

RUSSELL'S LISTENING LIST

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Dear LAYO Orchestra:

I'm starting a series to introduce you to music that changed my life. But first, I want to share with you the piece that changed Leonard Bernstein's life...

When Leonard Bernstein was a teenager, he heard Ravel's Bolero and went nuts. He played it full volume on his record player over and over for 2 solid weeks, driving his parents crazy! He couldn't stop listening. That feeling inspired him to become a conductor. And he became one of America's most important musicians.

This summer, I want to share with you, my students, the music that I fell in love with when I was your age. These are all pieces that made me feel deep emotion. Music I listened to over and over for weeks. Not every piece may grab you. Remember, too, you often have to hear a classical piece several times before it sinks in. I guarantee you, though, that all these pieces I share are worth knowing.

But first, let's find out what the big deal was for Leonard Bernstein with Bolero! It was a big deal to me as well, and maybe it will become your new favorite piece for a while as well.

Russell

BOLERO by Maurice Ravel

[*Bolero by Maurice Ravel*](#)

[*\(The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra conducted by Daniel Barenboim for the BBC PROMS\)*](#)

Bolero became Ravel's most popular piece and he was worried he would only be remembered for a "15 minute piece that has no music in it." That isn't true of course. What he meant is that Bolero has no thematic development. There's really no other piece like it. It's essentially a masterful study in orchestration and the possibilities of sonic color. It uses just one hypnotic theme that repeats 18 times, in one long gigantic crescendo! Yet its emotional buildup is undeniable.

The theme itself is very carefully composed, with a remarkable exotic sense of Eastern mysticism. It's sinuous—that is, it curves like a snake with quite unpredictable patterns. The first part of the tune is purely diatonic (C major notes only), setting up a serene meditative atmosphere. The second part of the tune explores the subdominant in an earthy, more exotic mode that combines qualities of major and minor (F-G-A-Bb-C-D-E-F and F-G-Ab-Bb-C-Db-Eb-F). The tune alternates between the two parts, always with different orchestration. As you listen, you'll find yourself waiting for the next "good part."

Accompanying the tune throughout is a snare drum that plays a bolero rhythmic pattern over and over:



[BOLERO by Maurice Ravel](#)

There are real magic tricks in Bolero. As the piece builds, Ravel combines instruments together that create absolutely unique sounds. Other interesting things: Bolero is one of the few orchestra pieces that use saxophones and the strings, usually the most prominent part of the orchestra, mostly pluck through the piece and only get to play the tune with using full bows near the end.

I fell in love with Bolero when I was 12 or 13. We watched a documentary called The Bolero in school. It featured Zubin Mehta and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. At the beginning, Zubin Mehta is upset that he is scheduled to conduct Bolero again. He is sick of the piece. Then the different musicians in the orchestra all talk about their solos and how it means to them. Finally the whole orchestra performs Bolero and everyone, even Zubin Mehta, gets caught up again in the ecstasy that Ravel creates. It's irresistible. You just want to hum the tune over and over. Hey, I just found the documentary for you on Vimeo. Check it out!

[Documentary from 1973–THE BOLERO](#)

And here is a performance with Leonard Bernstein himself.

[Leonard Bernstein conducting Ravel's Bolero](#)

SHEHERAZADE by Nicolas Rimsky-Korsakov

The "Second Favorite Piece" that I would like you to listen to is Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade. I wore out this record listening to it over and over. Hearing these musical sea adventures inspired me to write my own first extended piano composition, Magellan Suite, after Magellan's voyage around the world. Read on below and click all the links that cue the YouTube recording to the passage I discuss. I'm excited for you all to know this music, if you don't already!

For context, Nicolas Rimsky-Korsakov was a Russian composer writing in the late 1800s, around the same Dvorak, Richard Strauss, and Tchaikovsky. He was one of the great masters of orchestration. His textbook is still used by composers today. If you like Sheherazade, you'll love many of his other famous works as well, such as Capriccio Espagnole. I bet you know his most famous piece, incidentally—Flight of the Bumblebee.

—Russell

[*Sheherazade by Nicolas Rimsky-Korsakov*](#)

[*\(Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Kiril Konrashin\)*](#)

Sheherazade was one of the first pieces that really hooked me. Right from the beginning is this powerful proclamation in unison by the brass and strings. Then mysterious woodwind chords open a magical world where [we hear a gorgeous violin solo over harp](#). That violin solo is Sheherazade telling a story! The whole work is essentially a symphony in four movements, each movement full of exciting exotic colors and beautiful themes, all with remarkable solos for the winds.

Rimsky-Korsakov based *Sheherazade* on “The Arabian Nights,” a book that tells the story of King Shahryar, who is convinced that all women are faithless. He murders his wives the day after he marries them, so that they never have a chance to betray and dishonor him. He eventually marries Sheherazade, who figures a way to stay alive. She tells him a story that ends with a cliffhanger. The king wants to hear how the story ends, so he delays her execution for one day. But then she finishes that story the next night, she then begins another and ends with another cliffhanger. This goes on for 1001 nights, after which the King relents and lets her live.

Here are some of the moments special to me:

In the first movement, [the swashbuckling seafaring theme combined with the Sheherazade theme](#). I marveled how Rimsky-Korsakov imagined combining the two different themes together.

[The beautiful bassoon solo in the 2nd movement](#). Consider that this high bassoon melody was composed about 20 years (1888) before the even higher bassoon solo that begins Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (1913). And fifteen years later (1928), Ravel composed his own famous high bassoon solo in *Bolero*. All three solos are related. Stravinsky was a student of Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel was a friend of Stravinsky.

[Hear how the bassoon melody becomes even more expressive with the oboe and harp.](#)

[The exciting trade-offs between trombones and trumpets a tritone apart.](#)

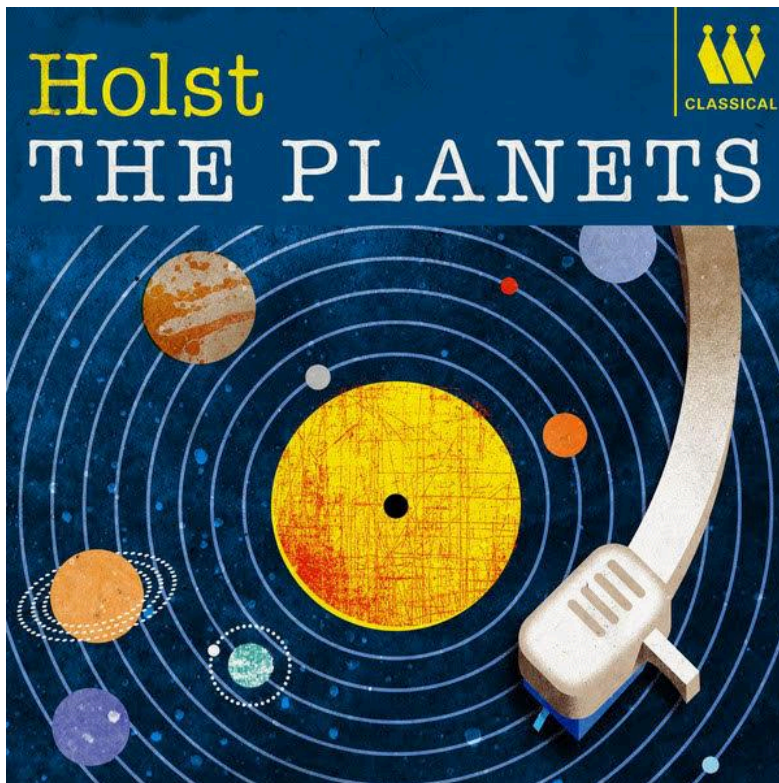
[The clarinet cadenza over pizzicato strings.](#) Later in the movement the bassoon, flute, and horn also play this cadenza.

Third movement: [the sweeping arabesques in clarinet, flute, and strings that weave over the expressive love melody.](#)

Fourth movement: [the frenetic tarantella beginning with flute and violas](#) and [the trumpet fanfare that follows.](#) And [the exotic music that combines a variation of the Sheherazade violin tune with the tarantella.](#) Finally, [the way the solo violin hovers with the high E harmonic over the now subdued opening proclamation theme in the low strings,](#) eventually revealing the high wind chords that finish this amazing “Once Upon A Time” saga.

THE PLANETS Suite by Gustav Holst (Part 1)

I hope you loved *Sheherazade* from last week. I'm continuing this series of music I loved when I was your age. The third piece is *The Planets* suite by Gustav Holst. I have so many favorite moments that I'm going to share it in two parts. I'll email the second part next week. Hope you enjoy it.



[The Planets](#) by Gustav Holst

(Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra)

After *Sheherazade* inspired me to compose my own *Magellan Suite* for piano, a friend asked if I knew *The Planets* by Gustav Holst. Astronomy has always fascinated me. What a great idea to write about the solar system! Only later did I learn that it was astrology, not astronomy, that inspired Holst: *Mars, the Bringer of War*, *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*, *Mercury, the Winged Messenger*, etc. (That's why Holst didn't compose an "Earth" movement.)

Listening to Holst's *The Planets* can obsess you in a good way for months! First, you get hooked on the rhythm and drama of *Mars*. Then as you listen to the rest of the piece, you keep discovering more "favorite" movements—the grandiosity of *Jupiter*, the sheer beauty of *Venus*, the cosmic mysticism of Neptune. *The Planets* is in 7 movements for a very large orchestra. On the low end are bass clarinet, contrabassoon, 2 tubas, and 3 trombones.. The brass includes 6 horns and 4 trumpets for a huge sound. There are parts for organ, celesta, and two harps. And-count 'em—6 timpani, among a bunch of percussion including a tam-tam and tubular bells. There is even a women's chorus that sings offstage just for the last movement (*Neptune, the Mystic*).

You can stop reading here and just click the link above to listen to the whole piece, or you can read further and click to hear some of my personal favorite moments from *The Planets*...

Mars, the Bringer of War

Back to the compulsive rhythm and drama of *Mars*. Yes, this music clearly inspired John Williams for his *Star Wars* scores, especially the Darth Vader theme. That's obvious. But there is so much more to hear in *Mars*. To begin, the strings flip their bows upside down to play on the wood (*col legno*), tapping an ominous rhythmic ostinato in 5/4 meter. That ostinato runs through most of the piece. Perhaps this piece inspired Ravel when he later composed his own ostinato rhythm years later for *Bolero*. Above the strings, horns and bassoons intone slow rising lines. Low and high brass gradually enter, then woodwinds, and more percussion. The accumulation of sound is both terrifying and magnificent:

[First big climax in Mars, the Bringer of War](#)

The final climax is even more shattering. You *feel* the power of the dissonant chords in different combinations of brass and strings, empowered by the organ. Then scurrying strings and woodwinds build excitement for the final statement of the ostinato:

[Final climax in Mars, the Bringer of War](#)

Venus, the Bringer of Peace

Then comes the tender Venus movement. What a contrast! I love the harmonies in the winds and cellos that introduce the first violin solo. They play in B flat minor, a chord that then transforms magically to F# major (B flat minor slides to B natural major 7th). Great moment!—

[Introduction to the gorgeous violin solo in Venus, the Bringer of Peace](#)

It's even more gorgeous when it comes back a second time, now preceded with chords in the flute and high violins (divided in 8 parts!) and then a magnificent solo cello:

[Reappearance of the music that introduces the violin solo in Venus, Bringer of Peace](#)

I also love the ending of Venus with its exquisite Celesta part:

[Celesta giving heavenly sparkle to the end of Venus, the Bringer of Peace](#)

Mercury, the Winged Messenger

The tempo picks up in *Mercury, the Winged Messenger*. This scherzo has an intentional Mendelssohn "fairy dust" quality, as well as suggesting a bit of the tarantella from the last movement of *Scheherazade*!):

[Scherzo theme in Mercury, the Winged Messenger](#)

The influence of Scheherazade continues in the magnificent lyrical theme that repeats in crescendo as it's tossed from solo violin to oboe to flute to celesta to clarinet to violins and a huge orchestral tutti:

[Lyrical theme in Mercury tossed from instrument to instrument](#)

The ending of Mercury is a *tour de force* of orchestration. Celesta, harp, piccolo, and flute descend in a magical sparkle, followed by woodwinds scurrying in ascent:

[Magical end of Mercury, the Winged Messenger](#)

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

It's fitting that Jupiter is the heftiest movement of *The Planets*. It expresses “jollity” first in the high energy of its accompaniments. Hear the violins begin the movement with fast imitation of a pentatonic scale:

[High energy violins opening Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity](#)

Second, Holst expresses “jollity” with hearty melodies that recall English folksongs. Six horns play the “big tune” that repeats over and over in ever larger orchestration, eventually layering in the energy from the beginning accompaniment, not unlike his treatment previously of the lyrical theme in *Mercury*:

[The Big “English Folk Song” Theme in Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity](#)

After the climax of this big theme, a short bridge prepares the trio section with an even more expressive “English folksong” theme:

[The Big “Noble Trio Theme” in Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity](#)

Next week: the rest of The Planets—Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune!

THE PLANETS Suite by Gustav Holst (Part 2)

Last week, I introduced you to the first four movements of a piece I listened to over and over again when I was a teenager—*The Planets* by Gustav Holst. Now I want to share some of my favorite moments from the last three movements. They are even more imaginative than the first four. The orchestration in *Saturn the Bringer of Old Age*, *Uranus the Magician*, and *Neptune the Mystic* use exotic augmented chords and effects with harp, celesta, and glockenspiel to create magical textures that are nevertheless familiar. That's because we've all grown up watching fantasy and sci-fi movies and TV shows with scores deeply influenced by this very music. Same harmonies, same effects, and even the same melodies have been copied by many other composers. But when you hear the "original," it's so much more powerful and emotional. Below, I've provided descriptions and links of some of these remarkable moments. The YouTube examples include the score if you want to really study how Holst creates these colors.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

Flutes play a slow ostinato of two half-diminished chords creating the tick-tock of time in *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*. I love when the violins breath in a long expressive sigh over this clock, using just two notes on the low G string. Those two notes are a super stretched out inversion of the clock motive itself. So simple an idea. Yet it sounds like a person breathing!

[Long Sigh in the Violins in Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age](#)

Holst presents the tick-tock on many levels. In this inspired moment, the brass and percussion alternate their own clockwork with church bells coloring the full orchestra in their own clock.

[Brass and percussion vs. full orchestra and bells in Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age](#)

When I was a teenager, I remember having tears listening to the ending of *Saturn*. The violin sigh now opens up new major harmonies, “healing” the tragic tritones of all those previous half-diminished chords. Such a simple idea, but so effective! The final measures are a blissful C major 7th chord, the tick-tock now a gentle murmur of flutes and harps under sustained strings.

[Transformation at the end of Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age](#)

Uranus, the Magician

Uranus, the Magician owes a lot to *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* by Dukas:

[Bassoons in Uranus the Magician](#)

[Bassoons in Sorcerer’s Apprentice by Dukas](#)

I like how the busyness at one point coalesces into a very catchy “English folk tune” theme:

[Catchy Theme in Uranus the Magician](#)

Then after that theme reaches a climax, the four note *Uranus* theme (G-Eb-A-B) pops up in very different rhythms in the bassoons, the timpani, and the tuba:

[Uranus theme in bassoons, timpani, and tuba](#)

The ending really *is* a piece of magic. Hear the dissonance between the strings playing an F major 9th chord, while one harp plays an open E chord and the other harp plays the Uranus whole tone motive (G-Eb-A-B) .

[Magic Harp Ending in Uranus, the Magician](#)

Neptune, the Mystic

I remember as a teenager feeling quite emotional listening to this last movement of *The Planets*. There is such a sweet sadness in these oboe chords:

[Sweet sad oboes in Neptune, the Mystic](#)

Those chords moving upwards in a partial scale are a tease for what Holst reveals at the end of the movement. There is a hidden connection between *Neptune* and *Mars*, the first movement that began this planetary journey. Both movements are in 5/4

meter. In Mars, you feel the pounding of the meter in your body. With *Neptune*, you sense the 3+2 beats subliminally. For most of the movement, two triads alternate a major 3rd apart—E minor and G# minor. E minor holds 3 beats, G# minor two.

[The Two Alternating Triads in Neptune, the Mystic](#)

The asymmetry gives this oscillation a subconscious wobble, a subtle restlessness that keeps the music moving forward, even while it also feels static. Eventually Holst layers the on top of one another and the dissonance sounds as if we travel into outer space. These two minutes are perhaps the most imaginative sounds in *The Planets*. Listen to these mystical arpeggios in strings, winds, harp, brass, and eventually celesta:

[Mystical arpeggios combining two chords \(E minor + G# minor\) in Neptune, the Mystic](#)

[Deep Mysticism in Neptune, the Mystic](#)

These remarkable musical textures evoke something deep, far beyond the special effects we routinely experience in movies today. They instill a new awakening. Holst now reveals that these alternating chords together contained the notes of an exotic rising scale. Oboes begin this scale and in one last “magic trick”— an offstage women’s chorus wordlessly sustains a high G. It is truly a sublime moment:

[Oboes Building the Exotic Scale That Introduces The Women’s Chorus](#)

The harmonic changes that follow seem to open up new worlds. Allow me to be a bit technical for those interested. The E minor/G# minor scale falls a step down, to D major (A dominant 13th) and then shifts a tritone away to Ab major (an Eb13th chord).

[Harmonic shift from dominant A 13th to Eb 13th in Neptune, the Mystic](#)

Then comes an even more magical shift to E major (B 13th), as the women's chorus now sings in rising triads, accompanied by harps and woodwinds. Truly an “unworldly” sound:

[Shift to E major and the Women's Chorus in Rising Triads](#)

The ending of *The Planets* is an extraordinary fade out. The offstage women's chorus continues alternating two chords (still exotic, but sounding more harmonically resolved—F dominant 9th to E major +6). They continue repeating the two chords softer and softer, until they fade to silence (the door to their offstage room is gradually closed). We feel the infinite stretch and ultimate entropy of the cosmos.

[The Fade Out Ending of The Planets](#)

PATHETIQUE by LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

I hope you've enjoyed listening to *Bolero*, *Sheherazade*, and *The Planets*. The fourth piece is Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata for solo piano. In a way, this piece encapsulates the essence of what makes Beethoven's music so special and helps you to understand his symphonies.



Sonata in C minor (“Pathétique”), op. 13 by Ludwig van Beethoven

It’s lunchtime, 7th grade. In our orchestra room, once again, students surround the piano to hear someone playing Beethoven’s *Pathétique* sonata. We all love hearing [that dramatic C minor chord](#). [The tragic dissonances that follow](#). [Then the quiet tender pleading chords denied with savage chords of fate](#). And that’s only the introduction! Then, [like an eagle swooping down on its prey](#), a C minor scale whooshes down to the main theme.

Even during Beethoven’s own time, the *Pathétique* was all the rage. Piano students *demand*ed to learn it, even as their teachers scoffed at it being too vulgar or modern. What did I love about it? That it was dramatic, fierce, brilliant, and super expressive. Along with the *Moonlight* Sonata, the *Pathétique* experimented with dramatic sonic possibilities for the piano that set young Beethoven apart from his contemporaries.

As I listen now, I realize Beethoven even inspired *himself*. I hear echoes of the *Pathétique* in his *Appassionata* sonata op. 57, and even in his very last sonata, op. 111, which is also in C minor. And listen carefully to the sublime *Adagio* in his 9th symphony— the beautiful opening theme is a variation of the *Pathétique*’s slow movement theme!

Check out the moments below that I found especially addictive in 7th grade...

1st movement

That main theme over the rumbling octave tremolos! It climbs in such defiance with chords that “stumble” from C minor to C major. The scale itself is a hybrid of C minor and F minor. Unpredictable and exciting. When the theme descends, it ends with a cadence that has a jazzy bass progression (A flat-F sharp-G). For theory folks, that is an augmented 6th progression.

[The ascending primary theme, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 1](#)

The second theme makes the piano sound like an orchestra. In the center are repeated chords that sound like string accompaniment while the theme above sounds like an oboe with echoes in the bass that are like bassoon.

[The second theme, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 1](#)

The closing section is fun to play. The main theme is now in contrary motion—scale going up while another goes down. And in between, is another tremolo accompaniment. So it has the sound of the main theme with the orchestration of the second theme!

[Closing theme and codetta, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 1](#)

The development section sustains the drama by cutting up both themes in small pieces that alternate with each other:

[Both themes chopped up, development section, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 1](#)

And don't forget the weird dissonant rumble in the retransition (the music that prepares the recapitulation)

[Bass rumble in the retransition, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 1](#)

2nd movement

The melody that opens the slow movement is one of Beethoven's most heartfelt, romantic themes.

[Lyrical opening theme, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 2](#)

Listen to the sliding chromatic inner voice that creates dissonance in the bridge that connects back to the lyrical theme. It's very similar to the bass rumble in the first movement. I love how Beethoven picks up a small detail and continues to develop it throughout the sonata.

[Dissonant bridge back to the lyrical theme, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 2](#)

Like the second theme from mvt. 1, The middle section has a contrasting minor theme that recalls the same texture as the second theme from mvt. 1. Chords in the middle (upper strings playing triplets) sandwiched between a soprano "woodwind" melody on the top and the bass. It too sounds "orchestral," with a woodwind playing the melody on top answered by a bassoon or lower strings in the bass.

[Contrasting section in minor, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 2](#)

How much richer the opening lyrical theme sounds when it returns, now with the more active accompaniment from the contrasting section!

[Return of the lyrical theme with the accompaniment from the contrasting theme, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 2](#)

Mvt. 3 Rondo (a rondo alternates a main theme or section with contrasting themes and sections—as in A B A C A B A)

I loved when I discovered that the Rondo theme is kind of a sped-up version of the beautiful slow movement melody. You can hear it clearly when its second phrase has the same falling fifths as the second phrase in the slow movement!

[2nd phrase of the A theme has the same falling 5ths as the slow mvt theme, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 3](#)

And then the middle of the rondo makes this connection between the movements even clearer. Those falling fifths (or rising fourths) are all in counterpoint.

[The central C theme same shape as slow mvt. theme, Beethoven Pathétique Mvt. 3](#)

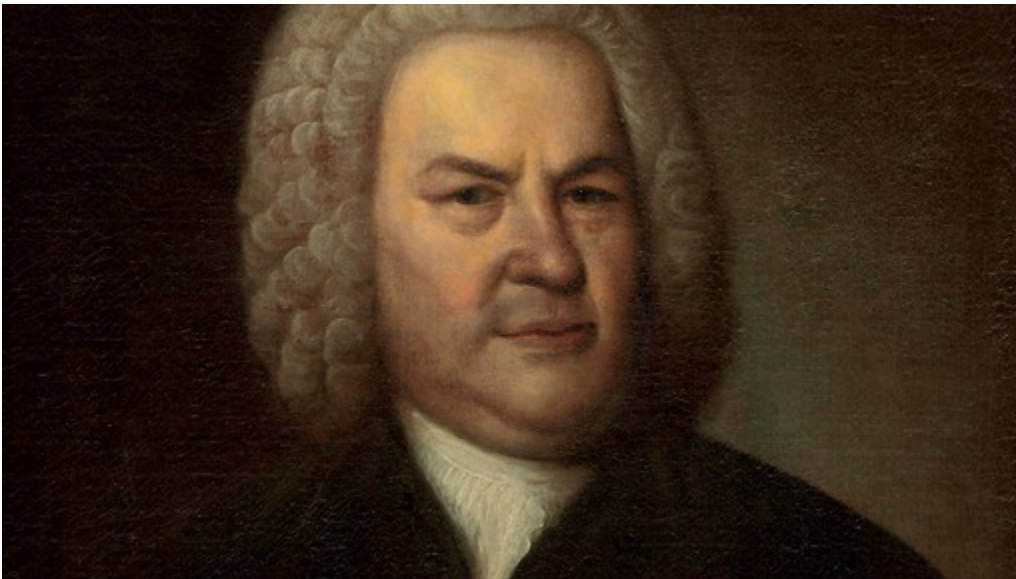
I loved how the end of the *Pathétique* sonata brings back the dramatic C minor chords from the first movement. The sonata even finishes with the same downward “Eagle swoop” that began the Allegro in the first movement.

[Exciting ending of Beethoven Pathétique Sonata](#)

I was in awe of Beethoven’s imagination to connect all the movements as one idea. Incidentally, *Pathétique* means passionate or tragically passionate. The title wasn’t Beethoven’s. His publisher added it. Same with the “Moonlight” sonata title. Clearly, the name stuck. It captures its sense of defiance and resilience in the face of tragedy.

BRANDENBURG CONCERTO No. 4

Continuing my series for you, my 5th "favorite" piece was Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 4. By the way, getting to know all 6 Brandenburg concertos is one of the great delights you'll have listening to music. But I'm particularly fond of this fourth concerto and hope you will love it as well.



[Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G major, Johann Sebastian Bach](#)

Of course, all 6 Brandenburg concertos are perfect masterpieces. The brilliant trumpet part in Brandenburg Concerto 2 is a favorite with most people. The harpsichord cadenza in Brandenburg Concerto 5 knocks your socks off. But as a teenager, my favorite was this lighter Brandenburg 4 in G major, with the way it sweetly alternates and blends flutes and strings.

Listen to the whole concerto on your own or click below to hear my favorite parts...

There is such delight and bright sunshine in this opening that simply alternates tonic and dominant chords:

[Delightful beginning of Bach Brandenburg No. 4](#)

All of Bach's music is a clockwork of descending of 5ths and those sequences are often the most emotional. This violin solo in the first movement is a perfect example:

[Solo violin with beautiful descending 5th sequences. Bach Brandenburg No. 4](#)

After such bright harmonies, the shift to minor makes for a very different color:

[How different the theme sounds in the minor key. Bach Brandenburg No. 4 mvt. 1](#)

Then there is this brilliant duet for two flutes:

[Extended flute duet, Bach Brandenburg No. 4 mvt. 1](#)

And a variation with 32nd notes that pumps the solo violin into a race car:

[“Crazy fast” violin solo, Bach Brandenburg No. 4 mvt. 1](#)

...

The mood changes to sadness in the middle slow movement. The solo flute is so expressive here as it creates spaces with beautiful scales in between the ensemble’s lament (again, a descending circle of 5ths sequence):

[Beautiful flute solos in the slow movement, Bach Brandenburg No. 4](#)

I love the way Bach ends this slow movement with a final expressive flute scale and then a magical Phrygian cadence (a iv-V chord progression that ends on the dominant instead of the tonic):

[Final flute solo in the slow movement and the end with an exquisite Phrygian cadence](#), Bach Brandenburg No. 4

...

After that Phrygian cadence, the mood in the 3rd movement switches instantly to joy with a fugue:

[Opening Fugue in Mvt 3, Bach Brandenburg No. 4](#)

What a wonderful and delicate texture Bach creates when the full ensemble telescopes down to a trio of 1 solo violin and 2 flutes. They play the fugue subject and then dance together in a descending circle of 5ths. It feels so satisfying when the full ensemble re-enters:

[Trio of solo violin and two flutes play fugue subject and expressive episode of descending 5ths, 3rd mvt. Bach Brandenburg No. 4](#)

This movement also features a virtuosic violin cadenza, but now Bach draws on his admiration of Vivaldi's own violin concertos, using fancy cross-string tremolos:

[Another virtuosic violin cadenza with shades of Vivaldi, 3rd mvt. Bach Brandenburg No. 4](#)

Before the final section, Bach writes a very satisfying bass pedal point on G. Absolutely love this moment!—

[Satisfying tonic pedal and final section, 3rd mvt. Bach Brandenburg No. 4](#)

Bach scored Brandenburg 4 for either flutes or recorders. [Here's a recording with recorders.](#)

CONCIERTO DE ARANJUEZ - Joaquin Rodrigo

The sixth piece of music I fell in love with when I was your age is Joaquin Rodrigo's famous guitar concerto, *Concierto de Aranjuez*. It's a piece I hope that will excite you as much as it did me. My notes below are pretty long, because I've even played the guitar solo with LAYO several years ago! If you don't want to read that much, perfectly ok. But click the first link to LISTEN to this very special piece.

Joaquin Rodrigo—[Concierto de Aranjuez](#)

When I was a teenager, I studied classical guitar as seriously as piano. The *Concierto de Aranjuez* by Joaquin Rodrigo, with its exotic, deep flamenco-inspired expression, became a favorite piece the first time I heard it. Several years ago I performed it with LAYO, fulfilling a lifelong dream.

Rodrigo's musical language is both familiar and exotic. It recalls the Baroque music of Bach and Spanish composer Gaspar Sanz. He also conjures the mystery and romance of flamenco ornamentation, harmonies, and colors. *Concierto de Aranjuez* remains the most popular guitar concerto. It inspired many jazz greats including Miles Davis and Chick Corea, who used it as a spinoff for their own creative work. The slow movement of the concerto has been covered in everything from pop songs to car commercials.

Here are some interesting facts about Joaquin Rodrigo:

Rodrigo was blind since the age of 3 when he contracted diphtheria. He composed using a Braille system and dictated to a copyist. Rodrigo himself did not play guitar.

And here's an interesting "insiders" tidbit. Every major classical guitarist has recorded the concerto, except for the greatest guitarist of all—Andres Segovia. During his career, Segovia was responsible not only for elevating the guitar as a solo concert instrument on par with the violin, he also personally commissioned and inspired a large part of its modern repertoire. Yet Segovia refused to perform the *Concierto de Aranjuez* because it was not dedicated to *him*! Rodrigo had dedicated the concerto to his friend, the guitarist from the Madrid conservatory who premiered it in 1940, Regino Sainz de la Maza. Years later, Segovia commissioned Rodrigo to write another concerto for him. The title speaks to Segovia's honor: *Concerto for a Gentleman* (*Concierto para un gentleman*). This became the *second* most popular guitar concerto.

Here are my favorite parts from the *Concierto de Aranjuez*...

Mvt. 1

The strummed guitar solo that begins the concerto sets the mood for a festive flamenco dance called a *bulerias*. It's so rhythmically catchy because the music uses hemiola, sometimes accenting measures in 2 beats and other times in 3 beats.

[Opening guitar solo, Aranjuez Mvt. 1](#)

When the violins enter with their joyful theme, we realize the guitar at the beginning was playing the accompaniment.

[The violin theme, Aranjuez Mvt. 1](#)

The development section in the first movement has a beautiful cello solo that highlights Rodrigo's delicate orchestration. Strings bounce their bows to imitate quiet guitar strumming with accents from the flutes. All of this together makes the next entrance of the guitar solo sound so right and natural. The guitar takes this energy and brings out more of the flamenco fantastical character of the theme as it plays in minor:

[Beautiful cello solo, Aranjuez Mvt. 1](#)

I love the exotic effect of this moment before the recapitulation with the brilliant flamenco guitar strums accompanied by descending swoops in the woodwinds.

[Brilliant flamenco retransition with woodwind swoops, Aranjuez Mvt. 1](#)

Mvt. 2

This movement is among the most beloved pieces of music written in the 20th century. It also has probably the most famous English horn solo ever written. Rodrigo composed it in elegy of the stillbirth of his son. It has the feel of Bach's melodic ornamentation combined with flamenco improvisation, all within a beautifully crafted Romantic era slow movement.

The two parts of the main theme are equally beautiful. Rodrigo clearly knew that, because directly after each part, the guitar answers the English horn with a variation.

[The gorgeous English horn theme Pt 1, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

[The expressive guitar variation of the theme Pt 1, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

[The gorgeous English horn theme Pt 2 Descent, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

[The expressive guitar variation of the theme Pt 2 Descent, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

Even though the English horn is the “star” of this movement, the guitar also has many stellar moments! For instance, these beautiful variations in its upper register.

[Guitar fantasies, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

The center of the movement, though, is an elaborate guitar cadenza that sounds like the deeply inspired improvisation of a master flamenco guitarist. I should mention that this concerto is specifically written for classical guitar, not flamenco guitar. Classical guitar can make a better sustained singing tone and is capable of far more subtle colors. A flamenco guitar is built for rhythm, producing a sound that is brilliant, clipped, almost noisy. The delight of this concerto is how Rodrigo combines both of these qualities. The classical guitarist takes on the persona of a flamenco guitarist, while preserving the particular expressive sound of a classical guitar.

The cadenza begins with the guitar intoning the theme in the moody low register of the instrument, accompanying itself with rolling chords.

[The great guitar cadenza Pt 1, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

In an original touch, Rodrigo interrupts the cadenza with the woodwinds and orchestra in mysterious dialog with the guitar.

[Mysterious dialogue interrupting the cadenza, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

After this brief section of mystery, the guitar resumes its cadenza in a gradual, smouldering, continual variation of the theme heading towards a magnificent climax.

[The great guitar cadenza Pt 2, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

In a virtuoso climax, the guitar strums a dissonant chord in three repeated phrases in its highest register, using brilliant *rasgado* (a flamenco technique of rapid strumming of all the fingers of the right hand). I've performed this concerto, and I can tell you that one reason this climax sounds so intense is that the chord Rodrigo writes for the guitar is devilishly difficult to play! The left hand fingers have to stretch far apart and very high on the fretboard, where it's difficult to make a clear sound. The left hand, in fact, is nearly at the soundboard, not far from where the right hand is so brilliantly strumming.

[The exciting virtuosic flamenco ending of the guitar cadenza, Aranjuez Mvt. 2](#)

Mvt. 3

The third movement is a neoclassic Spanish dance. Neoclassicism is when music has the quality of music from the Baroque or Classic era, but blended with modern harmonies and techniques. Neoclassicism was a big deal in the 20th century. Stravinsky essentially began this approach in the 1920s and a majority of composers, including Rodrigo, embraced it to great effect. Here Rodrigo writes a Spanish dance in the style of Baroque Spanish composers Gaspar Sanz and Domenico Scarlatti. Like them, he uses hemiola as he did in the first movement, alternating measures with 2 and 3 beats. But if you listen carefully, you'll notice he adds wonderful dissonances that Baroque composers would not have used. And these dissonances add to the music a witty, delicious flair.

[Opening Rondo theme in \$\frac{3}{4}\$ and \$\frac{2}{4}\$, Aranjuez Mvt. 3](#)