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Romance for Violin and Piano, Op. 23

AMY BEACH

Born: 1867

Died: 1944

Composed: 1893

Sometimes a piece of music is inextricably linked with a particular performer, and such is the case with Amy Beach's *Romance for Violin and Piano*—she wrote it for the violinist Maud Powell. Powell has been described as “the first great American woman violinist,” but more accurately she was “the first great American violinist.” She was also a powerful force advocating for women in classical music. Born in a rural town in Illinois in 1867, she quickly showed such promise as a violinist that her family sold their property to underwrite her training. She studied with Henry Shradyeck in Leipzig, with Charles Dancla in Paris, and finally with Joseph Joachim in Berlin. Powell gave the American premieres of the violin concertos of Tchaikovsky and Sibelius, as well as the American premiere of Dvorak's *Violin Concerto* under the supervision of the composer; she also appeared as soloist with the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Gustav Mahler. Powell championed music by women and minority composers, including Beach and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and she made a number of recordings for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Those recordings, readily available on YouTube, make clear how fine a violinist she was.

Powell was responsible for assembling the Women's Musical Congress for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, during which she encouraged young American women to make their careers as violinists, a field then dominated by men. Beach wrote her *Romance for Violin and Piano* specifically for Powell and for this occasion, and the two of them gave the first performance at the Fair on July 6. The audience responded so enthusiastically that the entire piece had to be encoed; during the second performance, the violin part fell off Powell's music stand, but she completed the piece from memory.

In music, a romance does not have specific formal meaning—it refers generally to a piece of music of expressive character. Beach's *Romance* opens with a brief piano introduction that hints at the shape of the piece's main theme. The violin quickly takes up that gentle rising-and-falling shape and soars with it. Sometimes the writing is gentle and expressive, but at other moments this music soars into the violin's highest register and blazes with intensity—at one point in the score, Beach asks that the playing be

con passione. Eventually this animation subsides, the yearning character of the opening theme returns, and the *Romance* fades into silence on the violin's quietly sustained high C-sharp.

Trois Morceaux, Op. 31

CÉCILE CHAMINADE

Born: 1857

Died: 1944

Composed: 1885

I. Andantino

II. Romanza. Andante

III. Bohémienne. Allegretto

In a world that has been most unwelcoming to female composers, Cecile Chaminade was one of the first women composers to achieve international success. The child of musical parents, Chaminade learned to play the piano as a child, began composing at age 8, and embarked on the first of her many tours as a pianist at 18. She made repeated visits to England and even performed in the United States, where “Chaminade Clubs” were created to play and hear her music. Chaminade was a vastly prolific composer—she wrote over 400 works—and she did not work in obscurity. She was the first woman composer to be awarded the Legion of Honor, in 1913, and she was a financial success as well: her *Scarf Dance* reportedly sold over five million copies. But music in the twentieth century passed Chaminade by, and most of her compositions have suffered the faint praise of being labeled “salon music”: tuneful, agreeable, not very difficult, and intended for domestic performance. By the time of her death at age 86, Chaminade's music had virtually disappeared from concert life.

Though she composed mostly for piano, Chaminade also wrote an opera, several works for orchestra, and chamber music, including two piano trios. She composed her *Trois Morceaux* in 1887, just as she turned 30. These three short pieces are beautifully written for the piano and for the violin: not only was Chaminade a superb pianist, but she also played the violin quite well. Generally in three-part form, the three pieces do not require detailed comment. The gentle opening section of the *Andantino* gives way to a central episode marked *dolce*, and a return to the opening material concludes very quietly (Chaminade's marking here is *dolcissimo*). The *Romanza* takes its character from the violin's opening theme, though when this returns after the center section, it has become more extroverted. The

concluding *Bohémienne* is the most virtuosic of the three movements, and it demonstrates Chaminade's thorough understanding of the violin—it is full of doublestopping, fast runs, pizzicato passages, and great leaps across the violin's range. An *Allegro* coda brings the piece to a nicely understated conclusion.

String Quintet in F minor ALEXANDER BORODIN

Born: 1833

Died: 1887

Composed: 1853-54

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Andante ma non troppo
- III. Menuetto
- IV. Finale. Prestissimo

Alexander Borodin led a sharply divided life. By profession he was a physician and research chemist who later helped found a medical school for women; his work on aldehydes was groundbreaking in its day and is still cited. But his passionate hobby was music, and he spent what little free time he had trying to compose: he once said that he had time to compose only when he was sick, and his friends—knowing this—would playfully wish him ill health so that he could spend more time with music. This combination of passions made for a very intense and productive life, and unfortunately a short one: Borodin died of a sudden heart attack while attending a fancy dress ball at age 53.

Borodin entered the Medico-Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg at age 17 and spent his days studying to become a doctor. But his spare time went to music, and he soon joined a group of young musical enthusiasts in St. Petersburg organized by his friend Ivan Gavrushevich. There Borodin was a passionate listener and sometimes a performer: Borodin was an amateur cellist, and occasionally participated in performances. It was during these years as a medical student that Borodin composed his *String Quintet in F minor*—he was 20 years old, and he never quite finished the piece. He came back and revised it in 1859, but when he set aside the manuscript, he apparently still intended to make changes, and he had not completed the coda of the finale. And thus the manuscript sat for a century until the Russian musicologist O. A. Yevlachov “completed” the final movement and published the *Quintet* in 1960.

Borodin's *Quintet* is scored for string quartet plus an additional cellist, which is the same instrumentation of Schubert's great *String Quintet* of 1828. Perhaps some of Borodin's intention was to compose a chamber work in which he could participate as the “extra” cellist, though

there is no record of any performance during Borodin's lifetime. In any case, the dominant influence on this music is not Schubert, but Mendelssohn, and listeners will sense that influence in the flowing melodic lines and high energy of Borodin's *Quintet*. This music is all the more remarkable for having been written by a 20-year-old who composed it in his spare time, even as he was struggling to learn how to compose (and how to become a doctor).

The *Quintet* is in four movements that span nearly half an hour. The opening *Allegro con brio*, longest of the four movements, is in the expected sonata form, based on two themes. The first of these is shared by the first violin and first cello, which will be the leading voices throughout the *Quintet*; the second theme, a sturdy rising figure, is announced by the cellos. The development is long and animated, and the young composer springs a nice surprise at the end: after all this energy, the movement winks out on a quiet coda played entirely pizzicato.

The *Andante ma non troppo* is in variation form, with the lovely principal melody shared again by first cello and first violin. Borodin was reportedly planning to add further variations to this movement, but did not get around to doing that. A minuet leads to the vigorous *Finale*, full of driving energy: Borodin marks it *Prestissimo* and specifies that it should be played *marcato*. Along the way come gentler moments, including a calm, lyric episode near the end. Borodin's manuscript lacks the end of this movement, but Yevlachov's completion is based on Borodin's own material and sounds reasonably authentic.

Perhaps Borodin's complete manuscript will show up some day. For the moment, the published version gives some sense of how fabulously talented its 20-year-old composer was, even if he could only work on music in his few spare moments.

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34 JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1864

- I. Allegro non troppo
- II. Andante, un poco adagio
- III. Scherzo. Allegro
- IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto — Allegro non troppo

Brahms began work on the music that would eventually become his *Piano Quintet in F minor* during the summer of 1862, when he was 29 years old and still living in Hamburg. As first conceived, however, this music was not a piano quintet. Brahms originally composed it as

a string quintet—string quartet plus an extra cello—and almost surely he took as a model the great *String Quintet in C Major* of Schubert, a composer he very much admired. But when Joseph Joachim and colleagues played through the string quintet for the composer, all who heard it felt it unsatisfactory: an ensemble of strings alone could not satisfactorily project the power of this music. So Brahms set out to remedy this—he returned to the score during the winter of 1863–64 and recast it as a sonata for two pianos. Once again the work was judged not wholly successful—it had all the power the music called for, but this version lacked the sustained sonority possible with strings that much of this music seemed to demand. Among those confused by the two-piano version was Clara Schumann, who offered the young composer a completely different suggestion: “Its skillful combinations are interesting throughout, it is masterly from every point of view, but—it is not a sonata, but a work whose ideas you might—and must—scatter, as from a horn of plenty, over an entire orchestra . . . Please, dear Johannes, for this once take my advice and recast it.”

