



## SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE

**MONDAY, JULY 12**

**Ludwig van Beethoven**

Sonata No. 6 for Violin and Piano in A Major, Op. 30, No. 1

*Allegro con brio*

*Adagio, molto espressivo*

*Allegretto con variazioni*

Andrew Wan, violin                      Andrew Armstrong, piano

**Alexander Borodin**

Quintet for Strings in F minor

*Allegro con brio*

*Andante ma non troppo*

*Menuetto*

*Finale: Prestissimo—Adagio—Prestissimo*

Augustin Hadelich, violin    James Ehnes, violin    Richard O'Neill, viola  
Bion Tsang, cell              Edward Arron, cello

**Maurice Ravel**

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in A minor

*Modéré*

*Pantoum: Assez vif*

*Passacaille: Très large*

*Final: Animé*

Nurit Bar-Josef, violin              Robert deMaine, cello              Adam Neiman, piano

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)**

Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major, Op. 30, No. 1 (1802)

By the earliest years of the 19th century Beethoven's stature as a composer had eclipsed his not inconsiderable reputation as a pianist noted for extraordinary powers of improvisation. Yet though his prospects seemed good, life seemed to be dealing him a number of daunting challenges, some stemming from the reactions by erstwhile supporters to his forceful and not always gracious personality, others to his deepening deafness. Several unsuccessful attempts to find a permanent court position worsened his mood, casting him into a debilitating depression that might have unhinged a less determined person. In the fall of 1802, he expressed his agony in what has become known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*. In this letter to his brothers he acknowledged

thoughts of suicide stemming from his deep despair. Yet the very act of venting his feelings in this letter ultimately allowed him to move on. Fortunately for himself and for us, the task of writing so painful a letter really did free him to sublimate his otherwise self-destructive impulses into musical form.

Several significant works emerged by the end of the year, including his Second Symphony, the massive so-called “Eroica” Variations, the three Op. 31 Piano Sonatas, and the three Sonatas for Piano and Violin, Op. 30, which he dedicated to Tsar Alexander I of Russia. Note that the first of the set, in A Major, originally contained what eventually became the finale of the later and far more famous “Kreutzer” Sonata.

The first movement *Allegro con brio* opens with a gently flowing duet between the two instruments. A second theme—even more flowing and lyrical—lies in the hands of the pianist. As the music proceeds, little packets of concentrated energy add thrust to the otherwise well-behaved activity. The movement is clearly in a classical mode, but increasing independence of the two instruments and unexpected energy convey growing confidence and originality.

Marked *Adagio, molto espressivo* the next movement bespeaks Beethoven’s growing Romantic inclinations. The dotted rhythms of the piano part replace the simple Alberti bass configurations of the *Rococo* and Classical periods. A mid-movement detour into the minor deepens the emotional pull of this tender and genuinely Romantic utterance.

The Sonata ends with a schema that plays to Beethoven’s mastery of variation form, a natural concomitant of his great gift of improvisation. Marked *Allegretto con variazioni*, the ascending theme gives rise to six variations, of which the fifth reverts to the minor mode and also demonstrates Beethoven’s contrapuntal wizardry. (He was trained in childhood by Christian-Gottlob Neefe, director of the national theater in Bonn, who reared his brilliant student on a diet of Bach, especially the Baroque master’s *Well-tempered Clavier*). Rapid fingerwork in some of the variations suggests that herein Beethoven expects a lot from those daring enough to take on the challenge of a piece that is really aimed more at professionals than casual amateurs.

### **Alexander Borodin (1833–1887)**

Quintet for Strings in F minor (1853–54)

Alexander Borodin was undoubtedly history’s most successful amateur composer, treating music as a beloved hobby secondary to his dual profession as a chemist and surgeon. (When Soviet authorities had a monument erected in his honor it was for his work as a chemist, not for his musical creations.) The illegitimate son of a Russian prince and the sister of a St. Petersburg civil servant, young Alexander bore the name of one of his father’s servants. His musical education was scanty, that in chemistry quite the contrary. Scientific journals of the time praised his scientific work, while fellow composers—spurred by the advocacy of Balakirev—applauded his musical efforts. He became one of the “Mighty Handful,” as the dominant Russian composers—with the conspicuous exception of “Westernized” Tchaikovsky—were termed by each other and

their claques. When Borodin died unexpectedly from a burst aneurysm in 1887, his lengthy and ambitious opera, *Prince Igor*, remained unfinished until completed by Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov.

When we think of Borodin as a composer it is most likely as the creator of *Prince Igor*, the atmospheric *On the Steppes of Central Asia*, and—with specific regard to chamber music—his two late string quartets, dating respectively from 1879 and 1881. These irresistibly lyrical pieces were not born in a vacuum; indeed, they had many antecedents among a slew of early chamber works by Borodin. As early as the 1840s and 1850s, the young composer had already composed (either partially, completely or lost) string trios, a quartet for flute, oboe, viola and cello, as well as a Quintet for Strings in F minor dating from 1853–54.

As a student at the Academy of Physicians in St. Petersburg, Borodin played an active role in chamber music *soirées* at the home of an amateur cellist. In these informal gatherings he heard and performed music by Boccherini, Spohr and other essentially Western European composers. During this period Russian composers inspired by the example of Mikhail Glinka began incorporating Russian folk tunes and derivatives into their compositions. Borodin's String Quintet is a case in point. Further nationalist impetus came in the figure of Franz Xavier Gebel (1787–1843), a German-born inhabitant of Moscow who borrowed from Russian folksong in his popular salon pieces.

Yet from the very opening notes of the first movement, marked *Allegro con brio*, it is the spirit of Mendelssohn that courses through the music. Flowingly lyrical and redolent of that composer's many *Songs without Words*, the music takes wings and seemingly floats in dreamlike wind currents. Note that this quintet, like Schubert's profound C-Major Quintet, Op. 163, D. 956, employs a second cello rather than a second viola à la Mozart and Brahms in their respective string quintets. Despite the expected darker timbres, Borodin is able to suggest Mendelssohnian lightness throughout this movement. Still, a hint of stereotypically Russian melancholy leaves its mark here as well.

The ensuing *Andante ma non troppo* begins in the lower strings before the ingratiating Russian-sound theme is appropriated by a solo violin. A central section entrusts the main theme to solo cello accompanied by pizzicatos elsewhere. Here, too, a violin takes up the fetchingly Romantic theme before returning to the cello. In form, the movement is essentially a set of two variations shared by violin and cello.

A light and airy *Menuetto* follows, somewhat in the nature of an elfin Mendelssohnian *scherzo*. The middle-movement Trio, however, has the lilting cadence of a rustic *Ländler*, so beloved of Schubert and Bruckner.

An energetic *Prestissimo* opens the final movement, once again suggesting the fluency of Mendelssohn. The descending main theme alternates with a rising secondary tune. Among the several episodes in the sonata-rondo is an *Adagio* in which the first cello's quietly commanding presence darkens the mood against sustained minor-mode chords.

The return of the initial themes sounds even more distinctly Mendelssohnian in the reprise of the *Prestissimo*. Borodin appends a brief coda to end the piece.

### **Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in A minor (1913–14)**

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Igor Stravinsky admired Ravel's music, likening the French composer to a Swiss watchmaker. This clever and insightful assessment captured Ravel's avowed objective—technical perfection. "I can strive unceasingly to this end," Ravel wrote, "since I am certain of never being able to attain it." This artistic creed is typically French and recalls similar thoughts uttered by as disparate a pair of composers as Camille Saint-Saëns and the Russian-born Stravinsky, who spent critical years in Paris absorbing French esthetics. Like Stravinsky (but only to a degree like Saint-Saëns), Ravel's music seldom fails to engage the emotions—the composers' and ours.

Ravel and his older compatriot Debussy composed string quartets—one apiece—early in their respective careers, but otherwise tabled their chamber-music inclinations till the second decade of the 20th century. Debussy, hoping in vain to survive cancer, set out to write six chamber works during World War I. Though we lament the fact that he could muster the strength for only three such works, they are exemplary in every way. Ravel, didn't wait quite as many years to follow up his string quartet (1903 versus Debussy's, composed a decade earlier), launching his Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano in A minor in 1913 and completing it the following year.

Progress came slowly to this fastidious classically-oriented composer. His efforts were exacerbated by the outbreak of the First World War. Recoiling from the conflict's palpable horrors, he attempted to avoid investing the Trio with music that would mirror the pain of the war, though dark clouds appear in both the opening and third movements.

The rhythm and modal harmonies of the *Modéré* movement undoubtedly recollect the Basque café music with which Ravel was well acquainted by birth and inner resonance. The main theme, its 3-2-3 rhythm a feature of Basque dance, is clearly folk-like, though its many variants abound in virtuosic passages requiring a very well-developed technique among all three performers.

The following movement's title, *Pantoum*, comes from *pantun*, a Malayan verse form used by Charles Baudelaire in *Les fleurs du mal*. Essentially a scherzo, this richly textured, colorful movement alternates between strongly accented rhythmic forays and a slowly moving, chorale-like series of chords. At times the strings play in 3/4 time, the piano in 4/2, creating a jazzy sense of cross accents.

The *Passacaille* is a clear reference to the Baroque variation form where a repeated melody is subjected to continuous variation. The eight-bar theme recurs eight times in wonderfully varied combinations of tone colors.

Marked *Final: Animé*, the closing movement begins without pause and surpasses the *Passacaille* in kaleidoscopic sonic effects and virtuosity. The initial theme is an inversion of the opening motif of the first movement. Here too, Ravel adds rhythmic interest through the use of asymmetric 5/4 and 7/4 meters. The work ends in a brilliant series of jazz-inflected triplets on the piano, contrasted by sustained trills in the strings.

**Program Notes by  
Steven Lowe**