

PROGRAM NOTES

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Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847)

Piano Sonata No. 1 in E major, Op. 6

- I. Allegretto con espressione
- II. Tempo di Menuetto – Più Vivace
- III. Recitativo: Adagio e senza tempo – Andante – Allegretto con espressione
- IV. Molto Allegro e vivace – Allegretto con espressione

Work Composed: 1825

It is puzzling to Mendelssohn scholars and fanatics alike as to why the brilliant German composer gave up on the medium of the solo piano sonata altogether after just three attempts – especially considering he produced such a thoughtful and fleshed-out debut at only 17 years old. The early romanticist's Beethovenian intellect outshines his youth as he takes after the melodic and structural contours of two of his predecessor's explosive sonatas: No. 13 "Quasi una fantasia" (1801) and No. 28 (1817). Each of Mendelssohn's movements enter in a defiant *attacca* and are quietly linked by a florid diminished arpeggio.

To begin the sonata-allegro, Mendelssohn introduces a *legato* sequence and rhythmic motif of two notes, short and long, in a yearning six-eight meter. The overarching phrase climbs toward the sky like the sun's rays or symphonic strings overlapping in tessitura. A pastoral tune underpinned by a deep Alberti bass follows and outlines the tonic of E major. Measures of chromaticism then carry the ear to B major, the second theme's tonality, and the mystical, downward-floating arpeggio first appears in a deceptive cadence at the end of the exposition. Cuing the development, the opening passage returns, now in G, only to be interrupted by two sudden drops to pianissimo and a lurking tick-tock. The left-hand octaves spur harmonic motion back to the home key, and a truncated recapitulation closes off with Mendelssohn's signature arpeggio for this composition.

Ballerinas on tiptoes or piping woodwinds come to one's mind while relishing the f# minor minuet. Its lilting triple meter, felt broadly in one, and march-like dotted rhythms marked *sempre staccato e leggiero* (always detached and light) characterize an airy yet comic dance, tickled with rolled chords and grace notes. The contrasting trio escalates in kineticism, with a soaring D major subject offset by syncopated pedal tones. Near the closing of the minuet, Mendelssohn evokes a miniature

harmonic cliffhanger by toying around with three accented g# suspensions in the bass that ultimately surrender to the keynote.

The composer's atypical slow movement revisits the imitative counterpoint techniques of Baroque-era music-making. A twisting figure initially bears a resemblance to the start of the *Adagio, ma non troppo, con affetto* of Beethoven's 28th sonata, but then expands into an unmetered, multi-sectioned *Recitativo*. Driven by an illustrative soliloquy, its voices recycle, layer, stretch and pull across the magnitude of the keyboard. The everflowing *fugato* hits a standstill and establishes a temporary sense of groundedness at two *andante* hymns (in out-of-nowhere keys of F# and Bb) carefully sandwiched between episodes. The bulk of the sonata has intentionally maintained a mellow aura thus far — secretly saving horsepower for the electrifying culmination to come...

Via a fantastical transition, Mendelssohn's beloved ritornello crescendos into an octave-laden direct sprint toward the grandiose finale. An orchestra arrives at a fiery *tutti* — complete with Mannheim Rockets, zipping scales and chords galore from the get-go — that unexpectedly unwinds at its coda. The composer, in a desperate cry for composure, tacks on a reprise of his composition's simple first sentence and unveils its recurring figuration once more — an exquisite epilogue fulfilling the cohesive narrative of this underrated musical epic.

Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Piano Sonata No. 4 in C minor, Op. 29

- I. Allegro molto sostenuto
- II. Andante assai
- III. Allegro con brio, ma non leggere

Work Composed: 1917

Suicide is a centric thesis enveloping Prokofiev's fourth sonata, one of two works dedicated to his dear friend and Saint Petersburg Conservatory colleague Maximilian Schmidthof who took his own life in 1913. Gone are the effervescent days of the Russian composer's virtuosic third sonata (Op. 28) — right at once, his fourth conveys trepidation and insecurity. In liner notes for renowned pianist Boris Berman's album recording, Soviet music historian David Fanning writes: "*Allegro molto sostenuto* is the intriguing and apt marking for the first [movement], in which a hesitant and uncertain mood prevails — the reverse of Prokofiev's usual self-confidence."

This early piece, premiered contemporaneously with Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony, Op. 25, upholds tonal centers yet is still not fully diatonic, as the composer is only inching his way toward neoclassical styles. The first pitch of the sonata-allegro is the raised 4 (f#), and its c minor tonic isn't solidified until the fifth measure or sustained for long afterward. The second theme then hovers around E-flat but is contaminated by dissonant grace notes, sevenths and non-chord tones that beef up the music's angst, a sentiment transmitted both loudly and softly throughout. Whispers of introverted, reflective struggle are blatantly juxtaposed with crunchy, labored proclamations that emulate screaming. Mid-recapitulation, a descending f# minor scale materializes as the bridge to an outro. Prokofiev's exit confrontation with his grief — a stepwise line adorned with right-hand ripples — is ghostly and pensive, but all breaks loose again in his semitone-clashed authentic cadence.

Although predictable-sounding on the surface, this masterwork's middle movement is its true *pièce de résistance*. A meditative texture once again lifts the curtain to unearth a hauntingly chromatic baritone in A minor coupled with sturdy thirds in the lowermost range of the piano. The next time around, his somber vocalise, now elevated two octaves, is saturated with an arpeggiated backdrop, yet it laments no less. Like in the *Allegro*, Prokofiev declares confidence in the form of leaping octaves and a bold crescendo, only to effortlessly segue back into translucence and repeat, creating a pattern of instability. Harmonically speaking, he forgoes consonance in favor of abstract spices — it's almost as if he's trying to present something pleasant but can't stop himself from tossing an extra f# in A minor and d# in C and transporting the listener to foreign, magical sonic lands. The song's protagonist is contorted, decorated, inverted and relocated, commanding utmost control and attention to voicing from the performer as the music evolves. Nearly four minutes of turbulence later, he collapses at a *Poco meno mosso*. The song runs out of steam, having sung everything he wished to sing, and enjoys one last introspective breath.

In an iconoclastic fashion, Prokofiev silences his tragic emotions and pondering of death, freeing himself at last from the subdued and tension-bearing reigns of his preceding movements — and, not to mention, mirroring Mendelssohn's Op. 6 some 92 years later. Out of darkness comes celebration: a boisterous C major personality is balanced, in ternary form, with a *dolce* A-flat interlude and, of course, more mode mixture. Despite its incessant aerodynamics, the *Allegro con brio* is actually considered by some pianists to be, in the words of Audrey Puschinsky, "more comfortable and straightforward than the *Andante assai*" — albeit demanding some ingenious finger gymnastics.
