

July 20, 2025

CONCERT

Sonata for Violin and Piano in G minor, L. 140

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born: 1862

Died: 1918

Composed: 1916–1917

- I. Allegro vivo
- II. Intermède. Fantasque et léger
- III. Finale. Très animé

Debussy's final years were wretched. He developed colon cancer in 1909 and underwent a painful operation, a form of radiation therapy, and drug treatment. It was all to no avail, and the disease took its steady course. The onslaught of World War I in 1914 further depressed him, but it also sparked a wave of nationalistic fervor, and he set about writing a set of six sonatas for different combinations of instruments. It may seem strange that the iconoclastic Debussy would return in his final years to so structured a form as the sonata, but he specified that his model was the French sonata of the eighteenth century and not the classical German sonata. To make his point—and his nationalistic sympathies—even clearer, Debussy signed the scores of these works "Claude Debussy, musicien français."

Debussy lived to complete only three of the projected six sonatas: a Cello Sonata (1915); a Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp (1916); and the Violin Sonata, completed in April 1917. It was to be his final work, and it gave him a great deal of difficulty. From the depths of his gloom, he wrote to a friend: "This sonata will be interesting from a documentary viewpoint and as an example of what may be produced by a sick man in time of war." Debussy played the piano at the premiere on May 5, 1917, and performed it again in September at what proved to be his final public appearance. His deteriorating health confined him to his room thereafter, and he died the following March.

For all Debussy's dark comments, the Violin Sonata is a brilliant work, alternating fantastic and exotic outbursts with more somber and reflective moments. In three concise movements, the sonata lasts only about thirteen minutes. Debussy deliberately obscures both meter and key over the first few measures of the Allegro vivo, and only gradually does the music settle into G minor. The haunting beginning of the movement feels subdued, almost ascetic, but the dancing middle section in E Major is more animated. Debussy brings back the opening material and rounds off the movement with a *con fuoco* coda.

The second movement brings a sharp change of mood after the brutal close of the first. Debussy marks it *fantasque et léger* ("fantastic [or fanciful] and light"), and the violin opens with a series of leaps, swirls, and trills before settling into the near-hypnotic main idea. The second subject, marked "sweet and expressive," slides languorously on glissandos and arpeggios, and the movement comes to a quiet close.

Over rippling chords, the finale offers a quick reminiscence of the very opening of the sonata, and then this theme disappears for good and the finale's real theme leaps to life. It is a shower of triplet sixteenths that rockets upward and comes swirling back down: the composer described it as "a theme turning back on itself like a serpent biting its own tail." There are some sultry interludes along the way, full of glissandos, broken chords, rubato, and trills, but finally the swirling energy of the main theme drives the music to its animated close.

Debussy may have been unhappy about this music while working on it, but once done he felt more comfortable with it, writing to a friend: "In keeping with the contradictory spirit of human nature, it is full of joyous tumult . . . Beware in the future of works which appear to inhabit the skies; often they are the product of a dark, morose mind."

Program note by Eric Bromberger

Program Notes

Verses for Piano Quintet

(Commissioned by the SCMS Commissioning Club)

MARTIN KENNEDY

Born: 1978

Composed: 2025

- I. Dansa
- II. Aubade
- III. Fable

Each of the three movements of *Verses*—*Dansa*, *Aubade*, and *Fable*—draws on a distinct poetic form or image that shapes its musical content.

The first movement is based on the *dansa*, a 13th-century Old Occitan lyric form traditionally performed with dancing. It opens with a short refrain (*respos*) that establishes the rhyme scheme for each stanza, which appears as either a quatrain (four lines in length) or a quintain (five lines in length). To achieve this, the refrains and verses are adapted into a modified rondo form, with 4/4 and 5/4 meters distinguishing the quatrains from the quintains. A driving rhythm, suggestive of dance, propels the movement throughout.

An *aubade* is a morning love song or poem about lovers parting at dawn, often featuring a departing lover addressing a sleeping beloved and a watchman warning of the coming day. This movement evokes dew settling on the ground, a rising morning sun, distant church bells, the song of a morning lark, and a lover's soliloquy.

