July 8, 2025

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

6 Klavierstücke, Op. 118
JOHANNES BRAHMS
Born: 1833
Died: 1897
Composed: 1893

Intermezzo in A minor
Intermezzo in A Major
Ballade in G minor
Intermezzo in F minor
Romance in F Major
Intermezzo in E-flat minor

Brahms had a curious relation with the piano. As a young man, he made his reputation as a virtuoso pianist and in those early years composed huge works in classical forms: of his first five published works, three are massive piano sonatas, all written before he was 21, and there are sets of variations from this period that rank among the most difficult piano music ever written. The composer—described in these years by a friend as "the young, heaven-storming Johannes"—seemed on the verge of creating a vast and heroic literature for solo piano. But then an unexpected thing happened: at age 32 Brahms simply stopped writing music for solo piano. Over the final three decades of his life, he returned to the genre only twice: in 1878-9, when he composed ten brief pieces, and at the very end of his life, when he wrote the twenty pieces that make up his Opp. 116, 117, 118, and 119.

The twenty pieces of these four final sets are all very brief, and Brahms gave them a range of titles: capriccio, intermezzo, ballade, romance, and rhapsody. Almost all are in ABA form: an opening theme, a countermelody usually in a contrasting tempo and mood, and a return to the opening material, which is always varied on its reappearance. This is intensely personal music, as if Brahms were distilling a lifetime of experience and musical refinement into these pieces as he returned one last time to his own instrument. While perhaps technically not as demanding as his early piano works, these twenty pieces nevertheless distill a lifetime of experience and technical refinement into very brief spans, and in their focused, inward, and sometimes bleak way they offer some of Brahms' most personal and moving music. Someone once noted that a cold wind blows through these late piano pieces; Brahms himself described them as "lullabies of my pain."

Brahms composed the six pieces of his Opus 118 in the years 1892-3 and published them under the utterly neutral title Klavierstücke ("piano pieces") that makes clear that this is a gathering of six different pieces rather than a unified set.

CONCERT

Scaramouche, Suite for 2 Pianos, Op. 165b
DARIUS MILHAUD
Born: 1892
Died: 1974
Composed: 1937

I. Vif
II. Modéré
III. Brazileira (Mouvement de samba)

Scaramouche is one of Milhaud's most delightful (and popular) scores. It was originally part of the incidental music Milhaud wrote for a production of Moliere's play Le médecin volant in 1937. From that music, Milhaud adapted for his friends Marcelle Meyer and Ida Jankelevitch a three-movement suite for two pianos that he called simply Scaramouche. Scaramouche was a character from the commedia dell'arte, where he was either a braggart captain or—more commonly—an agile soldier dressed in black who carried a sword and was a sort of Robin Hood figure. This music has proven so attractive that it exists in a number of arrangements, some of them made by the composer himself; these include versions for saxophone and orchestra, for clarinet, for guitar, and others.

The opening Vif ("lively") is just that: sparkling music, full of rhythmic vitality. In the Modéré ("moderate"), the melodic line moves gracefully between the two pianos, while the concluding Brazileira is a samba. Milhaud had spent the period of World War I in Rio de Janeiro, where he was secretary to the French ambassador, the poet-playwright Paul Claudel. In Rio, Milhaud fell in love with Brazilian

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music, particularly with the rhythmic flair he heard in its folkdances and street tunes, and that influence shaped his Le boeuf sur le toit, composed immediately after his return to France. Milhaud was drawn to the samba, and his Brazileira is in samba-rhythm, with its characteristic syncopation: he divides the 2/4 meter into patterns of eighth-notes: 3+3+2. It makes a lively conclusion to the suite.

Serenade for String Trio in D Major, Op. 8
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770
Died: 1827
Composed: 1795-1797

I. Marcia. Allegro — Adagio
II. Menuetto. Allegretto
III. Adagio
IV. Allegretto alla Polacca
V. Thema con Variazioni. Andante quasi allegretto

In his early years in Vienna, Beethoven set about mastering the classical forms that had already been refined to a very high standard by Haydn and Mozart. He wrote three piano trios, several piano sonatas, two cello sonatas, and then in the years 1796-97 began writing pieces for string trio: violin, viola, and cello. In this demanding (and unusual) form, Beethoven wrote four trios and–in a lighter mood–a Serenade in D Major. Where the trios all are in classical four-movement form, the Serenade looks back to the lighter instrumental music of Mozart: it is in seven movements, some of them in the dance forms Mozart had used in his divertimentos and serenades. Beethoven's early music sometimes proved difficult for audiences, but the Serenade made many friends: it was arranged for viola and piano and published as Beethoven's Opus 42 (this arrangement was by someone else, however), and it also exists in a version for flute and piano.

The Serenade opens with a brisk march that alternates dotted rhythms and triplets, but soon all this energy alternates with an Adagio section that features long and florid melodic lines; the violin gets most of the show here. The next two movements have somewhat unusual structures: the Menuetto has vigorous outer sections surrounding a flowing trio, and Beethoven rounds things off with a coda played entirely pizzicato. The Adagio is actually two movements in one–the slow opening tempo soon gives way to a scherzo section marked Allegro molto, and Beethoven alternates these throughout. The Allegretto alla Polacca is a polonaise, a Polish dance popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries–this lively example characteristically places the accent on the second half of the opening beat. The Andante quasi Allegretto is a theme-and-variation movement: the theme is in two eight-bar phrases, and Beethoven offers four variations and an extended conclusion. He rounds the Serenade off with a repetition of the march section of the opening movement.

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 14
CÉSAR FRANCK

Born: 1822
Died: 1890
Composed: 1878-1879

I. Molto moderato, quasi lento — Allegro
II. Lento, con molto sentimento
III. Allegro non troppo ma con fuoco

Few works in the chamber music literature have produced so violent a reaction at their premieres as the Piano Quintet of César Franck. Franck, then 57 and a professor of organ at the Paris Conservatory, had written no chamber music for over 25 years when the Piano Quintet burst to life before an unsuspecting audience in Paris on January 17, 1880. Few in that audience expected music so explosive from a man known as the gentle composer of church music. Franck's students were wildly enthusiastic, and a later performance is reported to have left the audience stunned into silence, some of them weeping openly. But the acclaim was not universal. Franck had intended to dedicate this music to Camille Saint-Saëns, the pianist at the premiere, but when he approached Saint-Saëns after the performance to offer him the personally-inscribed manuscript, Saint-Saëns is reported to have made a face, thrown the manuscript on the piano, and walked away. Franck's wife hated the Quintet and refused to attend performances.

There appear to have been non-musical reasons for these reactions. Four years earlier, a twenty-year-old woman named Augusta Holmès had begun to study composition with Franck. Augusta Holmès moved easily in the musical and literary circles of Paris. A striking figure, she attracted the attention and admiration of most of the leading musical figures of the late eighteenth-century, including Rossini, Wagner, Liszt, Rimsky-Korsakov, and many others. Saint-Saëns, whose proposal of marriage she rejected, confessed that "We were all in love with her." Holmès (she added the accent to the family name) composed on a grand scale: among her works are four operas (she wrote the librettos for all her operas), symphonies, symphonic poems, choral music, and songs.

The details of the relationship between Holmès and her teacher remain unclear. She was strongly attracted to Franck, and he confessed that his student "arouses in me the most unspiritual desires." The premiere of Franck's Piano Quintet apparently brought matters to a head. The general feeling was that the mild-mannered Franck had made clear his love for Augusta in this music, and both his wife and Saint-Saëns knew it. For those interested, the relationship between Franck and Holmès is the subject of a 1978 novel by Ronald Harwood titled César and Augusta.

Despite the tensions at its premiere, Franck's Quintet has come to be regarded as one of the great piano quintets, along with those of Schumann, Brahms, Dvořák, and Shostakovich. Everyone instantly recognizes its power—this is big music, full of bold gestures, color, and sweep. Franz Liszt, one of Franck's greatest admirers, wondered whether the Quintet was truly chamber music and suggested that it might be better heard in a version for orchestra. Franck's first instruction, dramatico, sets the tone for the entire work, and Liszt was quite right to wonder whether this is truly chamber music: Franck asks for massed unison passages, fortississimo dynamic levels, tremolos, and a volume of sound previously unknown in chamber music. Beyond the purely emotional and sonic impact, however, this music is notable for its concentration: the Piano Quintet is one of the finest examples of Franck's cyclic treatment of themes, an idea he had taken from Liszt—virtually the entire quintet grows out of theme-shapes presented in the first movement.

The opening of the first movement is impressive, as Franck alternates intense passages for strings with quiet, lyrical interludes for piano. Gradually these voices merge and rush ahead at the violent Allegro, which listeners will recognize as a variant of the violin's figure at the very beginning. This and other theme-shapes will be stretched, varied, and made to yield a variety of moods. At the end of the movement, the music dies away on Franck's marking estinto: "extinct."

The slow movement begins with steady piano chords, and over these the first violin plays what seem at first melodic fragments. But these too have evolved from the opening of the first movement, and soon they combine to form the movement's main theme. Again the music rises to a massive climax, then subsides to end quietly. Out of that quiet, the concluding movement springs to life. Franck specifies con fuoco—with fire—and the very beginning feels unsettled and nervous, with the violins pulsing ahead. The main theme, when it finally arrives, has grown out of material presented in the second movement; now Franck gives it to the four strings, and their repetitions grow in power until the theme is hammered out violently. An extremely dramatic coda drives to the brutally abrupt cadence.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger