July 6, 2025

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80
FELIX MENDELSSOHN
Born: 1809
Died: 1847
Composed: 1847

I. Allegro vivace assai
II. Allegro assai
III. Adagio
IV. Finale. Allegro molto

Mendelssohn's life was short, and its ending particularly painful. Always a driven man, he showed signs of exhaustion during the 1846–1847 season, and in May 1847, catastrophe struck: his sister Fanny, only 41, suffered a stroke and died within hours. She and her younger brother had always been exceptionally close—Mendelssohn collapsed upon learning of her death. Worried family members took him on vacation to Switzerland, hoping he could regain his strength and composure.

At Interlaken, Mendelssohn composed the String Quartet in F minor and tried to escape his sorrow, but with little success. An English visitor described his last view of the composer that summer: "I thought even then, as I followed his figure, looking none the younger for the loose dark coat and the wide-brimmed straw hat bound with black crape, which he wore, that he was too much depressed and worn, and walked too heavily." Back in Leipzig, Mendelssohn collapsed, was confined to bed, and died several days later at the age of 38.

Given the circumstances of its creation, one might expect Mendelssohn's Quartet in F minor to be somber music—and in fact, it is. The pianist Ignaz Moscheles found it the product of "an agitated state of mind." Yet this quartet's driven quality is also the source of its distinction and strength. Three of its four movements are fast, and the quartet hurtles to an almost superheated close, in which the F-minor tonality is affirmed with vengeance. It is not a conclusion that brings much relief; rather, it speaks directly from the agonized consciousness of its creator.

CONCERT

Piano Trio No. 25 in E minor, Hob. XV:12
FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN
Born: 1732
Died: 1809
Composed: 1788-1789

I. Allegro moderato
II. Andante
III. Rondo. Presto

When Haydn composed the Piano Trio in E minor, probably in the early months of 1789, he was 57 years old and had been kapellmeister to the Esterházy court for nearly three decades. After years of strictly controlling Haydn's productivity, the Esterházy family began to relax its strictures during the 1780s, allowing Haydn to write for other individuals and performers and to publish some of his music elsewhere. Responding to this new freedom, Haydn soon began writing symphonies for Paris and a great deal of chamber music. He had a personal motive here: although the Esterházys placed no artistic restrictions upon him, Haydn had not become wealthy in their service. These outside publications allowed him a new source of income, and Haydn was quite aware of the growing number of amateur musicians in Vienna and elsewhere who were eager to buy and perform music in their homes. The Piano Trio in E minor was written—at least in part—for this new market.

This trio was published as part of a set of three by the Viennese publisher Artaria in 1789. These were not the piano trios as we have come to know them in the music of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and other nineteenth-century composers, who saw the form as a partnership of three equal participants. In Haydn's trios, the piano is clearly the controlling force: it dominates textures and musical interest. Haydn referred to his trios as "Sonatas for pianoforte with accompaniment for violin and violoncello," and in fact, this set of three trios was published under the title Sonatas. Haydn's description may be a little severe—the stringed instruments, particularly the violin, are allowed more important roles in this music than mere "accompaniment."

Program Notes

The Trio in E minor takes some of its character from its minor tonality. The beginning feels almost fierce, with the piano sharply arpeggiating its opening chord—this sound is accentuated by the strident ring of the violin's open E-string. Textures remain clear in this sonata-form movement: the strings usually double the piano's line, though the violin is allowed some flights of its own. Haydn moves to E Major for the elegant Andante. Once again, the piano lays out the main idea, accompanied by pizzicato strokes from the violin and cello; later, the stringed instruments participate more fully in the musical argument. The finale is a brisk rondo that remains in E Major rather than returning to the key of the first movement. The piano has an exceptionally attractive part in this movement—athletic and spirited—and this music was doubtless as appealing to musicians two centuries ago as it remains today.

Violin Sonata No. 3 in A minor, Op. 25, *dans le caractère populaire roumain*

GEORGE ENESCU

Born: 1881
Died: 1955
Composed: 1926

I. Moderato malinconico
II. Andante sostenuto e misterioso
III. Allegro con brio, ma non troppo mosso

The greatest musician to come from Romania, George Enescu was also one of the finest violinists of the twentieth century. Enescu trained in Vienna and Paris and then had an international career, performing and conducting throughout the world. He kept Paris and Bucharest as his two homes and spent a significant amount of time in his native country, where he did much for Romanian music. As a composer, Enescu is unfortunately remembered for just one work, the Romanian Rhapsody No. 1, and its overpopularity has obscured the rest of his achievement, which includes the impressive opera Oedipe, five symphonies, and a large amount of chamber music.

