January 24, 2026

CONCERT

Duo for Violin and Cello, Op. 7
ZOLTÁN KODÁLY

Born: 1882
Died: 1967
Composed: 1914

I. Allegro serioso, non troppo
II. Adagio — Andante
III. Maestoso e largamente, ma non troppo lento — Presto

In the early years of the twentieth century Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók set out to discover and explore the folk music of Eastern Europe. They traveled widely, writing down the songs they heard and—when possible—recording them on primitive recording devices. There exists a wonderful photograph of the ever-formal Bartók, in suit and tie, with peasants in a Transylvanian village, where he is directing a peasant woman to sing into the horn of an early recorder. Bartók and Kodály would later assimilate the folk idioms of Eastern Europe into their own individual compositional styles, and Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello is one of the works that shows this influence most strongly. Composed in 1914, soon after Kodály had returned from a trip gathering Magyar folksongs, the Duo is full of the sound of folk idioms, peasant dances, speech rhythms, and even a children's song Kodaly heard on his trips.

The Duo was first performed at an all-Kodály concert in Budapest on May 7, 1918, by the musicians for whom it was written: violinist Imre Waldbauer and cellist Jenö Kerpely. They were the founding members of the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet, close friends and colleagues of Bartók and Kodály, and they were virtuoso performers of the highest order. Kodály knew that he was writing for brilliant players, and he wrote unbelievably difficult music for them: the Duo demands performers who can play easily into the very highest range of their instruments, master the most complex chording, and produce a range of sonorities from artificial harmonics to tremolando accompaniment and rapid pizzicato passages. The literature for violin and cello alone is small, and Kodály's Duo is the greatest example of the form.

Kodály faced particular problems when he wrote this music. The violin and cello have similar voices, but they are linear, melodic instruments, and their combination lacks the rich harmonic foundation that an accompanying piano would provide. But Kodály is able to suggest a harmonic context in a variety of ways, and the very beginning is a perfect illustration of his method. The Duo opens with the cello's soaring, heroic theme, which is punctuated by violin chords that provide a harmonic context. And within seconds the instruments exchange roles: now the violin sings while the cello accompanies with arpeggiated chords. Even as his instruments soar through their complete ranges, Kodály can suggest a harmonic foundation with pizzicato ostinatos, arpeggiated chords, murmuring tremolando, spicy clashes. His music is never particularly dissonant, but the Duo bends traditional key signatures even as it works to suggest them. This harmonic freshness is part of the music's appeal.

Kodály marks the first movement Allegro serioso. In sonata form, it opens with the two instruments sharing the rhapsodic first theme, and the two players share the flowing second subject as well. The principal impression this music makes is of soaring melodies, bright instrumental colors, and energetic rhythms—and after all this energy the movement concludes on delicate harmonic double stops.

Cello alone opens the Adagio with a long, subdued melody, but after that restrained beginning, the central Andante turns almost violent (Kodály's marking here is deciso: "decisive") when over growling cello tremolos, the violin sings powerfully in octaves. The finale opens with a slow introduction, this time for violin alone and so free in rhythm that it seems at first like a fantasia. The movement takes wing at the Presto, and along the way the quoted children's song rings out in the violin in all its glowing innocence. That song may be innocent on its first appearance, but Kodály then stretches that little tune through some supple rhythmic re-imaginings before a brisk coda propels the Duo to its most emphatic conclusion.

Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, K. 493
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: 1756
Died: 1791
Composed: 1786

I. Allegro
II. Larghetto
III. Allegretto

By 1785, four years after his move to Vienna, Mozart was beginning to look for new avenues of income. He had up to this point supported himself as composer, performer, and teacher, but now he began to recognize that significant income might come from publishing music that would be purchased by amateur performers, whose number was growing in the final decades of the century. Toward that end, he entered into an agreement with his friend Franz Anton Hoffmeister to publish a number of his works. Specifically, Hoffmeister contracted with Mozart to write three piano quartets, and he paid the composer an advance on the income he expected from them. But the first of these, the Piano Quartet in G minor, did not sell well. Those who bought it complained to the publisher that it was too difficult. Hoffmeister brought this unwelcome news to the composer, and they reached an agreement: Hoffmeister let Mozart out of the contract and allowed him to keep the advance.

Mozart's opera The Marriage of Figaro was premiered in Vienna on May 1, 1786, and it promptly began a successful run of nine performances (and many more in the following years). With his lengthy labors on the opera behind him, Mozart returned to chamber music. Mozart composed the Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, completing it on June 3, only a month after the premiere of Figaro.

Mozart appears to have written this quartet not on commission but because he wanted to. The Piano Quartet in E-flat Major is scarcely easier than its predecessor—Mozart was making no concessions to amateur performers—and once again his choice of key is an indication of the music's character. E-flat Major was the key Beethoven would later associate with heroism (the Eroica and Emperor Concerto), but for Mozart that key seemed to suggest warmth and nobility (the Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola and the Symphony No. 39). Mozart would never think of allowing his music to express the events or emotions of his personal life, but it is hard not to believe that this genial, open music reflects the happy moment of its composition.

The firm beginning of the Allegro—the opening statement concludes with little fanfares—establishes the bright mood that pervades this quartet. Of particular interest in the first movement is the fact that the second subject dominates both the exposition and development. The piano seems to start this theme, offering what will be its first measure, but the violin quickly shoulders the piano aside, takes the theme for itself, and extends it across a long span. The development begins quietly on this theme but soon overflows with energy, and Mozart treats that first measure—with its characteristic turn—in canon across the span of the development.

As he did in the first quartet, Mozart frequently sets piano and strings as separate elements in the slow movement: the melodic line moves easily between them in this nocturne-like Larghetto in A-flat Major. The concluding Allegretto, however, gives the piano a virtuoso part, full of brilliant runs and virtuoso writing, while the strings retreat somewhat to the shade, answering or accompanying the piano. In fact, it is easy to imagine this movement recast as a rondo-finale of a piano concerto because the piano's role is so dominant. But it is easy to forgive the concerto-like qualities of this movement when the piano's part is so exciting, carrying the listener along on the triplet runs that eventually dash the movement to its close.

Piano Quintet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 1
ERNŐ DOHNÁNYI

Born: 1877
Died: 1960
Composed: 1895

I. Allegro
II. Scherzo. Allegro vivace
III. Adagio, quasi andante
IV. Finale. Allegro animato — Allegro

It is hard to believe that this accomplished music was written by a seventeen-year-old. But Ernst von Dohnányi was a prodigy of many talents: he became a composer, a virtuoso pianist, and a conductor

(his grandson was Christoph von Dohnányi, former music director of the Cleveland Orchestra). Dohnányi truly was one of those figures whose careers span different eras. Born when Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and Liszt and Wagner were still alive, Dohnányi as a boy met Brahms, who encouraged his composition and helped guide his career. Concert tours throughout Europe and the United States established his reputation as a pianist, and later he became a conductor, leading the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra from 1919 until 1944. Following World War II, Dohnányi settled in the United States, where he taught for years at Florida State University. He died in the year John Kennedy was elected president.

Dohnányi's music has always hovered right on the edge of genuine popularity. He has had passionate advocates among performers and critics, and at least one work—Variations on a Nursery Tune—has made it into the standard repertory. But the majority of his output, including three operas, two symphonies, four concertos, and a vast amount of piano and chamber music, remains little-known.

Dohnányi's Piano Quintet in C minor was published as his Opus 1, though he had written many works before it. The quintet's first performance took place in Vienna in 1895. That premiere was in fact arranged by Brahms himself, then only two years from death, and it should come as no surprise that the Piano Quintet shows the strong influence of the older composer, particularly in its romantic richness and a harmonic language quite similar to Brahms' own.

The quintet is dominated by the stirring opening theme of the first movement, heard immediately in the piano. This very Brahmsian melody—with its characteristic drop of a fourth—will recur in many forms throughout the quintet. Strings present the lyric second theme group, also of Brahmsian spaciousness; Dohnányi marks it dolce. A long development leads to the close on a triumphant restatement of the opening idea, now in C Major.

The scherzo is in ABA form: its outer sections hurry along busily, while the trio is Schubert-like in its songfulness. The Adagio, quasi andante takes some of its somber character from the dark color of the lower strings, which often dominate textures here, and the viola announces the long opening idea of this ternary-form movement. A more animated middle section in D-flat Major soars into the violins' high registers before the return of the opening material and the quiet close. The finale brings back the mood and manner of the opening movement: the main theme here is closely related to the quintet's beginning. Much of the writing is for unison strings, and Dohnányi quickly alternates meters, with the music leaping between 5/4 and 6/4 almost by measure. A variation of the opening idea becomes the basis for a brief fugato, and the first movement's opening theme comes back in all its glory to bring the quintet to a dramatic conclusion.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Brahms had every reason to feel flattered by this work. But Dohnányi's Piano Quintet in C minor is remarkable music in its own right and a stunning achievement by a young man still several years short of his twentieth birthday.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger