

# Program Notes: Paul Huang, *violin*; Wu Han, *piano*

Notes on the program by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

## LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(Born Bonn, Germany, baptized December 17, 1770; died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria)

### Violin Sonata in G Major, op. 30, no. 3

**Composed:** 1801–1802

**Published:** 1803, Vienna

**Dedication:** Aleksandr I, Tsar of Russia

**Other works from this period:** Detailed in the notes below

**Approximate duration:** 15 minutes

In the summer of 1802, Beethoven's physician ordered him to leave Vienna and take rooms in Heiligenstadt, today a friendly suburb at the northern terminus of the city's subway system but two centuries ago a quiet village with a view of the Danube across the river's rich flood plain. It was three years earlier, in 1799, that Beethoven first noticed a disturbing ringing and buzzing in his ears, and he sought medical attention for the problem soon thereafter. He tried numerous cures for his malady, as well as for his chronic colic, including oil of almonds, hot and cold baths, soaking in the Danube, pills, and herbs. For a short time he even considered the modish treatment of electric shock. On the advice of his latest doctor, Beethoven left the noisy city for the quiet countryside, with the assurance that the lack of stimulation would be beneficial to his hearing and his general health.

On October 6, 1802, following several months of wrestling with his diminishing hearing (as well as a constant digestive distress and the wreck of a recent affair of the heart—the thought of Beethoven as a husband threatens the moorings of one's presence of mind!), Beethoven penned the most famous letter ever written by a musician—the "Heiligenstadt Testament." Intended as a will written to his brothers (it was never sent, though he kept it in his papers to be found after his death), it is a cry of despair over his fate, perhaps a necessary and self-induced soul cleansing in those pre-Freudian days. "O Providence—grant me at last but one day of pure joy—it is so long since real joy echoed in my heart," he lamented. But—and this is the miracle—he not only poured his energy into self-pity, he also channeled it into music. The Symphonies nos. 2–5, a dozen piano **sonatas**, the Fourth Piano **Concerto**, the Triple Concerto, the opera *Fidelio*, three sonatas for violin and piano (**Opus 30**), and many songs, chamber works, and keyboard compositions were all composed between 1802 and 1806.

Beethoven had completed the three Opus 30 sonatas for violin and piano by the time he returned from Heiligenstadt to Vienna in the middle of October 1802. The Sonata no. 3, in G major, is the most compact and cheerful such piece in Beethoven's creative output. The main **theme** of the opening **sonata-form movement** balances, in good **Classical** fashion, a frisky  **motive** in rolling scale steps with a more lyrical idea. The second theme is full of incident, with mercurial shifts of **harmony**, a half-dozen thematic fragments, sudden changes of dynamics, and sharply accented notes. The **trills** and bustling rhythmic activity that close the **exposition** are carried into the **development** section, which provides only a brief formal deflection before a full **recapitulation** of the exposition's materials rounds out the movement. Though the second movement is marked to be played "in the tempo of a **minuet**," this is music grown from song rather than dance, sweet and lyrical and gracious, that returns to its lovely opening strain throughout in the manner of a **refrain**. The closing movement is a genial **rondo** whose sunny vivacity and sparkling passagework recall Haydn's *Gypsy* rondos.

\*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 94.

## JOHANNES BRAHMS

(Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany; died April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria)

### Violin Sonata in d minor, op. 108

**Composed:** 1886–1888

**Published:** 1889

**Dedication:** Hans von Bülow

**First performance:** Detailed in the notes below

**Other works from this period:** Detailed in the notes below

**Approximate duration:** 21 minutes

For many years, Brahms followed the sensible practice of the Viennese gentry by abandoning the city when the weather got hot. He spent many happy summers in the hills and lakes of the Salzkammergut, east of Salzburg, but in 1886, his friend Joseph Widmann, a poet and librettist of considerable distinction, convinced Brahms to join him in the ancient Swiss town of Thun, twenty-five kilometers south of Bern in the foothills of the Bernese Alps. Brahms rented a flower-laden villa on the shore of Lake Thun in the nearby hamlet of Hofstetten and settled in for a long, comfortable summer. The periods away from Vienna were not merely times of relaxation for Brahms, however, but were actually working holidays. Some of his greatest scores (the Violin Concerto, the Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies, the Piano Concerto no. 2, the *Haydn Variations*, the *Tragic Overture*, and numerous smaller works) were largely realized at his various summer retreats in earlier years. The three summers that he spent at Thun (1886–1888) were equally productive: the Violin Sonatas nos. 2 and 3, the c minor Piano Trio, the Second Cello Sonata, *Gypsy Songs*, *Choral Songs* (op. 104), the *Lieder* of opp. 105–107, and the Double Concerto were all written there. Brahms began the Third Violin Sonata, op. 108, at Hofstetten during the summer of 1886 but composed most of the score during his sojourn two years later. The sonata's premiere was given on December 22, 1888, in Cologne by the composer and the celebrated Hungarian violinist, composer, and pedagogue Jenő Hubay.

