Notes on the Program

By Nicky Swett

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Trio in E major for Piano, Violin, and Cello, K. 542
- Born January 27, 1756, in Salzburg
- Died December 5, 1791, in Vienna
- Composed in 1788
- Duration: 19 minutes

Today, we describe almost anything written for Piano, Violin, and Cello as a "Piano Trio." The label acknowledges both the central role that the keyboard tends to play in these works and the cooperation and interaction required among the group's three voices. But most of the pieces that Joseph Haydn and W. A. Mozart wrote for these instruments had a specific musical and social role. The piano trio was a particularly satisfying genre for amateur pianists—it includes the virtuosity and extroverted playing of a solo sonata and the interactions between keyboard and strings typical of a solo concerto, all playable from the comfort of one's living room.

The later Haydn trios involve independent and impressive violin parts. But the cello is routinely assigned the role of doubling the low lines in the left hand of the piano, providing essential color and grounding the group, but not getting much opportunity for interruption or interaction. Early trios by Mozart display much the same strategy, but by 1788 when he wrote his Sonata in E major for Piano with Violin and Cello Accompaniment (K. 542), he had begun to give the cello much greater freedom. The results are beneficial not just to the cellist, but to the left hand of the piano, which in this piece is available to create intricate inner voice textures while the cello holds down the bassline.

In the first movement, the piano presents the main themes, and the violin and cello repeat, elaborate, and vary in response. The cello asserts its role as a conversational partner in a closing passage at the end of the exposition (opening section), in a canonic section at the start of the development (middle section), and when that freer material from the end of the exposition returns in the instrument's singing, tenor range in the recapitulation (closing section). The slow movement is a sweet song, with a snapping dotted motif, again introduced by the piano and then varied by string countermelodies. In a minor-key middle section, the violin and the left hand of the piano trade figures in a transporting, strange moment of Baroque counterpoint. The final *Allegro* has all the competitiveness of the finale of a solo concerto. The piano and violin egg each other on, in turn presenting sequences of string-crossing triplets and running sixteenth notes, while the cello tries to get a word in—and once or twice succeeds!

Maurice Ravel
Sonata for Violin and Piano
- Born March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France
- Died December 28, 1937, in Paris
- Composed in 1923–27
- Duration: 18 minutes

In 1921, seeking a respite from the hustle and bustle of Paris life, Maurice Ravel moved to the nearby town of Montfort L'Amaury and bought a small house, an eccentric bungalow that his friend Manuel Rosenthal said was "like a slice of Camembert cheese that wouldn't be nicely cut." It was not far from the city, so Ravel could still regularly travel in for performances and

events. Often, he would visit jazz clubs and concerts in the company of his companion, the violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange. According to Rosenthal, Ravel once asked her to marry him, but she turned him down, feeling they were incompatible, and they remained close friends for the rest of his life. She inspired him to compose a violin sonata, a project he had previously avoided, and between 1923 and 1927 he slowly worked away at it. When the sonata was finally finished, he dedicated it to Jourdan-Morhange, but by that point she had developed serious arthritis and so its 1927 premiere was instead given by the Romanian violinist and composer George Enescu.

The piece is best known for its second movement, a "Blues" that is often played as a standalone piece, in which the violinist strums and slides up and down the instrument and the piano taps out a walking bass. Ravel, like many of his fellow Parisian composers at the time, was convinced that jazz and blues represented the future of music. When he took the Violin Sonata on tour in 1927, he went as far as to suggest that the people he met in America didn't take jazz "seriously enough."

Ravel had strong views on violin sonatas, seeing the violin and piano as "instruments which are, in my opinion, essentially incompatible. Far from balancing their contrasts, the Sonata reveals their incompatibility." The second movement certainly seems geared toward this end. The two instruments exist in their own worlds, imitating the sounds of a double bass, a singer, and a keening trumpet in order to create a convincing blues number, yet never quite aligning in their efforts. But the contrast is clearest when the instruments play the *same* music, as in the first movement, when violin and piano chirp out the same playful, repeated-note figures to radically different effect. The final perpetual-motion toccata is a brilliant tour de force for the violinist. The piano provides support and occasional interruption, further foregrounding the composer's view that these instruments do best when serving different roles.

George Gershwin
Three Preludes for Violin and Piano

- Born September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York
- Died July 11, 1937, in Hollywood, California
- Composed in 1926, arranged by Jascha Heifetz in 1942
- Duration: 7 minutes

Johann Sebastian Bach's two volumes of masterful Preludes and Fugues, which he called *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, are undoubtedly the most famous collections of works that feature entries in all 24 major and minor keys. Countless 19th- and 20th-century pianist-composers, including Carl Czerny, Frédéric Chopin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Dmitri Shostakovich, tried to follow in his footsteps, composing keyboard preludes (and, in Shostakovich's case, fugues as well) that covered the range of options for home keys in Western tonality.

