

Notes on the Program

Sonata in F major for Horn and Piano, Op. 17

Ludwig van Beethoven

- Baptized December 16, 1770, in Bonn (likely born December 16)
- Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna
- Composed in 1800
- Duration: 14 minutes

At a young age, the Bohemian horn player Jan Václav Stich (1746–1803) was sent to study in Prague, in Munich, and finally in Dresden with maestro Anton Joseph Hampel. At this time, “horn” meant “natural horn,” a brass instrument with a similar range and timbre to today’s French horn, but which was largely limited to producing notes that fit well with a harmonic series. Practically speaking, this meant that horn players did best playing triads or arpeggios, as opposed to scales or chromatic melodies. Hampel was credited with inventing a technique for manipulating pitches by sticking one hand in the bell of the instrument, which made it easier to play all 12 notes. He passed the method on to Stich, who in turn perfected it and spread it throughout Europe (after strategically changing his name to something more Italian, Giovanni Punto).

Punto worked in Paris for most of his career, but in the late 1790s he had a brief period in Vienna, where he bumped into the young Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven wrote the Sonata in F major (Op. 17) for them to play together, which they premiered in April of 1800. The piece opens with a triumphant horn fanfare—the kind of music that would have been possible for the instrument before Hampel’s and Punto’s innovations. The piano responds with lyrical fare in the make of Beethoven’s early piano sonatas. After a second fanfare, the horn takes up the tune, finding its way up a gradual ascent, and hitting on a number of chromatic pitches. The movement becomes a dialogue between diverging identities for the instrument: the traditional celebratory, leaping, arpeggiated function, and a newfound capacity for winding, expressive lines that would grow to be strongly associated with the horn over the course of the 19th century.

The brief *Poco adagio* is a funeral march, whose severe dotted figures melt away into the merry, closing *Rondo*. We might hear this short, sad interlude as a cousin of a section of Beethoven’s wildly popular Septet (Op. 20), written the same year, in which the showstopping finale is preceded by a melodramatic, funereal horn intro. When the Horn Sonata’s *Allegro moderato* closing movement begins in earnest, Beethoven again stages a dialogue between melodic leaps and steps; in this case, the horn’s arpeggiating tendencies win out, and direct the piano to follow suit.

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Samuel Barber

***Summer Music* for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, and Horn, Op. 31**

- Born March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania
- Died January 23, 1981, in New York City
- Composed in 1955
- Duration: 12 minutes

Samuel Barber declared his vocation early and kept his word. In a letter to his mother at age nine, he wrote, “I was not meant to be an athlete [*sic*]. I was meant to be a composer, and will be I’m sure.” At 14 he entered the young artist program at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he spent a decade honing three disciplines: composition, voice, and piano. It was his brief professional career as a baritone, pursued in his twenties, that left the deepest mark on his musical imagination. Nearly two-thirds of his output comprises art songs, choral works, and vocal orchestrations. The singing impulse born from his lifelong relationship with the voice equally pervades his purely instrumental writing.

Summer Music originated with a 1953 commission from the Chamber Music Society of Detroit, who commissioned Barber for a septet composed of the principal players of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Delayed by work on his opera *Vanessa*, Barber missed the commission deadline.

He revived the project after hearing the New York Woodwind Quintet in Maine the following year, reshaping it into a piece for their standard grouping of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and horn. Over the next year, he attended their rehearsals, brought drafts for trial readings, and shaped the work closely around their sound. The premiere took place in Detroit in March 1956, after which the Quintet performed it at Harvard, on a South American tour, and at Carnegie Hall.

Marked “Slow and indolent,” the work unfolds across a single 12-minute movement poised between late Romanticism and modernism. The horn establishes a repeating ostinato as the oboe sings above it—a melody that drifts between tonality and ambiguity before gently resolving. This languid opening is interrupted by a faster passage in sharp rhythmic unison, which is itself broken by a horn call. The ostinato returns, now lengthened and gradually accelerating, until it carries the music back to the original oboe theme. What follows is something like a fever dream: familiar material woven together with new ideas. Barber was insistent that the piece carry no program — it is, he said, an evocation of summer in the most elemental sense: “not killing mosquitoes.”

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Heitor Villa-Lobos

Trio for Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon

- Born March 5, 1887, in Rio de Janeiro
- Died November 17, 1959, in Rio de Janeiro
- Composed in 1928
- Duration: 18 minutes

Born in 1887, Heitor Villa-Lobos came of age in a Brazil still inventing itself. The Empire had collapsed just two years after his birth, and the young republic was straining toward a national identity it had not yet found. His father, an amateur musician, introduced him to the cello and clarinet before he passed away when Heitor was 11. Eschewing any formal path, the teenager taught himself guitar and began performing with a street band in Rio as a means of supporting himself. At 16 he was playing in a theater orchestra; at 18, he struck out into Brazil's interior, traveling for the better part of a decade and absorbing the folk and indigenous music traditions he encountered along the way.

The details of those years grew mythic in the telling with his accounts of remote tribes and perilous encounters whose veracity no one could quite confirm. But when Villa-Lobos returned to Rio, he brought that raw, unapologetic experience directly into his music. The Eurocentric critical establishment was scandalized. The public was captivated. By the early 1920s, he had become the defining voice of Brazilian classical music—a reputation sealed at the landmark “Week of Modern Art” in 1922, where he served as the festival's musical standard-bearer.

The following year, with government backing and the support of influential patrons, Villa-Lobos traveled to Paris, where he lived and worked until 1930. There he met Stravinsky, Ravel, Prokofiev, and Varèse, and achieved an international stature unmatched by any other Latin American composer.

All of these cultural currents—the street bands and theater orchestras of Rio, the indigenous music of Brazil's vast interior, the Parisian avant-garde—converge in the Trio for Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon. The work opens with the clarinet and bassoon locked in rhythmic unison while the oboe cuts through the texture above them; as the movement unfolds, each instrument steps forward in turn before all three arrive together at the emotional climax, trading insistent rhythmic motifs in a Stravinskian assertion of primitive energy. The movement ends as dramatically as it proceeds, with a unison crescendo cut short by a single, theatrical stroke.

The second movement offers a change of atmosphere, blending the hazy harmonic color of French Impressionism with the easy, swaying lilt of South American dance. The finale returns to driving, propulsive rhythms rooted in the tribal music and dance Villa-Lobos witnessed in his years of wandering, bringing this work to an energetically charged close.

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Otar Taktakishvili

Sonata for Flute and Piano

- Born July 27, 1924, in Tbilisi
- Died February 21, 1989, in Moscow
- Composed in 1968
- Duration: 16 minutes

Otar Taktakishvili occupies a unique and fascinating place in 20th-century music. Born in Soviet Georgia in 1924, he rose to prominence with remarkable speed—composing the official anthem of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic while still a student at the Tbilisi Conservatory, and joining its faculty just two years after graduating. Taktakishvili went on to serve as the Conservatory's rector and accumulated three USSR State Prizes and the 1982 Lenin Prize, previously awarded to Prokofiev and Shostakovich. He was both genuinely celebrated and deeply enmeshed in the Soviet cultural apparatus.

Taktakishvili belonged to a generation of Soviet composers trained in traditional Russian music theory, largely insulated from the Western avant-garde. Unlike his predecessors Prokofiev and Shostakovich, who faced censure for music deemed too complex or subversive, Taktakishvili and his contemporaries wrote in an accessible idiom that invited no such scrutiny. He was unabashedly conservative, going so far as to publicly criticize composers who adopted twelve-tone technique. The result was a style rooted in diatonic melody, clear formal structure, and the folk traditions of his native Georgia.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Sonata for Flute and Piano, his best-known work in the West and a staple of the 20th-century flute repertoire. The Sonata unfolds across three movements, each drawing on the melodic simplicity and rhythmic directness of Georgian folk music. The first movement presents two contrasting themes: an opening melody in C major that moves in gentle stepwise motion within a narrow range, and a more playful, scherzo-like second theme that introduces flashes of chromaticism.

The slow second movement, *Aria*, offers a long, lyrical line in A minor—vocal in character, unornamented, and deeply songlike. The finale returns to dance, opening in a lilting compound meter before introducing a contrasting theme in a simple duple feel, its grace notes and repeated rhythms evoking the sound of folk performance. Throughout, the piano's ostinato figures and pedal tones provide a grounding, almost ritualistic backdrop.

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Joseph Jongen

Rhapsody in D minor for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, and Piano, Op. 70

- Born December 14, 1873, in Liège, Belgium
- Died July 12, 1953, in Sart-lez-Spa, Belgium
- Duration: 20 minutes

Joseph Jongen is often considered second only to César Franck among Belgian composers, yet his name remains largely unfamiliar outside of organ music circles. That neglect is puzzling. His contemporary, Lord Berners, described his music as possessing “remarkable lyric charm and dramatic power,” and the Rhapsody, Op. 70, bears that out in full.

Born in Liège in 1873, Jongen was admitted to the Conservatoire there at the precocious age of seven and stayed for sixteen years. In 1897 he won the Belgian Prix de Rome, which allowed him to travel to Italy, Germany, and France, where he encountered other composers like Richard Strauss, Vincent d’Indy, and Florent Schmitt. These meetings left a lasting mark; the lush harmonic language of late German Romanticism, the modal elegance of the French school, and the adventurousness of the Parisian avant-garde all found their way into his musical voice. With the outbreak of World War I, he and his family moved to England, where he founded a piano quartet with violinist Désiré Defauw, violist Lionel Tertis, and cellist Émile Doehaerd. After the war he returned to Belgium, began teaching at the Brussels Royal Conservatory, and from 1925 to 1939 served as its director.

The Rhapsody was composed in 1922, shortly after his return, which proved to be a moment of creative renewal following the upheavals of the war years. Symphonic in scope and almost concerto-like in ambition, it unfolds with the spontaneity its title promises: a flight of fancy ranging freely across moods, colors, and textures. The opening gives way to a *Tempo di Habanera*, a nod to the Spanish exoticism that so captivated his Parisian contemporary Ravel. From there, the music pivots into a *molto vivo* driven by relentless eighth notes and sudden *sforzando* accents; it is the most overtly modernist passage in the work, with the angular energy of Stravinsky pressing through the texture. Then, just as unexpectedly, the mood softens into a lyrical, Chopin-like moment for the piano—intimate and song-like, almost a concerto cadenza.

What follows is a series of episodes giving each voice its moment: the flute soaring above a horn ostinato, the oboe and piano sharing a tender exchange, and finally the horn stepping forward for a commanding solo marked in the score *cor fièrement* (“the horn, proudly.”) Throughout, the piano binds the ensemble together as co-protagonist rather than mere accompanist. The result is a work of considerable charm and ambition, and a compelling case for rediscovering one of Belgium’s finest musical voices.

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