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**Program Notes**  
**January 26, 2012**

**Janáček: Sonata for Violin and Piano**

Although Czech composer Léos Janáček (1854–1928) originally made his reputation as a composer of instrumental music, his early training emphasized sacred choral music. He was born into a musical family and at age 11 was sent to a monastery school in Brno to be a chorister. When he graduated in 1869, he went on to study at the Czech Teachers' Institute, and then to become head of a monastery choir himself. He continued to pursue his education in Prague and Leipzig while also conducting various choral ensembles. His ambition then took him to the cultural capital of the Habsburg Empire—Vienna, where he composed an early violin sonata that does not survive.

Back home in Brno in the summer of 1880, Janáček all but stopped composing, save for a few choruses and songs, because he was too busy inaugurating and then heading a school for organists. He also became interested in the riches of Moravian folksong, producing an impressive edition of over 2000 folk songs and dances. Folksongs soon began to influence his own original compositions—as did the Czech language, which he set in his songs and operas with an ear for its inherent musicality.

The opera *Jenůfa* (1904) brought him some success, but his major achievements as a composer came relatively late in life. In his 60s, Janáček was newly energized not only by the successful premiere of *Jenůfa* in Prague and the founding of the Czech Republic in the wake of World War I, but also by a passionate friendship with Kamila Stösslová initiated in 1917. The May-December affair (she was some three decades his junior, and both were married) apparently went unconsummated, but their intensely romantic correspondence inspired the String Quartet No. 2, “Intimate Letters” (1928).

The Violin Sonata (1922) had a different source of inspiration: Russophilia. Janáček first visited Russia, where his brother lived, in 1896, and returned to Brno to found a Russian Club. His daughter Olga became a Russian teacher, and a handful of his works were tied to Russian literature. The sonata was his response to the Russian campaign at the outset of World War I, though ideas for the piece date from before the war, (the second movement Ballada was composed around 1914), and revisions continued well after.

The sonata begins with an unaccompanied recitative for the violin; what follows is a sonata allegro form, with contrasting keys and themes. Both the second and third movements are in ABA form, the second being a lyrical interlude (with a brief episode of strife that quickly passes) followed by a folksy scherzo. The finale features as its first theme a stately chorale heard first in the piano. Its return at the end of the movement in the violin, with piano tremolos (reminiscent of the very opening) roiling below, marks “the Russian armies entering Hungary” on September 26, 1914, the composer himself explained.

## **Bartók: Sonata No. 1, Sz. 75**

Hungarian composer Bela Bartók (1881–1945) was a prodigy, taking piano lessons as a young child with his mother and making his public debut at age 11 with one of his own small compositions on the recital. Subsequently he studied with a pupil of Franz Liszt at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest. His first orchestral work was a tone poem in the vein of those by Richard Strauss (whom Bartók met in 1902), but he was also influenced by the music of Claude Debussy and Johannes Brahms. Beginning around 1908, however, his music reveals a new attraction to Hungarian folk songs. That year he traveled with friend and fellow academy alumnus Zoltán Kodály through the countryside collecting folk melodies. Bartok integrated these into his own works, not only simply by quoting folk tunes but also by adapting traditional harmonies and dance rhythms within traditional forms.

In 1940, with Hungary an Axis power allied with Germany, Bartók fled to the United States, where he struggled personally and professionally. In 1944, after years of ill-health, he was diagnosed with leukemia. His last work was a commission from Serge Koussevitzky for the Boston Symphony Orchestra: the Concerto for Orchestra, premiered in December 1944. That same year he finished the violin sonata and his third piano concerto. A viola concerto was left unfinished at his death.

The first violin sonata was composed in December 1921 for famed violinist Jelly Arányi, who captivated the composer personally as well as musically. “It is good and great that I should have inspired that gorgeous sonata,” she wrote in her diary. “But apparently a woman can’t inspire the soul of a man without doing great harm. It is sad, too sad, that I should make this great man suffer.” Arányi put off the composer, and kept their relationship strictly professional.

The most notable feature of the sonata is the relationship between the two instruments—or rather, the lack thereof. The piano does not simply accompany the violin, but has its own independent line; almost no thematic material is shared between the two instruments, which seem to inhabit different musical worlds. And each has its own distinct character as well. Whereas the violin is impassioned, emotional, and lyrical, the piano is rhythmic and percussive with a series of unending, dissonant chords.

As unusual as this design may be, the first movement is actually a traditional sonata form with two, contrasting themes. The first theme, in the violin, is expressive, with large leaps; the second is more insistent and aggressive. Both are presented at the outset, varied in the middle, and then return at the end, with the first theme in the violin played very high and very softly (*pianissimo*).

The second movement likewise begins with a solo for the violin, a kind of operatic arioso. The solo passages throughout, for both violin and piano, increase the sense of disconnect between the two performers. The driving finale features Romanian folk inflections with its sweeping leaps on the violin and percussive rhythms in the piano.

## **Janáček: Romance for Violin and Piano**

The Romance for Violin and Piano is one of a group of such works composed in the fall of 1879 while Janáček was a student at the Leipzig Conservatory, and the only one to survive. He took it to his teacher, Oskar Paul, who deemed it “too massive” for a romance. Apparently Janáček himself disagreed, however, since he kept the piece.

Though his true love was opera, and today Janáček is remembered primarily as an operatic composer, his chamber music first made his reputation not only in the Czech Republic but also in Vienna, London, and Berlin. His earliest works are for small ensembles, and the violin was his favored instrument: Among his student compositions are the Romances, along with attempts at a violin sonata, a string quartet, and other works for violin and piano.

The opening theme is warm and long-breathed. Indeed phrases spin out at length, showcasing Janáček’s melodic gift and capturing the spirit of the genre: Originally a 15<sup>th</sup>-century song style in Spain and Italy, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century romance simply designated a slow, lyrical piece full of feeling.

## **Brahms: Sonata No. 3 in D minor, Op. 108**

The music of Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) often seems somehow nostalgic, even regressive. Forgoing the excesses of his Romantic contemporaries Liszt and Wagner, he sought refuge in the corseted Classical structures of Haydn and Mozart along with the counterpoint of Bach. When he realized that concert organizers had started to privilege the music of dead rather than living composers on their programs, Brahms began emulating the dead. He embraced such archaic musical genres such as the motet and serenade, created a set of variations on a theme by Haydn, and rejected the fire and brimstone of grand opera for instrumental miniatures. The idea was to enter the pantheon of past masters even while still very much alive.

Critics of a Romantic mindset have been carried away by this idea, however, asserting that Brahms was nostalgic to the point of being melancholic, a condition defined by musicologist Reinhold Brinkmann as an “individual, albeit historically mediated state of mind and spirit.” Maybe this is true, or maybe Brahms consciously chose to manufacture this autumnal mood. Art is, after all, artificial.

His symphonies and orchestral works grapple with his predecessors in obvious ways. The theme of the First Symphony finale, for example, harkens back to Beethoven’s Ninth, whereas his chamber works explore the possibilities of forms and structures that other composers of Brahms’s own generation were happy to leave behind. His sonatas, for example, take up traditional forms inherited from Mozart and Beethoven while packing them full of his own distinctive, complex thematic interplay. The Third Violin Sonata, Op. 108 (1887) is a marvel of concision: four movements are packed into barely twenty minutes.

The first movement falls in sonata form, with two main ideas that are developed and then recapitulated. The violinist takes up the first, high in its register, while the piano

accompanies with syncopated, stuttering chords. The lyrical second theme, introduced by the piano, moves to a major key. One of the most striking features of the sonata is the outburst in the recapitulation; rather than just restating the themes from the opening, Brahms continues to develop them. This drive to embellish and vary his musical material is an essential element of the composer's style.

The Adagio showcases this talent for thematic invention: a single theme is varied and repeated, without any contrasting material. The third movement is an extremely brief scherzo in ABA form, and the finale presents an assertive, dramatic main theme in the violin that is varied and repeated between interjections of contrasting material. The first of these, in the piano, is hymnlike, with rich chords and a bouncing bass line. This theme returns only once; the movement is dominated by the sawing violin chords from the introduction and leaping first theme.

- *Program notes by Elizabeth Bergman*