

Program Notes

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J. S. Bach (1685–1750)

Little is known about the genesis of Johann Sebastian Bach's Six Unaccompanied Suites for Violoncello, except that they were likely composed around 1720 during his tenure as Capellmeister for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. The town of Cöthen, the tiny seat of this rural principality, boasted a superb musical establishment of well-trained, exceptionally skilled instrumentalists. Several years before Bach's arrival, Prince Leopold, a devoted patron of the arts who both "knew and loved" music, had persuaded his mother to hire musicians from the Prussian court capelle disbanded by Friedrich Wilhelm I. Bach composed some of his most important keyboard and instrumental works in Cöthen, where musical performance was integral to courtly life. Among the capelle *virtuosi* who may have inspired the composition of the Cello Suites were cellist Carl Bernhard Lienicke and gambist Christian Ferdinand Abel.

The excerpts performed from Suite No. 1 in G Major include the courante, sarabande, and gigue, which are standard dances in the Baroque suite, and the minuet, which reflects the practice of inserting optional dances, generally in pairs, between the sarabande and gigue. This courante and gigue favour the Italianate style. The slow, stately sarabande, with its characteristic accent on the second beat, features double, triple, and quadruple stops and constitutes the expressive focal point. Bach composed more sarabandes than any other dance type. The minuet was the most popular dance in Europe in the late Baroque period.

Counted among the finest examples of the mature Baroque suite, Bach's Cello Suites fully explore the idiomatic qualities of the instrument, rivalling in virtuosity his keyboard works from the same period and exemplifying his mastery of counterpoint. The performer must navigate the dense counterpoint and refined harmony that is concentrated in a single melodic line, while maintaining emotional intensity and articulating the distinctive rhythms of the dance.

Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

Béla Bartók composed *Contrasts for clarinet, violin, and piano* in 1938. The work was commissioned by American jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman and Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti. Goodman and Szigeti requested a duo for clarinet and violin (with piano accompaniment) in two contrasting movements suitable for performance separately as well as for release on a single 78 rpm record. They also suggested the inclusion of the brilliant clarinet and violin cadenzas that occur in *Verbunkos* and *Sebes*. The two-movement version of the piece, entitled *Rhapsodies for Clarinet and Violin; Two Dances: Verbunkos and Sebes*, was premièred on 9 January 1939 at Carnegie Hall by Goodman, Szigeti, and pianist Endre Petri. In the meantime, Bartók had completed a slow movement, *Pihenő*, which he inserted between the two dances. He performed the three-movement version, renamed *Contrasts*, with Goodman and Szigeti at Carnegie Hall on 21 April 1940. Shortly thereafter they recorded it for Columbia Records.

As the new title for the piece suggests, Bartók exploits the contrasting timbres of the three instruments, writing highly virtuosic parts for the violin and clarinet, which engage in thematic interplay throughout, and a challenging if more modest piano accompaniment, which sometimes imitates the sounds of the Indonesian *gamelan*. Goodman, whose first impression of the score was that of "fly specks all over the sheet," relied on Szigeti to help him make sense of the logic inherent in Bartók's music.

Contrasts exhibits the influence of Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian folk music. The outer movements, *Verbunkos* (Recruiting Dance) and *Sebes* (Fast Dance), derive from the Hungarian tradition of recruiting young soldiers for the hussar regiments. Travelling from village to village, a small group of hussars performed the *Verbunkos*, a patterned military dance. After sufficient libation, a young peasant recruit would respond with improvised dancing in the *Sebes*. Bartók acknowledged that the pizzicato figuration with which *Verbunkos* begins resembles the opening of Ravel's Sonata, which he and Szigeti had often played together. The middle movement, *Pihenő* (Relaxation), departs from the folk tradition with "night music," in which the clarinet and violin simultaneously mirror each other's lines in a manner reminiscent of concentric ripples on a lake. *Sebes* requires the violinist to play two different instruments, one in *scordatura* and the other in traditional tuning. The clarinetist, having used a clarinet in A for the earlier movements, switches to a B-flat clarinet for this movement's outer sections. In deference to Goodman, *Contrasts* makes the occasional nod to jazz music, perhaps inspired by the recordings of his jazz trio (with Teddy Wilson and Gene Krupa) to which Bartók listened before composing the piece.

Pablo de Sarasate (1844–1908)

"Sarasate plays at the St. James's Hall this afternoon," he remarked. "What do you think, Watson? Could your patients spare you for a few hours?" (Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Red-Headed League*, 1891). Sherlock Holmes was not the only fictional admirer of Sarasate. In Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920), set in 1870s New York, the socially marginal Mrs. Lemuel Struthers hosts a Sunday evening musicale featuring the renowned Sarasate, to which she invites Madame Olenska—and everyone else in the room. After all, Sunday is "the day when New York doesn't know what to do with itself."

Spanish violinist and composer Pablo de Sarasate (1844–1908) garnered fame in the late nineteenth century concertizing throughout Europe and the Americas. Characterized as "the ideal embodiment of the salon virtuoso," Sarasate was known for his elegant, seemingly effortless style of playing, impeccable technique, precise intonation, purity of tone, and unusually fast vibrato. He was also among the first violinists to make recordings.

Sarasate established his reputation by performing works dedicated to him by many of his illustrious contemporaries but was at his best playing his own compositions, which more intentionally showcased his virtuosity and reflected his Spanish heritage. *Playera*, from *Spanische Tänze*, op. 23, no. 1 (1880), belongs to the classical *flamenco* tradition. More specifically, it is a Spanish *seguidilla* of Andalusian origin. The slow tempo, expressive lyricism and improvisatory character of the violin part capture the spirit of the *cante hondo*, one of the oldest *flamenco* song types, in which both singer and accompanying guitarist extemporize according to strict conventions. Sarasate entrusts the *playera* rhythm to the piano, which provides harmonic support. *Habanera*, from *Spanische Tänze*, op. 21, no. 2 (1878), is a dazzling display of virtuosity in which the level of technical difficulty escalates over a series of thematically contrastive sections. The piano, after foreshadowing the violin melody in the introduction, settles into the rhythm of the Afro-Cuban habanera.

Ástor Piazzolla (1921–1992)

Ástor Piazzolla (1921–1992), king of the *Nuevo tango*, was born in Mar del Plata, Argentina. He grew up in New York where he mastered the *bandoneón* and became acquainted with legendary tango singer-composer Carlos Gardel. Upon returning to Buenos Aires in 1937,

he gave concerts and made tango arrangements for Aníbal Troilo, later forming Orquesta del 46 to showcase his own compositions. Piazzolla claimed to have studied with three great teachers: Alberto Ginastera, Nadia Boulanger, and the city of Buenos Aires. Boulanger may have persuaded Piazzolla to pursue his interest in the tango, but Buenos Aires taught him its secrets, which he discovered “in a cold room in a boarding house, in the cabarets in the 1940s, in the cafés with balconies and orchestras, in the people of yesterday and today, in the sound of the streets.”

In the mid-1950s Piazzolla set about to revolutionize the tango, a move that initially met with resistance among traditionalists in Argentina. He formed his Octeto Buenos Aires in 1955 specifically to experiment with new rhythms, new harmonies, melodies, timbres, and forms, ultimately creating *tango nuevo*, which represented a fusion of traditional tango, classical music, and jazz. He soon found acceptance for *tango nuevo* outside Argentina, particularly in France and the United States, and by the 1980s even the Argentinians were hailing him as the saviour of the tango.

Piazzolla composed *Oblivion* in 1982 for Mario Bellocchio’s film *Enrico IV* (1984), adapted from a play by Luigi Piradello. The protagonist is an actor-historian who suffers a fall during an historical pageant. Upon regaining consciousness he assumes the identity of the character that he was playing, Henry IV, Holy Roman Emperor. Piazzolla’s nostalgic tune unfolds in a slow *milonga*, a song genre of Uruguay and Argentina that was a forerunner of the tango.

La muerte del ángel (1962) belongs to the incidental music composed for Alberto Rodriguez Muñoz’s play *El tango del ángel* about an angel who heals the spirits of the unfortunate in Buenos Aires only to be killed in a knife fight. This tango is part of a series of “ángel” compositions from the late 1950s and early 1960s. It falls into three sections, beginning with an aggressive fugue. Piazzolla attributed his contrapuntal facility to his studies with Nadia Boulanger. In the slow middle section, the cello introduces an expressive, lyrical theme that is passed to the rest of the trio. When the fugue theme returns, it is doubled *fortissimo* by violin and cello over chordal piano accompaniment.

Oblivion and *La muerte del ángel* were arranged for piano trio by José Bragato (b. 1915), the cellist in several of Piazzolla’s ensembles, including Octeto Buenos Aires.

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Chopin’s Introduction and Polonaise brillante in C Major, op. 3 originated in October 1829 during a week spent at the country estate of Prince Antoni Radziwiłł, an avid cellist and composer. Chopin delighted in playing chamber music with the Prince and his family and in giving piano lessons to his two daughters, whose charms proved a welcome distraction. He was especially taken with Princess Wanda, and it was for her and her father that he composed this polonaise or “‘Alla Polacca’ with cello accompaniment.” The following year, he added a slow introduction for the Polish cellist Kaczyński, eventually dedicating the entire work to the Austrian cellist Joseph Mark.

Writing to his friend Tytus Woyciechowski in November 1829, Chopin dismissed his new composition as “nothing more than a brilliant drawing-room piece suitable for the ladies.” A mainstay in Polish salons in the early nineteenth century, the keyboard polonaise developed from the folk *polonez* (both sung and danced), which the nobility adopted and transformed into a more sophisticated instrumental piece for dancing at grand balls and ultimately for listening pleasure.

Judging from the level of difficulty in their respective parts, Princess Wanda's technical facility was superior to her father's. The piano part, although primarily accompaniment for the lyrical, expressive melodies given to the cello, typifies Chopin's brilliant, post-Classical style and completely dominates the texture with highly virtuosic passage work and ornamented repetitions of thematic material. Performers have frequently reworked the cello part in the polonaise proper to elevate its brilliance. Tonight's performance uses Leonard Rose's arrangement, which has become standard. Evidently Chopin had sufficient regard for this youthful work (or perhaps for the Princess) to create an arrangement of it for solo piano, which was discovered by the Polish musicologist Jan Weber in the 1980s.

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the waltz became extremely fashionable in Vienna, flourishing among the aristocracy and invading the salon, ballroom, and opera house. Chopin's waltzes are miniature masterpieces of refinement, elegance, and grace, capturing the conventions of the dance and the nostalgic atmosphere of the salon.

The Grande valse brillante, op. 18, written in 1831–32, is dedicated to his pupil Laura Horsford. One of his most popular works, it is the first of eight waltzes that Chopin himself authorized for publication. It owes much to the waltzes of Joseph Lanner, Johann Strauss Sr., and Johann Strauss Jr., which he encountered during his visits to Vienna, as well as to Carl Maria von Weber's *Aufforderung zum Tanz*. A brief introductory invitation to the dance is followed by a medley of seven contrasting waltz tunes, alternately lyrical and brilliant. A forceful return of the invitation announces the recapitulation of the opening waltz tune, whose dramatic pauses in turn usher in the glittering coda. Although Chopin never intended it for dancing, this waltz closed the ballet *Chopiniana* (1908) and was retained in its successor *Les sylphides* (1909).

The Valse in E Minor, op. posth., composed in 1830 at the end of the Warsaw period, has much in common with Chopin's later, more ambitious waltzes—namely its brilliant style, motivic expansion, and large-scale conception. The use of leaping grace notes throughout may have been inspired by Joseph Lanner and Johann Strauss Sr., but structurally, this waltz departs from the standard Viennese pattern. It is organized in a circular three-part form, framed by an introduction and coda. The middle section is in the parallel major mode. When the opening waltz theme returns at the end, it is extended, closing with a surprising harmonic twist that leads directly to the bravura coda.

Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942)

Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942), a Czech composer and pianist of German-Jewish descent, was attracted in the early stages of his career to the atonal expressionism of the Second Viennese School. After his experiences during the First World War, however, he gravitated towards dadaism, using contemporary popular dances as the point of departure for “derisive imitation of ‘elitist’ music,” in keeping with his anti-bourgeois, socialist convictions. Schulhoff was introduced to contemporary American jazz music by the dadaist painter George Grosz and incorporated it into compositions written in the 1920s. During this period he also embraced French neoclassicism. The Five Pieces for String Quartet were composed in December of 1923 in Prague and dedicated to the French composer Darius Milhaud. They were first performed by the Zika Quartet at a festival sponsored by the International Society for New Music in Salzburg on 8 August 1924.

Five Pieces for String Quartet is a neoclassical parody of the Baroque dance suite, but its title, brevity, chromatic harmonic language, and experimentation with timbre also connect it to the *Stücke* associated with the Second Viennese School. It opens with acerbic spoof on the Viennese waltz, notated in duple meter and featuring staccato and pizzicato articulation. The waltz rhythm, established by the cello ostinato, introduces a static open-fifth sonority that recurs in accompaniment figures throughout the suite. The serenade is played *con sordino* and relies upon plucking, strumming, harmonics, and a variety of bowing techniques (*am Frosch*, *col legno*, and *sul ponticello*) to create its eerie atmosphere. The folksong-like melody and constantly shifting accent of the Czech dance are reminiscent of Bartók's music. In the dance-song *Tango milonga*, the first violin plays a lyrical melody with ornamentation evocative of *flamenco* style. The suite closes with a frenzied tarantella dominated by chromaticism and octave leaps with spiccato and pizzicato articulation.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

La valse, Maurice Ravel's last completed ballet, began life in 1906 as sketches for a piece called *Vienna*, which he intended as an homage to Johann Strauss Jr. Ravel envisioned it as "a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which is mingled in my mind the idea of the fantastic whirl of destiny." At the outset of the First World War, he characterized the piece as a "symphonic poem," which implies an extra-musical program, and translated the title into German, *Wien*. Ravel hoped to finish it in 1914, but the trauma of war and the death of his mother prevented him from doing so. In February 1919, when he resumed thinking about the piece, it became a "choreographic poem" entitled *La valse*, which would offer a French perspective on the Viennese waltz. Between December 1919 and February 1920, Ravel completed the original solo piano and two-piano versions *La valse*. The orchestral score was ready by mid-April 1920.

Ravel clearly intended *La valse* for the Ballets Russes, whether or not Sergey Diaghilev had made any firm commitment to produce it. When he and Marcelle Meyer played the two-piano version for Diaghilev, however, the Russian impresario dashed his hopes, exclaiming: "Ravel, it's a masterpiece...but it's not a ballet...It's the portrait of a ballet...It's the painting of a ballet." Their already-strained relationship was severed completely. *La valse* was first performed in the orchestral version as a concert work in Paris in December 1920. The ballet was premièred in Antwerp in 1926 and Paris in 1929.

The short version of Ravel's scenario for the ballet, published in the orchestral score in 1921, focuses on dance imagery: "Through breaks in the swirling clouds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. Little by little they disperse: an immense hall filled with a whirling crowd can be made out. The stage is illuminated gradually. The light of the chandeliers peaks at the *fortissimo*. An imperial court, about 1855." *La valse* has elicited a variety of interpretations from other commentators—including a tragic affair, life in post-war Vienna, the end of the Habsburg Empire, the demise of European high culture, the destruction of civilization, insanity, a *danse macabre*, and a life-and-death struggle—most of which Ravel rejected. He vehemently opposed overtly political readings of the piece, perhaps preferring to hang on to his original conception in the face of the irrevocable changes wrought by war. *La valse* can certainly be viewed as commemorating the birth, life, decay, and death of the waltz. The music unfolds "in two well-defined sequences, each growing to a climax. The first waltz-chain is exuberant and cheerful in the Viennese manner, but the second is harsher and more turbulent, ending in discord"—a discord, in fact, of cataclysmic proportions.