

PROGRAM NOTES

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Chromatic Fantasia & Fugue in D minor, BWV 903

Work Composed: c. 1720

It is unknown as to whether the Chromatic Fantasia & Fugue was written before or after 1720, during Bach's time in Köthen or Weimar. Because the composer's autograph is missing, published scores are based entirely on copyists' manuscripts from which discrepancies abound. The designation of the word "Chromatic" – whether it be to the introduction's ambiguous harmonies or the fugue's chromatic subject – is also debated, for the title did not originate with Bach.

Despite the Chromatic Fantasia & Fugue's questionable authenticity, the composition is still, undoubtedly, a tribute to Bach's immense virtuosity: the opening, with its rapid scalar runs sans a formal theme or ostinato, is representative of the free fantasia style, and the overarching toccata-like form (and key of D minor) draws connections to the great Toccata & Fugue in D minor. Johann Nicolaus Forkel, Bach's first biographer, searched for but failed to find such another improvisatory masterwork; he wrote in 1802: "This fantasy is unique and has never been second to none." It was a staple of the concert repertoire for 19th-century pianists Mendelssohn, Brahms and Liszt, who translated the music's freeform arpeggios into more romanticized, pianistic and sometimes controversial interpretations.

The fantasia can be loosely divided into three main sections plus a conclusive passage. The first 28 bars constitute a technically-demanding prelude of 32nd-note passagework loaded with triplets and diminished-seventh harmonies. An extensive series of modulations, labeled "arpeggio" in the oldest scores, is then followed by a musically-sensitive "recitative." Here a soprano emerges, intoning an expressive *lamento* with continuo-style accompaniment. Richly-ornamented melodies progress through circles of fifths and enharmonic equivalents before collapsing on a brief authentic cadence. Chromatically-sinking diminished chords over a tonic pedal tone further postpone the arrival to the final resolution. While listeners may classify the fantasia's big-picture harmony as non-diatonic or even atonal, Bach ingeniously implements resting points, or final-sounding cadences, between improvisational gestures to establish a sense of tonality as the center shifts from tonic to dominant and then circles around dominant.

Maintaining the fantasia's exploratory character, the fugue takes structural freedoms not previously seen in *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. The fugal subject is an ascending half-step line filling in a minor third, and the distinctive "long-short-short" rhythm of the countersubject is an example of Bach's *figura corta* pattern. Beginning in D minor, the themes move through distantly related keys. The initial tonality is revived in the subject's final restatement: heavy bass octaves in the left hand underpin harmonies with an organistic *gravitas* reminiscent of the ending of a toccata.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

From 6 *Klavierstücke*, Op. 118

1. Intermezzo in A minor. *Allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato*
2. Intermezzo in A major. *Andante teneramente*

Work Composed: 1893

Brahms's late "autumnal" period is characterized by a more introspective and less virtuosic musical persona. The music's evocation of bittersweet and melancholy emotions – indicating summer's passing and winter's greetings – is what coined its distinct nickname. In his penultimate work for solo piano, an aged Brahms reflects wistfully on his past as he approaches the end of his musical career and ultimately his life. The nostalgic aura is hinted with passionate moments, illustrating more distilled revivals of youthfulness in favor of spontaneity.

Restless modulations blurred by seamless transitions are a defining harmonic quality of the intermezzi. The first one, marked, "Not fast, but very passionately," opens with a cascade of tumultuous arpeggios beneath which the melody fights to unearth itself. Brahms decepts the listener by introducing progressions in the relative key of C major, and the lingering suspensions built within dramatize the cadential resolutions. The downward melodic contour (a commonality among Brahms's late works) is altered when the intermezzo takes on ternary form. In the B section, the initial rhythmic motif is extended as formerly textural arpeggios become more melodically involved. Once the A minor tonality is fully realized, diminished seventh chords stretch across the keyboard's wide range, building surges and unwinds of tension. The torrent peacefully lands on a Picardy third (an unexpected resolve to the parallel major), perfectly setting up the listener for the intermezzo to follow.

The romantic serenity of the second piece, one of Brahms's most beloved, encapsulates the autumnal mood. Its reminiscence of a tender cradle song exemplifies his attraction to Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*. Sustained major second intervals and unresolved suspensions permeate throughout and are fueled by a yearning energy. The first three notes gracefully lean into a prolonging that propels the whole work forward. This motif continuously wanders, searching for an ideal tonality to establish itself, while the composer freely experiments with voicing: about a minute into the intermezzo, the same three-note figure is heard in the bass. Brahms further explores contrapuntal development in the F-sharp minor/major middle section. The opening motif is gone, and a duet clearly unfolds over the hands' two-against-three rhythms. A chorale-like, homorhythmic texture then floats in, resembling a faint glow only to be immediately swept by darkness.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111

1. Maestoso – Allegro con brio ed appassionato
2. Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

Work Composed: 1821-22

Beethoven's last piano sonata was a culminating challenge of intellectually-derived music he posed for himself – not in the form of an hour-long symphony, but rather a twenty-seven minute sonata composed of two intensely polarizing movements. The 32nd piano sonata is argued by scholars to be his greatest multimovement work because of its remarkable ability to conceptualize two opposite states of human emotion. The conflicts juxtaposed – sonata-allegro form vs. theme & variations, C minor vs. major, fast vs. slow, and dark vs. light – define its beauty and elegance.

Crashing diminished sevenths set the stage for uncertainty. This grandiose opening statement strongly influenced those of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 and Liszt's Dante Sonata. In a majestic, double-dotted introduction, the composer reinvigorates the archaic style of the French overture. This crescendos to a startlingly low rumble in the bass, launching an authentic cadence into the aggravated, stormy C minor exposition. Enter the theme, a muscular figure declared in unison, and its subsequent *fugato*. Scurrying scales and jagged leaps drive the hands into a familiar frenziness (think: the third movement of Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata). There is seemingly no unity between left and right as the theme modulates unconventionally to the submediant of A-flat major. The contrapuntal fury breathes a sigh of relief when a lyrical C major figure takes shape in the recapitulation, but it ominously reappears in the bass in F minor only to venture back to tonic. The aggressive subject relaxes on an angelic parallel major chord, foreshadowing the Arietta to follow.

Drastically, a warm, chordal homorhythm summons a more grounded, controlled fullness. A solemn melody surfaces so simplistically, as if it's crying for embellishment. The intellect of this slow *tema con variazione*, comparable to Beethoven's Op. 109, is overlooked: at the first variation, this theme is wholly transfixed. Additional figurations decorate the soprano line, increase animation, and expand its rhythmic complexity. The third variation is a portrait of Beethoven's heroism: he speeds up the dotted patterns of the Maestoso into these ecstatic, swinging syncopations. Then the bizarre, yet wondrous, improvisatory cadenza modulates to E-flat major, explores the piano's mysterious low register, and revitalizes the theme. In the last variation, the still recognizable melody is enveloped in a flutter of ethereal high trills before dying in C major – the most innocent key of all.

It cannot be concluded as to whether or not the composer intended to write a third movement. Biographer Anton Schindler quoted Beethoven: "I never got around to finishing it." Yet scholars point out that the highest pitch of the last chord – middle C, which starts his first piano sonata – suggests a cyclic closure. However after such an "ultimate resolution of conflict" (pianist Andrés Schiff), is a third movement necessary at all?

Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978)

Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia (arr. Matthew Cameron)

Work Composed: 1954

A Soviet Armenian-Georgian composer of highly nationalistic folk music, Khachaturian was nearly 50 years old at the time he composed “Spartacus,” his third and last ballet. The score was awarded the Lenin Prize that same year, and the work was premiered in 1956 at the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). But it was the standout 1968 production, with modernized choreography by Yuri Grigorovich, at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow that rose the ballet to soaring heights.

Khachaturian wrote “Spartacus” at the suggestion of author/critic/librettist Nikolai Volkov, who first conceptualized a contemporary storytelling of the historic Thracian gladiator and his Third Seville War (73–71 BC). The composer then traveled to Italy to visit the remnants of the ancient slave rebellion, where he became awe-struck to commission his great project. He remarked: “The courageous and heroic figure of Spartacus has for long been beckoning and inspiring me to write a ballet. I believe that the theme of Spartacus and the slave uprising in ancient Rome has great importance and appeal today.”

The vast majority of Khachaturian’s repertoire is heavily influenced by communism: brutally-accented dissonances and lurid musical personalities are commonalities among his exotic celebrations of Armenian culture. The “Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia,” however, is picturesque romanticism. Russian ballet dancer Askold Makarov, who starred as Spartacus in the 1956 premiere, depicted: “When Phrygia, after her burst of despair, rises from her knees and stands next to [Spartacus] like a monument of grief, the theme flares up in the orchestra... The grieving violins are followed by the pathetic and vibrating voices of the cellos: the theme grows, embracing the entire orchestra. And I... want to rise. I know that my hero is dead, but the very notion that Spartacus may still be alive gives me no peace when I hear the anthem to immortality.”

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Three movements from “Petrushka”

1. Russian Dance
2. Petrushka's Room
3. The Shrovetide Fair

Work Composed: 1910-11

Like Beethoven, Stravinsky sketched out melodic ideas, yet thematically twisted and developed them away from the piece. There are no manuscripts or traces of his corrections and experimentations. Both composers also disbelieved that music itself was emotional; feelings came rather from the listener’s absorption of the notes and rhythms and were dependent on the timeliness of the performance. This directly contradicts Stravinsky’s famous quote: “I haven’t

understood a bar of music in my life, but I have felt it.” He also loathed long, overwritten pieces, once saying, “the more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self.”

Initially envisioned to be a *Konzertstück* for orchestra, “Petrushka” expanded into a ballet of *scènes burlesques* when Sergei Diaghilev, art critic and founder of the Ballet Russes, realized its potential as a staged theatrical work. It was premiered by the Ballet Russes on June 13, 1911 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. During his early Russian period, Stravinsky wrote two more revolutionary ballets for the impresario’s company: “The Firebird” in 1910 and “The Rite of Spring” in 1913. Unlike the latter, “Petrushka” was generally well-received by the public and not disturbingly controversial, but it didn’t gain mass popularity with audiences until the mid-20th century.

Stravinsky’s masterful orchestration called for an extraordinary pianist. While unorthodox in a symphonic setting, the extended piano part was significant to the composer’s traversal of the life of Petrushka, a traditional Russian folk hero. The instrument essentially symbolized the protagonist: the puppet was constantly “ridiculed,” or interrupted by the orchestra’s brash trumpet fanfares. This incessant banter, paired with the lead role’s iconic *leitmotif* – the “Petrushka chord,” a bitonal C major and F-sharp major triad – was a defining characteristic of the ballet score. Ten years later, Stravinsky arranged the *Trois mouvements* for piano solo (derived from the ballet’s first three *tableaus* or scenes) in dedication to the legendary Arthur Rubinstein. He refused to call this work a transcription because it was intended to be pianistic and not just a symphonic reduction. But the finished product – a technique-busting showpiece, heightened by extraneous multi-octave jumps – was unplayable due to Stravinsky’s poor left hand dexterity.

The most difficult challenges of interpreting “Spartacus” and “Petrushka?” According to pianist Santiago Rodriguez: “Bringing out elements of the ballet, characterizing [Stravinsky’s] collection of masquerades in the Shrovetide Fair, and capturing the music’s distinctly Russian traits.”