The final movement draws on the traditional fable, popularized by Aesop and his concise moral lessons. Like the *Dansa*, this movement is also set in rondo form, with the 'moral'—introduced at the beginning—serving as the refrain. Each episode offers a reflection on the moral, which grows increasingly insistent as the movement progresses.

Program note by Martin Kennedy

String Quintet No. 5 in D Major, K. 593

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: 1756

Died: 1791

Composed: 1790

- I. Larghetto — Allegro
- II. Adagio
- III. Menuetto. Allegretto — Trio
- IV. Allegro

Mozart's last two string quintets come from the final year of his life, and they differ in several ways from the two great quintets of 1787. If the final two quintets seem somewhat restrained by comparison to their predecessors (they are significantly shorter), they show Mozart at the height of his powers. We sense him here exploring even more deeply the deployment of the sounds possible from these five instruments, and he does this with the dazzling contrapuntal mastery of his final years. The canvases may be smaller here, but throughout the two final quintets we sense Mozart's sheer pleasure — his verve — in writing music that manages to be both so exuberant and so complex at the same time.

Mozart composed the Quintet in D Major in December 1790, exactly one year before his death. The reason for its composition is unknown, but it may have been commissioned by Johann Tost, formerly a violinist in Haydn's orchestra and now a wealthy cloth merchant who used his fortune to commission music (Tost commissioned and received the dedication of a number of Haydn's quartets). In December 1790, just as the Quintet in D Major was composed, Haydn was about to depart for his first extended stay in London, and he and Mozart spent much of that month together in Vienna. They played chamber music together that month and are known to have played this brand-new quintet. Haydn particularly admired it, and some observers feel that this is one of the most "Haydnesque" of Mozart's compositions, particularly for its slow introduction (the only one among Mozart's quintets), its building movements on single themes, and the bucolic trio of the minuet movement.

The quintet begins with a Larghetto remarkable for Mozart's deployment of his instruments and for its unsettling harmonies. All alone, the cello offers a series of four-note statements that feel like questions and that wander through unexpected keys. High above, the other four instruments respond to these "questions" in different ways, some of them surprisingly plaintive. The music comes to a pause, then steps out smartly at the Allegro, and we recognize that this theme has been subtly anticipated in the slow introduction. This will be a monothematic movement: virtually everything grows out of this theme. It is a brilliant movement in many ways, not just for its slashing runs, but more for the interplay of the five voices, for the 'conversational' quality of much of the writing, and for its canonic mastery. Mozart appears to have been energized by the possibilities he found here, for he continues to develop his material right through the recapitulation. The ending is a complete surprise. Mozart brings back the Larghetto introduction with its question-and-answer exchanges, then snaps the movement off sharply with the first eight bars of the Allegro.

The Adagio, in G Major, opens with an outpouring of serene song from the first violin, and quickly Mozart begins to combine and recombine instrumental groups: the two violins exchange the line with the three lower voices, and then the first violin and cello engage in a long conversation as the middle voices accompany. The first violin introduces a plaintive second theme — a close cousin to the falling violin line in the opening Larghetto — which is then developed with similar care. At the movement's conclusion, it is the first violin and viola who wind the music down to its graceful final measures.

The sturdy Menuetto feels quite straightforward, though as it proceeds Mozart offers some close canonic writing that intensifies textures without ever clouding them. The trio section is fun. It sounds faintly rustic (and faintly Haydnesque) as the first violin shoots upward across several octaves above pizzicato accompaniment, but this too is treated to some graceful canonic extension.

The finale is one of the most dazzling movements Mozart ever wrote. It goes like a rocket, and it can be enjoyed simply for the white-hot virtuosity of Mozart's writing (and the first violin gets the lion's share of this). But much more is going on here than simple high spirits. A second theme arrives and is instantly turned into a taut fugato. The development

brings a second fugato, and at the climax Mozart combines the movement's main theme with the theme of the first fugato. It is a moment that fuses the most heady compositional procedures with music full of fire and fun, and on this exuberant combination the Quintet in D Major sweeps to its close.

Program note by Eric Bromberger