were inspired by the mood of a summer day's pitiless heat in the bare Judean Hills, while the 'Ballad' pictures the monotonous

babbling of an oriental story-teller. The last song is based on a traditional folk tune of Sephardic-Jewish origin – a veritable pearl which I have only given a setting.

Ben-Haim intended that the instrumentalist focus on beauty of tone rather than any show of technical brilliance. In these Three Songs, melodic expression is the primary goal. The viola's melismatic phrases find subtle companionship in Ben-Haim's sympathetic piano part.

Piano Quartet in A minor, Op.1 Josef Suk (1874-1935)

The son of a schoolteacher and choirmaster, Josef Suk studied piano, violin and organ with his father, pursuing his formal musical education at Prague Conservatory. He undertook composition while at the Conservatory, and composed this Piano Quartet as a graduation piece. An excellent violinist, Suk was keenly interested in chamber music. He remained at the conservatory for an extra year to pursue additional study in chamber music with cellist Hanuš Wihan and in composition with Antonín Dvořák. When the Prague publisher František Augustin Urbánek issued the quartet in 1891 as Suk's Opus 1, it bore a dedication to Dvořák. Suk became Dvořák's favorite protégé, and married the great composer's daughter Otilie in 1898.

Suk spent the most celebrated years of his career as violinist in the Czech Quartet, earning a distinguished reputation as a modern Czech composer as well. He retained his passion for playing chamber music, but oddly wrote relatively little of it. As a composer, he is best known for his orchestral works, and most of the pieces for small ensemble are early and experimental. This dramatic piano quartet, however, does not sound like the music of a seventeen-year-old, nor does it lack confidence.

After an opening salvo from the piano – a single chord – the strings present a powerful unison theme. Suk will use them as a bloc frequently. Initially the piano supports them in chords; presently their melody-vs.-accompaniment roles change. Piano effects the change to the second theme, introduced in the warm sound of the cello. Second themes are where Suk shines. Using harmonic diversions that plumb the last vestiges of romanticism, he introduces glorious lyrical tunes in all three movements.

A viola solo ushers in the development, which makes much of a dotted rhythmic cell embedded in the opening theme. Suk develops his material with skill and imagination. The writing is remarkably secure and fluid for one so young.

His central Adagio is a ternary song form [A-B-A'] that begins as a pastoral romance in F major for cello and piano. Upper strings take up the cello theme, thickening the texture as Suk builds to the first climax. The slightly fast middle portion modulates to D major, maintaining most of the melodic activity in the strings with rippling accompaniment in the piano. Eventually

the sonorities grow to a soaring *appassionato* marked *ffff*, before the serene calm of the opening returns to conclude the movement.

Bold gestures and a strong rhythmic profile give the finale its character. Despite its minor mode, the *Allegro con fuoco* is upbeat and spirited. Once again, Suk delivers a luscious second theme and spins engaging modulations in his transitional passages. To observe that the imprint of his teacher (and future father-in-law) is evident is not disparagement. Dvořák was correct in identifying this piano quartet as a sturdy, worthwhile first work that heralded greater things to come. Suk was highly regarded in the early decades of the 20th century. This quartet makes clear that his music is ripe for discovery.