Recast it Brahms did, but not for orchestra. Instead, during the summer and fall of 1864 he arranged it for piano and string quartet, combining the dramatic impact of the two-piano version with the string sonority of the original quintet. In this form it has come down to us today, one of the masterpieces of Brahms' early years, and it remains a source of wonder that music that sounds so *right* in its final version could have been conceived for any other combination of instruments. Clara, who had so much admired her husband's piano quintet, found Brahms' example a worthy successor, describing it as “a very special joy to me” (Brahms published the two-piano version as his Opus 34b, and it is occasionally heard in this form, but he destroyed all the parts of the string quintet version).

The *Piano Quintet* shows the many virtues of the young Brahms—strength, lyricism, ingenuity, nobility—and presents them in music of unusual breadth and power. This is big music: if all the repeats are taken, the *Quintet* can stretch out to nearly three-quarters of an hour, and there are moments when the sheer sonic heft of a piano and string quartet together makes one understand why Clara thought this music might be most effectively presented by a symphony orchestra.

The *Quintet* is also remarkable for young Brahms' skillful evolution of his themes: several of the movements derive much of their material from the simplest of figures, which are then developed ingeniously. The very beginning of the *Allegro non troppo* is a perfect illustration. In octaves, first violin, cello, and piano present the opening theme, which ranges dramatically

across four measures and then comes to a brief pause. Instantly the music seems to explode with vitality above an agitated piano figure. But the piano's rushing sixteenth-notes are simply a restatement of the opening theme at a much faster tempo, and this compression of material marks the entire movement—that opening theme will reappear in many different forms. A second subject in E Major, marked *dolce* and sung jointly by viola and cello, also spins off a wealth of secondary material, and the extended development leads to a quiet coda, marked *poco sostenuto*. The tempo quickens as the music powers its way to the resounding chordal close.

In sharp contrast, the *Andante, un poco Adagio* sings with a quiet charm. The piano's gently-rocking opening theme, lightly echoed by the strings, gives way to a more animated and flowing middle section before the opening material reappears, now subtly varied. Matters change sharply once again with the C-minor *Scherzo*, which returns to the dramatic mood of the first movement. The cello's ominous pizzicato C hammers insistently throughout, and once again Brahms wrings surprising wealth from the simplest of materials: a nervous, stuttering sixteenth-note figure is transformed within seconds into a heroic chorale for massed strings, and later Brahms generates a brief fugal section from this same theme. The trio section breaks free of the darkness of the scherzo and slips into C-Major sunlight for an all-too-brief moment of quiet nobility before the music returns to C minor and a *da capo* repeat.

The finale opens with strings alone, reaching upward in chromatic uncertainty before the *Allegro non troppo* main theme steps out firmly in the cello. The movement seems at first to be a rondo, but this is a rondo with unexpected features: it offers a second theme, sets the rondo theme in unexpected keys, and transforms the cello's healthy little opening tune in music of toughness and turbulence.

Clara Schumann, who had received the dedication of her husband's quintet, was instrumental in the dedication of Brahms'. Princess Anna of Hesse had heard Brahms and Clara perform this music in its version for two pianos and was so taken with it that Brahms dedicated not only that version to the princess but the *Piano Quintet* as well. When the princess asked Clara what she might send Brahms as a measure of her gratitude, Clara had a ready suggestion. And so Princess Anna sent Brahms a treasure that would remain his prized possession for the rest of his life: Mozart's manuscript of the *Symphony No. 40 in G minor*.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger