

Notes on the Program

By Jack Slavin

Joseph Haydn

Trio in C major for Piano, Violin, and Cello, Hob. XV:27

- Born March 31, 1732, in Rohrau, Lower Austria
- Died May 31, 1809, in Vienna
- Composed in 1795–96
- Duration: 18 minutes

During his first visit to London in 1791, Haydn encountered Therese Jansen, a piano student of Muzio Clementi. Jansen's playing impressed Haydn enough to earn her a mention in the first of his London Notebooks, where he referred to her as an important pianist of the day. When he returned to the city later that decade, he served as a witness at Jansen's wedding to the son of the prominent engraver Francesco Bartolozzi, and he later dedicated the Piano Trios Hob. XV:27–29 to the new Mrs. Bartolozzi.

The set is a testament to her abilities, with demanding piano writing throughout. Indeed, Haydn himself referred to these late trios as keyboard sonatas with string accompaniment, implying the primacy of the keyboard part relative to the rest of the ensemble. This is not to say, however, that the strings are present to merely double and ornament the piano, as was the case in the Baroque trio sonata. Haydn's writing here is more sophisticated, showcasing all three instruments and creating dialogue among the ensemble.

The first movement opens with a celebratory fanfare-like gesture whose energy is immediately countered by a soft, delicate response. The sonata form unfolds from there, driven by an active piano part. In the development, the opening gesture returns in A-flat major, as if to signal the arrival of the recapitulation, but in the wrong key. The true recapitulation, when it does arrive, emerges out of a hushed transitional passage. The *Andante* is graceful and measured: neither saccharine nor aloof, it adheres to the expectations of a slow movement while maintaining a gentle forward momentum. Minor-mode passages offer contrast to the main theme but do not upset the delicate balance of the movement. The *Presto* finale, which combines elements of rondo and sonata form, is cheerful and witty throughout.

Felix Mendelssohn

Quartet in C minor for Piano, Violin, Viola, and Cello, Op. 1

- Born February 3, 1809, in Hamburg
- Died November 4, 1847, in Leipzig
- Composed in 1822
- Duration: 30 minutes

Felix Mendelssohn lived from 1809 to 1847, making him a close contemporary of the likes of Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849) and Robert Schumann (1810–1856). While the latter two are labeled as strictly Romantic composers, Mendelssohn's oeuvre occupies a middle ground between the Classical and the Romantic. A strong Classical foundation was laid in early childhood, owing to a rigorous musical and general education overseen by his parents, Lea and Abraham Mendelssohn.

Perhaps only Mozart could rival Mendelssohn in his precocity; his musical gifts, especially as a composer, were evident early on. His innate talent was nurtured by his family's relative affluence and commitment to education, which allowed for tutelage across many disciplines, including classics and visual arts. Felix pursued composition studies under Carl Friedrich Zelter, director of the Berlin Singakademie, where he and his sister Fanny sang in the chorus. His composition notebook from this period shows extensive contrapuntal work, including fugues in the style of J. S. Bach alongside pieces modeled after those of Haydn and Mozart.

The Mendelssohn family held house concerts which drew Berlin's artists and intellectuals to hear Felix and Fanny perform. This domestic setting was Felix's primary milieu, with relatively few public appearances throughout his early adolescence. It is fitting, then, that his first published work, the Piano Quartet in C minor, would be in a genre primarily intended for the home. The choice of the piano quartet over other chamber music groupings was likewise apt: the piano gave him a part to play himself, the three string voices afforded opportunities for contrapuntal texture, and the ensemble carried none of the intimidating legacy of more established genres like the string quartet.

The cello introduces the *Allegro vivace* with a gesture that establishes the C-minor tonality and ushers in the first theme, which is built on a repeated-note motif. The strings take turns with the elegant second theme, throughout which the piano accompaniment is more subdued. The first theme returns to close the exposition and lead into the development, which is relatively tame compared with those of Mendelssohn's later works.

The *Adagio* opens with a lyrical, tender theme in A-flat major. A quiet tension builds, leading to a contrasting middle section with long, slow-moving lines in the strings over murmuring arpeggios in the piano. The *Scherzo* presents a technical challenge across all parts, but most notably the piano. The nimble, effervescent quality that would become synonymous with the Mendelssohnian scherzo is already audible in this early example.

The finale is laid out in sonata form, though unusually, the first and second themes are built around the same melody. Different tonal and affective contexts obscure the connection somewhat, but the overall contour of a descending sweep followed by an ascending return remains discernable. This curious movement closes Mendelssohn's Opus 1, offering a glimpse of the composer's maturing voice.

Johannes Brahms

Selected *Hungarian Dances* for Piano, Four Hands (1868, 1880)

- Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg
- Died April 3, 1897, in Vienna
- Composed in 1858–68 and 1880
- Duration: 10 minutes

Brahms's fascination with the Hungarian and Romani musical traditions can be traced back to the influx into Hamburg of political refugees on their way farther west following the upheaval of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. Brahms is said to have made the acquaintance of one such refugee, a violinist by the name of Ede Reményi, who introduced him to the *style hongrois*, which draws on the musical vocabulary of the Romani people. The influence of this style can be heard throughout Brahms's career, whether in outright homage—as in the *Hungarian Dances* heard today—or more subtly woven into larger pieces.

The *Hungarian Dance* No. 5 in F-sharp minor is the calling card of the set, with its instantly recognizable opening melody and a *Vivace* section built on a repeated-note motif. The piece exemplifies the key characteristics Brahms adopted from the *style hongrois*, including

extensive *rubato* (fluctuation in tempo) and stark dynamic contrasts. Some of the material for this dance was taken directly from *Bártfai emlék* (Memories of Bártfa), a dance form known as a *csárdás* by Béla Kéler, which the composer named after his hometown.

The 15th dance lives up to its tempo marking: *Allegretto grazioso*. Dotted rhythms in the secondo part lend an almost jazzy feel while *dolce e leggiero* (sweet and light) passages flit across the primo part. The roles then reverse, with the dotted figures moving to the upper register and sixteenth-note runs appearing in the secondo, before an *animato* passage surges toward the emphatic middle section.

The final *Hungarian Dance*, in E minor, concludes the set with an intense opening melody followed by a bright and lively second theme. A delicate *Più presto* closing section in a major key is marked by repeated trills in the primo part and a virtuosic sixteenth-note run that cascades to a triumphant finish.

Leonard Bernstein

Three Meditations from *Mass for Cello, Piano, and Percussion*

- Born August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts
- Died October 14, 1990, in New York City
- Composed in 1971, arranged in 1977
- Duration: 16 minutes

Leonard Bernstein's *MASS: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers* is perhaps his most ambitious and multifaceted compositional undertaking. Commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis for the 1971 opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, it is an epic, staged work that layers elements of Broadway, rock, and other vernacular idioms onto its classical foundation. In Bernstein's own words: "Essentially [MASS] is concerned with a celebration of the Roman ritual using the Latin text of the Catholic liturgy; but simultaneously there is a subtext in English reflecting the reactions, doubts, protests, and questionings—positive and negative—of all of us who are attending and perceiving this ritual."

The Three Meditations for Cello and Piano (heard on this program with added percussion) are drawn from various moments in *MASS*: the first two bookend the *Gloria*, while the third is assembled from the *Epiphany*, *In Nomine Patris*, and *Chorale: Almighty Father*. Marked *Lento assai, molto sostenuto* (very slow, very sustained), the first meditation is at times severe and at others, serene. The cello begins the second meditation—a set of variations on an eleven-note sequence from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—with a *pizzicato* (plucked) statement of the theme, which is echoed by the piano in the first variation with staccatos in the lower register. The second variation is brief but chilling, with a *fortissimo* trill in the cello. A triplet-based third variation follows. The piano leads the fourth and final variation before the coda rounds out the piece. The third meditation features an extended dance episode, its jaunty mixed meter echoing the trance-like effect achieved in *In Nomine Patris*. The rhythmic drive of this section is offset by expressive passages in the cello.

George Gershwin

***Cuban Overture* for Piano, Four Hands, and Percussion**

- Born September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York
- Died July 11, 1937, in Hollywood, California
- Composed in 1932
- Duration: 10 minutes

By the early 1930s, George Gershwin was already a highly successful composer, both in the popular sphere with Tin Pan Alley and Broadway hits and in the classical world with major works like *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Concerto in F*, and *An American in Paris*. Success notwithstanding, he took an interest in furthering his musical education in a more rigorous way, and to that end took up composition lessons with Joseph Schillinger. Schillinger, a composer, theorist, and pedagogue of Russian origin, worked with many of Gershwin's contemporaries, including Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Tommy Dorsey. The lessons with Schillinger were demanding and thorough; their influence is clear in *Cuban Overture*, whose construction is indebted to the strict forms and orchestration principles he acquired in his studies.

Schillinger's teachings formed the skeleton of the piece, but the inspiration came from a 1932 trip to Havana, of which the composer himself said: "I spent two hysterical weeks in Havana where no sleep was had, but the quantity and the quality of fun made up for that. Cuba was most interesting to me, especially for its small dance orchestras, who play the most intricate rhythms most naturally." One such musical group was the Septeto Nacional led by Ignacio Piñero, a key figure in the rise of *son*—a fusion of Hispanic and African musical elements that became one of Cuba's most popular genres. One of Piñero's most famous compositions, *Échale Salsita*, would serve as Gershwin's melodic inspiration for the *Cuban Overture*, and the percussion instruments he brought home supplied its rhythmic foundation.

Cuban Overture was originally premiered under the title *Rumba* by the New York Philharmonic in August 1932 before an enormous crowd at Lewisohn Stadium. Notably, Gershwin indicated in the score that the percussion ensemble, consisting of maracas, bongos, claves, and güiros, be placed directly in front of the conductor — a clear signal of how central he perceived them to be to the music. He renamed the piece *Cuban Overture* to give, in his words, "a more just idea of the character and intent of the music," and explained further: "In my composition, I have endeavored to combine Cuban rhythms with my own thematic material. The result is a symphonic overture which embodies the essence of the Cuban dance."

The four-hand piano arrangement of the piece is heard on today's program with added percussion, coming as close to the original as possible short of a full orchestra and honoring the importance Gershwin placed on the percussion section. *Cuban Overture* unfolds in a three-part structure: driving, rhythmically charged outer sections frame a pensive middle section introduced by a clarinet cadenza in the orchestral original. Beneath the infectious dance rhythms and exuberant melodies, the piece is anchored by complex musical processes, including polytonality and contrapuntal writing, that the composer himself highlights in his program note. *Cuban Overture* exemplifies Gershwin's ability to blend formal structures with the vitality and appeal of his popular writing.