In January of 1925, George Gershwin entered "Preludes" at the top of a new book of manuscript paper and started scribbling fragmentary themes. It seems likely that he intended to write a complete set of jazz-inspired preludes in the make of Bach and Chopin, but he was swept up by other projects and ultimately wrote only a few. He played seven "preludes" on a concert in December of 1926, though some of these pieces were borrowings from other short piano works, and he eventually whittled the set down to just three numbers that he published in 1927.

The composer Kay Swift, who was Gershwin's lover for the last 10 years of his life, spoke about how much he loved playing his Three Preludes and "included them, wherever he could, on programs that were just a little bit too short!" They remain cherished recital material to this day and have been arranged for many instruments besides solo piano.

The first of the three is a syncopated romp in B-flat major that gets more and more

virtuosic as it goes along. In the second prelude, a grounded, repeated, rocking harmonic and rhythmic gesture accompanies a blues melody in a mournful miniature that anticipates the beloved song “Summertime” from Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess*. The final prelude, a fiery number in E-flat minor, features dissonant combinations of motivic fragments that bring to mind the compositions of modernists like Alban Berg, for whom Gershwin shared a warm, mutual admiration.

Antonín Dvořák
Quintet in A major for Piano, Two Violins, Viola, and Cello, Op. 5
- Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, Bohemia
- Died May 1, 1904, in Prague
- Composed in 1872
- Duration: 28 minutes

After graduating from the Prague Organ School in 1859, Antonín Dvořák struggled to find work as an organist, but he managed to score a job playing viola in a local dance band. This role seamlessly morphed into a position as principal violist in the house orchestra of the Provisional Theatre, which opened in 1862. He started composing seriously around 1865 and produced a flurry of early works that drew on a range of influences that included the operas of Wagner, who had conducted Dvořák’s orchestra, the piano music of Franz Liszt, and the symphonies and chamber music of W. A. Mozart, Felix Mendelssohn, and Robert Schumann. The unfiltered variety and bursts of Wagnerian extravagance found in these first compositions led him to eventually refer to this era as his “Mad Period.” In the early 1870s, he publicly declared himself to be a composer and started applying for grants. In order to clarify his voice to the public and to critics, he started to refine his style, shedding some of his more Wagnerian tendencies and deciding to emphasize the Classical streak that can also be found in his youthful creations.

Dvořák wrote his Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 5, in 1872. It was first performed in November of that year, on a series devoted to presenting new Czech compositions that was organized by the publisher and concert promoter Ludevít Procházka. Then, like many of his early pieces, it fell into obscurity. Luckily, the quintet wasn’t among those that he ripped up after determining that music from this era was too “Mad,” but he did lose the manuscript! When he wanted to revise it in the 1880s, he had to get in touch with Procházka for a copy of the score. He explained that “these days, I like to take a look at some of my old sins every now and again, and it’s been such a long time since I last saw this one.”

The opening movement of the quintet features themes in which a simple, singable motif is heard three times with slight harmonic variations. The melody only evolves and moves toward a cadence on that third iteration. There could be something rote or student-like about this strategy, but Dvořák, like Franz Schubert, displays a knack for writing repetitive music that leaves us patiently curious about where themes and sections might go. Harmonically, Dvořák demonstrates great adventurousness. He rapidly changes the key of the main theme from A major to G major, dropping the tonality down a vertiginous whole step and creating an extraordinary contrast in string instrument color. Taking after Robert Schumann in his chamber works, Dvořák writes a long development section compared to the efficient exposition and recapitulation, taking advantage of a luxurious opportunity to dissect and layer important motifs and to establish new themes.

At the start of the *Andante sostenuto*, he channels the early piano sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven with a keyboard theme based on a simple falling and rising arpeggio. Dvořák lets the violin’s subsequent version of the tune wander off into a passionate revery that is punctuated by keyboard figures with a distinctive, rhythmic snap. As in many of the composer’s later works, the active, varied accompaniment figures give the music its shape, and over the course of the movement they move to the foreground as the melodies are folded into the humming texture.

Dvořák wrote this quintet as part of his efforts to develop a new approach to composition. But in the third movement, which combines the impish energy of a scherzo with the structural ambition of a finale, we hear a little bit of “Mad Period” Antonín. The helter-skelter rhythms and ambiguous harmonies at the opening have the quality of a devilish, programmatic piano piece by Franz Liszt. These more demonic musical ideas alternate with jolly drinking songs and a bright, sweeping theme that appears at the very end in the brilliant, sparkling high register of the keyboard, bringing the work to a close in a raucous, celebratory fashion.

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