July 13, 2025

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Piano Sonata No. 1, H. 350
BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ

Born: 1890
Died: 1959
Composed: 1954

I. Poco allegro
II. Moderato (poco andante)
III. Adagio. Poco allegro

Bohuslav Martinů fled from Europe to the United States in 1941 to escape the Nazi occupation of France. This was a productive time for Martinů the composer—he wrote four magnificent wartime symphonies—but it was a difficult time for Martinů personally. He did not speak English when he arrived, he found life in America very strange, and he had serious health challenges. After the war, Martinů was anxious to return to Europe, and particularly to his native Czechoslovakia, but the communist takeover there prevented that. The composer spent his final years in the United States (he taught at Princeton and the Berkshire School), France, Italy, and Switzerland, where he died at age 68.

It was in France that Martinů wrote his Piano Sonata No. 1. Martinů composed it in Nice in the fall of 1954 and dedicated it to Rudolf Serkin. During the summer of 1957, Serkin visited Martinů at his home in Switzerland, played the sonata through for him, and accepted many of Martinů's suggestions about phrasing and dynamics. Serkin gave the premiere performance in Düsseldorf that fall and gave the American premiere at Carnegie Hall on December 2, 1957.

The Piano Sonata comes from very late in Martinů's career: of the 384 works in Harry Halbreich's catalog of Martinů's compositions, the sonata is No. 350. Martinů's Piano Sonata is traditional in the sense that it is a three-movement work in classical forms: a sonata-form first movement, a theme-and-variation second movement, and a fast finale that shows some relation to sonata form. But it is original in the many ways Martinů bends and expands those forms, particularly through an approach he called "fantasy": in the middle of these classical forms, he will suddenly take up a figure or theme and develop it on its own.

The first movement may be rooted in E-flat Major, but the music is so free harmonically that any sense of that home key is often obliterated. And it is just as free metrically. The opening Poco Allegro may be marked in 3/8, but the music is so free metrically that Martinů puts the 3/8 marking in parentheses and often abandons barlines altogether, replacing them with dotted lines that indicate phrasing rather than a specific meter. This movement is built on the contrast between its dissonant and wide-ranging opening idea and a much more lyrical second subject. Martinů develops and recapitulates these themes and rounds the movement off with a quiet coda that finally settles on a calm E-flat Major chord.

The Moderato opens with murmuring textures built on constantly shimmering 32nd-note textures, and this tremolo-like sound will recur throughout. The "theme" of this variation-form movement is a gentle dotted idea that reappears across the movement in constantly evolving forms. Various eruptions intrude on the evolution of that theme before a Tranquillo coda draws the movement to its conclusion.

A majestic eleven-measure Adagio opens the final movement, its ringing chords setting the stage for the Poco Allegro, where the music leaps ahead on another dotted melody. Here—and throughout the sonata—the writing can be of stupefying difficulty for the pianist before a busy coda brings the sonata to its firmly chiseled close.

CONCERT

Piano Trio in E-flat Major, D. 897 "Notturno"
FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born: 1797
Died: 1828
Composed: 1827

Schubert's Piano Trio in E-flat Major, D. 897, was published in 1846, eighteen years after the composer's death, under the name Notturno. Schubert scholars now believe it to be a rejected slow movement for his Piano Trio in B-flat Major, D. 898. The name Notturno, or "nocturne," did not originate with Schubert (his manuscript simply says Adagio), and it was probably the invention of that first publisher, but it has remained part of the way we think of this music.

Program Notes

Schubert's sense of this brief movement may be seen in his complex markings. Though the dynamic of the opening is pianissimo, Schubert stresses that it should also be appassionato. Over softly arpeggiated piano chords, the violin and cello sing a long duet in thirds. Suddenly, the roles reverse: the piano has that gentle melody while the strings frame it with a pizzicato accompaniment. The shimmering, subdued atmosphere of this music earned it the nickname Notturno, and while not authentic, that name is apt. The central episode moves into E Major and grows more energetic, the music proceeding along sharply dotted rhythms. Schubert brings back his opening string duet (the piano's accompaniment has now grown more ornate) and weaves material from the trio section into the coda before the Notturno draws to a very quiet close.

Was this the rejected slow movement of Schubert's Trio in B-flat Major? We may never know, and finally, it doesn't matter. What does matter is that the Notturno is lovely music in its own right, and this isolated movement will bring pleasure to all who love Schubert's music.

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major, Op. 13

EDVARD GRIEG

Born: 1843
Died: 1907
Composed: 1867

I. Lento doloroso — Allegro vivace
II. Allegretto tranquillo
III. Allegro animato

Grieg completed his Second Violin Sonata in July 1867, a month after his twenty-fourth birthday. Grieg set out to make this music as Norwegian as possible, incorporating Norwegian folk tunes and dance rhythms and using violin techniques associated with the Hardanger fiddle, the fiddle of Norwegian folk music. When accused of nationalism, Grieg reacted defiantly—that had been his intention. To foreign ears, however, the identification of Grieg with the music of Norway is already so automatic that this sonata does not sound like Norwegian folk music to us—it sounds like Grieg.

The Second Violin Sonata is in three movements, and there are thematic links between the outer movements. The first movement opens with a slow introduction in G minor, marked Lento doloroso and featuring a freely rhapsodic passage for the violin. The main idea bursts forth in the piano at the Allegro vivace. This is a vigorous Norwegian dance in 3/4 meter known as the springdans, and the ear quickly recognizes that Grieg had anticipated the shape of this theme in the movement's slow introduction. The second subject is a gently rocking waltz tune for violin, marked tranquillo ed espressivo. The development, based on both themes, is impassioned and exciting.

The Allegretto tranquillo, in ABA form, opens with a piano melody in E minor that is soon picked up by the violin. Both instruments swirl and swoop through an energetic extension of that melody. The center section, by contrast, is a quiet, rhapsodic interlude.

The soaring violin melody that opens the Allegro animato is directly related to the introduction of the first movement—for all the charges of nationalism, this music is much more tightly constructed than one might at first think. The quiet second theme at the center of this movement is a variation of the center section of the slow movement. High spirits prevail throughout the energetic finale, which flies to its close.

At its premiere, Grieg's Second Violin Sonata had a tough time with the critics, especially Norwegian critics uncomfortable with his use of native material. Infrequently heard today, this sonata deserves to be better known, as do Grieg's other two violin sonatas. These works are well-crafted, appealing for their thematic ideas, and continually rewarding.

Piano Quintet, Op. 18

MIECZYSŁAW WEINBERG

Born: 1919
Died: 1996
Composed: 1944

I. Moderato con moto
II. Allegretto
III. Presto
IV. Largo
V. Allegro agitato

The music of Polish-Russian composer Mieczysław Weinberg is almost unknown to Western audiences, but it has a devoted following among those familiar with it. The American musicologist Steven Schwarz has been frank in his admiration, describing Weinberg as

"the third great Soviet composer, along with Prokofiev and Shostakovich." Weinberg was unbelievably prolific: he wrote seven operas, 22 symphonies, 17 string quartets, and numerous orchestral and chamber works—his list of opus numbers runs to 192. Weinberg also wrote about 40 film scores, including the music for Mikhail Kalatozov's famous The Cranes Are Flying (1957).

Weinberg (whose name is spelled many different ways, including Moise Vaynberg) may have been a successful and honored composer, but he led a horribly difficult life, and his story reflects many of the currents that ripped through the twentieth century. He came from a musical family in Poland (his father was a violinist and conductor), and as a young man he studied piano at the Warsaw Conservatory. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, Weinberg fled to the Soviet Union and studied at the Minsk Conservatory. (In Poland, his parents and sister died in concentration camps.) Weinberg never studied formally with Shostakovich, but the two became colleagues and friends, and they remained close for the next thirty years. Shostakovich, in fact, risked his own career to intercede on Weinberg's behalf when the younger composer was arrested and imprisoned in February 1953 on the charge of "Jewish bourgeois nationalism" during the so-called "Doctors' Plot" against Stalin (Stalin died in March 1953, and Weinberg was released the following month). Weinberg's final years were difficult, as he suffered from debilitating illnesses that left him an invalid.

Weinberg was 24 when he composed his Piano Quintet in F minor in 1944. His initial model may well have been the Piano Quintet in G minor of Shostakovich, composed four years earlier and also in five movements. Shostakovich's quintet had proven an immensely popular work: it won the Stalin Prize, and it offers a relaxation rare in that composer's music. But Weinberg's quintet, composed during the furies of World War II, is a very different piece of music—spare, edgy, violent, dissonant—and it is hard not to feel that it must reflect the violent world around the young composer. To be sure, Weinberg himself never explicitly made that connection—for him, this was a purely abstract piece of music. But if it is not a reflection of the war, it is nevertheless music full of energy, violence, and dissonance.

It is also a very big piece. In contrast to the Shostakovich quintet, which spans just over half an hour, Weinberg's quintet can stretch out to nearly fifty minutes. And it is big in terms of sonority, gesture, and expression. The Moderato con moto opens quietly as—over murmuring strings—the piano sounds the movement's central theme in octaves. This angular, chromatic idea will recur throughout, and it is quickly taken up by the strings. The dancing second subject feels childlike in its initial simplicity, and there is even a third idea, given out by the piano over shifting meters. The development is extremely active, and Weinberg employs a considerable amount of pizzicato as the themes are recapitulated and the movement glides to an understated conclusion.

The Allegretto begins with a duet for violin and cello, both muted at first. The piano joins them, and the movement unfolds over a range of instrumental color that includes trills, pizzicato, col legno bowing, and harmonics. The Presto bursts to life as dancing strings, again muted, are soon joined by the energetic piano. Out of this busy rush comes a surprise: a wild waltz leaps to vigorous life. This is a powerful, strident waltz with the strings often in octaves, and the movement concludes abruptly on great swooping glissandos.

Now comes the slow movement, and at this point we expect some relief—which is exactly what we don't get. This Largo is by far the longest and most violent movement in the quintet. It erupts with the strings' stark octaves, stamped out in fortissimo. Then—strangely—the piano enters and takes control: the strings step aside completely as the piano embarks on an extended solo passage that maintains, in quite different ways, the tension of the opening. Eventually, the first violin takes wing high above this violent landscape, and later a cello solo will help lead the way to the movement's bleak ending.

The concluding Allegro agitato is well named. It begins with hammering eighth-notes, and above that incessant pulse the main theme is punched out in blunt octaves by the piano. In the middle of this movement comes another surprise: over a 9/8 meter a jig (or gigue) begins to dance cheerfully, and Weinberg treats this innocent tune to some extended contrapuntal development. Along the way, the main theme of the opening movement returns, and finally the music dissolves into silence on a long, quiet chord that Weinberg marks morendo.

Emil Gilels and the Bolshoi Theatre Quartet gave the premiere of Weinberg's Piano Quintet in Moscow on March 18, 1945, seven weeks before the conclusion of the war.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger