

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Violin Sonata No. 3 in D Minor, Op.108

The Violin Sonata No.3 in D Minor by German composer Johannes Brahms is a work widely beloved by audiences and performers alike. Published in 1889, it was dedicated to his colleague Hans von Bulow, a pianist-conductor who performed Brahms' compositions regularly and frequently programmed them in the repertory of the superb court orchestra at Meiningen. Brahms had the habit of escaping the hot city of Vienna during the summers - specifically to his flower laden villa on the shore of Lake Thun in the summer of 1888, where he completed the third violin sonata. As an extreme self-critic, Brahms was known to be persistently secretive about his drafts and incomplete works, and he destroyed almost all of them. In fact, it took twenty seven years and four discarded attempts since his first dip into the violin sonata genre before he was satisfied enough to publish his first one in 1880. Hence, the third and last of Brahms' violin sonatas is considered a work of his utmost maturity.

Featuring dark passionate themes and a greater integration of piano and violin, the thematic material of the first movement is shared equally by both instruments. A lyrical yet agitated first subject is presented by long tones in the violin, and the piano introduces a sweet arching second subject that is contrived from a motif of step wise motion followed by dotted rhythms. Brahms then characteristically expands the main thematic material extensively to construct the development, recapitulation and coda with various modulations and evolvment. The second movement is one of Brahms' most heartfelt creations; a simple form with touching harmonies and warm textures. The sentimental third movement found in place of a traditional fun scherzo. While it may be light and quick, it consists of a quiet intensity and mystery that is woven into adept motivic development. This culminates in the explosive fourth movement that showcases constant musical exchanges and conversation between both instruments. It reminisces the sombre expressiveness of the opening movement, presented with a new drive and burst of passion.

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)
Sonata for Violin and Piano

French composer and pianist Francis Poulenc was one known for his bipolar creations - an expert with balancing musical wit and deep sensuality. Described as 'half monk and half naughty boy', the dichotomy that comes with Poulenc's musical language is extremely distinctive, and both sides equally important. Poulenc had less interest in harmonic innovation and instead had a consistent commitment to expressive melodies in both his humorous and more serious works. Yet, he stated that he wanted his music to be 'healthy, clear and robust'. Only staying consistent to self-contradiction, Poulenc's nature often caused misunderstanding with colleagues and critics during his life and beyond. He is most aptly described by writer Jessica Duchen as "a

fizzling, bubbling mass of Gallic energy who can move you both to laughter and tears within seconds. His language speaks clearly, directly and humanely to every generation”.

Poulenc explicitly expressed his dislike for the violin, and several attempts at a violin sonata as early as 1918 that were all discarded. His one and only published violin sonata, premiered in 1943, was completed largely due to the persistent nagging of his violinist friend Ginette Neveu. Poulenc referred to his sonata as ‘a monster’ and credited the few violinistic details of the score to Neveu’s contribution. In the midst of the Second World War and the French’s submission to Nazi rule, Poulenc expressed his political defiance through his music. He wrote this sonata in memory of the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, who was shot dead by fascists during the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The first and third movements, ‘Allegro con fuoco’ and ‘Presto tragico’ display anger and grief through spiky rhythms and soft melodies. The second movement, ‘Intermezzo’ carries the quote from Lorca: “The guitar makes dreams cry”. It is contrastingly slow and calm; devoid of fury yet still filled with a sense of tragedy, peppered with Spanish guitar influences.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

La Plus Que Lente (arr. Leon Roques)

Translating to ‘the slower than slow’, La Plus Que Lente was Claude Debussy’s sultry tribute to the world of cafe music. It was in the French composer’s visit to Budapest in 1910 where he was inspired by the Gypsy style cafe ensembles. Debussy wrote of a Gypsy musician: “In an ordinary, commonplace cafe, he gave one the impression of sitting in the depths of the forest; he arouses in the soul that characteristic feeling of melancholy in which we so seldom have the opportunity to indulge”. Premiered in the same year and originally a piano waltz, it is atmospheric and sophisticated, dappled with “syncopated rhythms, elasticity of the melodic line and blue tinted chords”.