Enescu composed his Violin Sonata No. 3 in 1926, dedicating it to the memory of violinist Franz Kneisel—longtime concertmaster of the Boston Symphony—who had died earlier that year. The key to this striking music can be found in its subtitle: "in the popular Romanian character." Enescu sets out here to wed Romanian folk music with the classical violin sonata; the result is a virtuoso violin sonata and a very exotic piece of music. Though the sonata contains no specific folk tunes, Enescu—like Bartók in his Violin Rhapsodies, composed at almost exactly the same time—assimilates a folk idiom so completely that it becomes the raw material for his own music. Romanian folk music inevitably suggests a Romani character, and listeners will hear that in this sonata, as well as characteristic Romanian melodic patterns and Enescu's attempt to mirror the sound of native instruments such as the cimbalom and lautar. He notates the score with unusual precision, specifying notes to be played slightly sharp or flat, how the piano is to be pedaled, and so on.

The Third Violin Sonata has become one of Enescu's most popular works, recorded by Yehudi Menuhin, Isaac Stern, and many others. While it is much better to listen to such a work as pure music, something of its emotional character can be understood in a remark Enescu made to one of his students: he described the sonata as "a fantasy on the life and soul of the [Romani] fiddler, the kind of musical vagabond who roamed about Europe in the old days, playing at campfires, imitating not only the sounds of nature but also the techniques and stunts of other [Romani] players."

The sonata is in the standard three movements but is quite free in structure and expression. The opening Moderato malinconico does indeed have a melancholy air. Its first theme group consists of a series of brief thematic ideas, all riding along a very supple rhythmic pulse; these will be combined and developed across the span of the movement. The dancing second group quickly turns passionate and soaring before a brief development leads to a modified return of earlier material and a quiet close.

The Andante sostenuto opens with the strange sound of a one-note piano ostinato—a high B—sounding obsessively; over this constant pulse, the violin sings the first idea entirely in harmonics. That opening ostinato sets a pattern that will characterize this movement: it is full of recurrent

pedal sounds—some of these are like Romani bagpipes, and at other times the piano mimics the jangling sound of the cimbalom. This movement is quite varied, with moments of calm giving way to more ebullient episodes. The finale dances to life on the piano's sharp-edged chords, and quickly the violin leads the way through a series of varied sections. This movement is particularly sonorous: there are extended passages played in pizzicato chords, tumultuous waves of piano sound, and striking tremolo and harmonic effects from the violin. The sonata drives to a dramatic—and resounding—conclusion, marked triple forte.

String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 87

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born: 1809
Died: 1847
Composed: 1845

I. Allegro vivace
II. Andante scherzando
III. Adagio e lento
IV. Allegro molto vivace

Mendelssohn was one of the most gifted composers of all time, and while it has become fashionable in some circles to dismiss his music as superficial and glib, it should be noted that he drove himself mercilessly—not just as a composer but also as conductor, performer, administrator, and educator (he was also a talented painter). His death at 38 was at least partially the result of exhaustion that inevitably resulted from the demands he placed on himself. Mendelssohn was conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra from 1835 until 1846 and also served as director of the Leipzig Conservatory. Such demands kept him from composing much during the concert season and academic year. He became, in effect, a "summer" composer—one who wrote during those sunny, happy months when he could take his wife and children away from Leipzig and relax.

The Quintet in B-flat Major is one of these summer compositions—Mendelssohn finished the score in Frankfurt on July 8, 1845, just a few months after the premiere of his Violin Concerto. One of the most distinctive features of the Quintet, particularly in its outer movements, is its concertante first violin part—the writing for first violin here is so brilliant that it demands a virtuoso performer. The very beginning of the Allegro vivace has reminded many of the beginning of Mendelssohn's own Octet: over rustling accompaniment, the first violin leaps upward with a melody that will surge and fall back through two octaves. The falling, lyric second subject is introduced by the first viola, and the energetic development flies along over omnipresent triplets. The movement concludes with a majestic coda built on both main ideas.

The brief Andante scherzando is not the quick, silvery-fast movement one might expect from Mendelssohn at this point but a piquant little dance. Mendelssohn varies the texture by combining bowed and pizzicato passages and surprising the listener with uneven rhythms and shifting harmonies before the movement concludes nicely with all strings pizzicato.

The marking for the third movement—Adagio e lento—seems redundant, as both terms mean "slow." The movement is built on its grieving main theme, heard immediately in the first violin. The accompaniment is unusually busy, and the huge climax to this movement—with buzzing tremolos—seems more orchestral than chamber-like in its sonority (in fact, Toscanini performed this movement with the entire string section of the NBC Symphony). Energy is the keynote of the finale, marked Allegro molto vivace. This movement returns somewhat to the manner of the opening movement, with the first violin part particularly brilliant, though Mendelssohn varies the pulse here by sharply syncopating the secondary theme group. The development is spirited and the coda exuberant—as befits music written by a man on holiday.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger