

Petite Suite by Claude Debussy (1886-9)

By emphasizing tonal color and atmosphere rather than the formal structures typically found in classical works, Debussy introduced impressionism into music, following in the wake of the artistic movement of Manet, Monet, and Pissarro. An early work, the *Petite Suite*, hints at this new approach though it alludes more to the style of earlier French masters such as Fragonard and Watteau, famous for their sensual depictions of aristocrats cavorting in the countryside. Indeed, Debussy took inspiration from a volume of poems entitled *Fêtes galantes* (literally, “gallant parties”) by Paul Verlaine (a set that also includes “Claire de Lune” from which evolved one of Debussy’s most famous works.) Written for piano duet and later orchestrated by his colleague Henri Büsser, the *Petite Suite* is charmingly pretty and, like the poems, is at times flavored with a soupçon of sexual innuendo.

In *En bateau* (Sailing), Debussy beautifully captures an initially languid scene, as waves gently lap against a boat drifting on a lake at night. The mood soon perks up as the revellers aboard entertain notions of romance and seduction. In *Cortège*, Verlaine presents a genteel lady preceded by her pet monkey, while a pageboy carries the train of her dress. The music is processional but as her aides surreptitiously peek beneath her dress, there is a subtly erotic undercurrent that plays along with the pageantry. The final two movements, Menuet and Ballet, while not connected to any specific poems, inhabit the same sense of nostalgia, enchantment, and excitement.

Reformation Symphony in D major Op. 107 by Felix Mendelssohn (1829-30)

As a work that saw its affections by its composer crumble from youthful enthusiasm to utter disdain, this symphony has had an intriguing if troubled history. Mendelssohn wrote the *Reformation Symphony* to honor the 300th anniversary of the official presentation of the *Augsburg Confession*, a key document in defining the principles of faith observed by the Lutheran Church and, thereby, a milestone in the Protestant Reformation. The only problem was that the symphony was passed over for the 1830 Berlin celebrations. One explanation is that because of illness, Mendelssohn did not finish the work until perhaps too late. Another theory attributes the omission to anti semitism: though his parents converted to Christianity and had their children baptized as Lutherans, the composer was nevertheless *born* in a prominent Jewish family. Or it may have simply been that the symphony was thought less appropriate than the shorter, more conservative work that was chosen, one by the lesser known composer, Eduard Grell.

After fruitless subsequent efforts to arrange performances of the symphony in Leipzig, Munich, and Paris, it finally got an outing in Berlin two years later. Although the composer had made extensive revisions to the work by then, he thereafter lost faith in it. The work remained unpublished and neglected until 20 years after his death, and as a result it was catalogued as his fifth and final symphony rather than his chronological second. In fact, so pronounced was the composer’s later displeasure with the symphony that he described it as “juvenile” and exclaimed that he “would rather burn it than any other piece of music of mine”.

It seems the difficulties in getting the symphony performed and the negative reaction by critics to its religiously inspired programmatic elements, left the composer feeling that this was a

fatally flawed work. In more recent times, the work has enjoyed a more positive reaction from audiences and critics. In an essay on the symphony by musicologist, Judith Silber, she describes the work as “a programmatic symphony of striking originality” and though it “fell victim to the censure of Mendelssohn’s later years, .. at the time he wrote it he considered it in every way a major work”.

Of particular note in the symphony, is the slow introduction to the first movement which cites in the strings a two bar rising phrase taken from Lutheran liturgy known as the *Dresden Amen*, a leitmotif that Richard Wagner later deployed in his opera *Parsifal* to represent the Holy Grail. Silber argues that while the inner two movements are less obviously programmatic, they can also be seen as expressions of faith (the carol like trio of the second movement) and despair (the deeply felt arioso of the third). In the last movement we are presented with a chorale (*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*) presumed to be by Martin Luther himself. Mendelssohn opens the movement with the theme and pursues it with a series of lively contrapuntal variations, celebratory in tone, finally reaching its restatement at the very end in a rousing climax by the entire orchestra.

Violin Concerto No 1 Op. 19 by Sergei Prokofiev (1917)

Perhaps inured by the *avant-garde* nature of Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, which infamously caused a near riot at its first performance in 1913, Parisian audiences soon began to *crave* music with shock value. Ten years later, hearing the first performance of Prokofiev’s first violin concerto they were left somewhat underwhelmed, with complaints that it was “too romantic” and even, horror of horrors, “Mendelssohnian”. To Prokofiev, who had prided himself on his reputation as an *enfant terrible* at the St Petersburg Conservatory for his propensity to cause outrage by both his outspokenness and his music, this tepid reaction must have seemed more than a little galling.

A century later though, in spite of its romanticism, the violin concerto displays enough dissonances, unusual harmonic modulations, spiky rhythms, and special effects for contemporary audiences to find the work more than satisfactorily modern. Evidently, given the singularity through which 20th century music later passed, where tonality, form, and structure were at times almost completely extinguished, current audiences’ desire for the shock of the new is not what it used to be.

At any rate, the concerto enjoyed a better reception in Prague, a year after its Paris debut, when performed by the Hungarian virtuoso, Joseph Szigeti, who continued to champion the work for many years in Europe and the US. Prokofiev wrote the concerto in 1917, on the cusp of the Russian Revolution, while he was still living in St Petersburg. Despite the political turmoil of the times, this proved to be one of the most fertile periods of his life. In the same year he also wrote the *Classical Symphony*, the third and fourth piano sonatas, *Visions fugitives* for piano, and he started on his third (and what became his most famous) piano concerto.

Unlike the usual sequence of many earlier concertos where a slow movement is placed between two outer fast movements, Prokofiev reverses this by presenting a dizzyingly fast scherzo at the center and surrounding it with two slow movements. The beautiful ethereal opening theme, which reappears in the conclusion of the last movement, was inspired by a love affair and displays Prokofiev compositional prowess at its lyrical best. It’s arguably the

combination of Prokofiev's lyrical sweetness and modern sensibility that makes him today one of the most popular of all 20th century composers. As such the violin concerto is a fine example of one of his more accessible pieces.

Polonaise Brillante in D major Op. 4 by Henryk Wieniawski (1852)

Imagine going to a stand-up comedy show where the star performer relied on old material dredged up from a century ago. The hecklers would be not be amused. Yet, modern day musical artists get away with the equivalent act all the time! Not so the virtuosi of yesteryear. In the 19th century, Wieniawski, along with Paganini, Sarasate, Vieuxtemps, Joachim, and others all made a name for themselves not only as great violinists of their day but as notable composers of some of the instrument's most spectacular works. Why this no longer happens is an interesting question. Blame it on the distractions of modern life or the rigors of being able to compete today as a top soloist. Wieniawski, himself, followed a gruelling schedule of concerts and travel that rarely gave him time to devote to composition, which explains why his output of works was relatively modest. Nevertheless, he wrote some pieces that remain favorites of the violinist's repertoire including two sparkling gems entitled *Polonaise Brillante*. Based on the polonaise form, a kind of Polish dance in 3/4 time that has a characteristic dotted rhythm, this, the earlier of the two pieces, affords opportunities for the soloist to unleash a barrage of virtuoso tricks including harmonics, rapid runs of double stopping, and flying staccatos. Yet it also features some attractive melodic qualities that transform it from a mere etude into a dazzling and memorable work.

Valse-Scherzo Op. 34 by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1877)

Dedicated to (and possibly orchestrated by) Iosif Kotek, a violinist and former compositional student with whom Tchaikovsky became infatuated, the *Valse-Scherzo* was a wonderful token of the composer's affections. In fact, Tchaikovsky toyed with the idea of dedicating his violin concerto to Kotek, who provided inspiration and technical help in its creation the following year, but decided this might attract too much attention to a same-sex liaison that, given the norms of the day, would not have been treated kindly. The piece while short is in three parts featuring a lively waltz in the outer sections reminiscent of his ballet music, while in the more passionate middle section there's a colorful cadenza. The work is an unabashed romantic showpiece for the soloist, which Kotek seems to have anticipated when writing to Tchaikovsky. "Thank you in advance for the waltz; it will surely be wonderful, as is everything that you compose... this shall be a piece to impress everybody". And so it was. But incredible though it may seem, after scathing reviews of Tchaikovsky's violin concerto at its first performance (given by Adolph Brodsky), Kotek refused to perform the later work thinking it might damage his reputation. Thus ended a beautiful friendship - but the magnificence of the *Valse-Scherzo* lived safely on.