Brahms's three violin sonatas are works of his fullest maturity. In 1853, he had written a **schерzo** for a collaborative sonata (Schumann and Albert Dietrich chipped in with the other movements) for Joseph Joachim, but during the following twenty-seven years, he began and destroyed four further attempts in the genre. (Brahms was almost pathologically secretive about his sketches and unfinished works, virtually all of which he destroyed.) It was not until the G Major Sonata (op. 78) of 1880 that he was pleased enough with any of these violinistic progeny to admit one into the world; the Opus 100 Sonata followed in 1886 and Opus 108 came two years later. His reasons for concentrating on this form at the time may have been personal as well as musical—as each of these works was finished, he sent it as a sort of peace offering to Joseph Joachim, from whom he had been estranged for some time. Brahms, it seems, had sided with Joachim's wife, the mezzo-soprano Amalie Weiss, in the couple's divorce proceedings, and bitter feelings were incited between the old friends, though Joachim never wavered in his support and performance of Brahms's music. The rift was not fully healed until Brahms offered Joachim the Double Concerto in 1887.

The d minor Violin Sonata was dedicated to Hans von Bülow, a musician of gargantuan talent celebrated as both pianist and conductor, who played Brahms's compositions widely and made them a mainstay in the repertory of the superb court orchestra at Meiningen during his tenure there as Music Director from 1880 to 1885. The

dedication to the pianist-conductor is especially appropriate for this sonata, since the piano is more thoroughly integrated with the violin than in the earlier two sonatas, in which the keyboard serves largely as accompanist to the string instrument's wordless songs. Violin and piano share equally the thematic material of the opening movement: the violin presents the principal subject, a lyrical inspiration marked by long notes that give way to quick neighboring tones; the piano's arching second theme is superbly constructed from a two-measure motive of step-wise motion followed by a hesitant dotted-rhythm gesture. The development section is largely occupied with a discussion of the main theme. A full recapitulation and an ethereal **coda** grown from the main theme close the movement.

The **Adagio** is one of Brahms's most endearing creations, an instrumental hymn of delicately dappled emotions, touching melody, and suave harmonies that caused Peter Latham to note in his biography of the composer, "Brahms wrote nothing more gracious than these sonatas, in which he never seeks grandeur and woos rather than compels." The third movement (which the score instructs should be played **con sentimento**) replaces the traditional scherzo with an **intermezzo** of precisely controlled intensity and masterful motivic development. The sonata-form finale resumes the darkly expressive eloquence of the opening movement with its impetuous main theme. A chordal subject initiated by the piano provides contrast, but the unsettled mood of the first theme remains dominant through the remainder of the movement. "Perfect as each movement of the three violin sonatas is," wrote Karl Geiringer, "they seem, in this last movement, to have reached their culminating point."

## BÉLA BARTÓK

(Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary; died September 26, 1945, New York City)

### **Hungarian Folk Tunes for Violin and Piano**

**Composed:** 1909; arranged in 1926–1927 by Joseph Szigeti from Bartók's *For Children*

**Published:** 1927

**Other works from this period:** Violin Concerto no. 1 (1907–1908); Fourteen **Bagatelles** for Solo Piano, op. 6 (1908); String Quartet no. 1, op. 7 (1908–1909); Two Elegies for Solo Piano, op. 8b (1908–1909)

**Approximate duration:** 9 minutes

Béla Bartók's creative personality was shaped by the field expeditions that he made as a young man with his friend and colleague Zoltán Kodály in search of the indigenous music of his native Hungary: both published their research in some of the most important ethnomusicological studies of the twentieth century, both allowed their original compositions to be permeated by the influence of folk music, and both were dedicated to perpetuating the traditions that they found and encouraging a wider appreciation of them. This last concern led Kodály to develop a comprehensive method of music education based on folk models that revolutionized the teaching of the subject in Hungary. While Bartók did not have as thorough an involvement in formal music education for younger students as Kodály, he did write a number of folk-inspired works intended to foster in children the development of technical performing skills, musical understanding, and an appreciation of Hungarian culture.

The best known of Bartók's pedagogical works is the *Mikrokosmos* (ca. 1926, 1932–1939), a collection of 153 graded pieces for piano based on folk idioms that progress from one-finger exercises to numbers of virtuoso difficulty. Among his other works for students are the *Ten Easy Pieces* (1908, arranged for orchestra in 1931 as the *Hungarian Sketches*), the four volumes of piano pieces titled *For Children* (1908–1909), and *First Term at the Piano* (1913), as well as the *Twenty-Seven Two- and Three-Part Choruses for Children* (1935). *For Children* was written at the

request of the Budapest publisher Károly Rozsnyai, "in order," said the composer, "to acquaint the piano-studying children with the simple and non-Romantic beauties of folk music." These aphoristic pieces (eighty-five in the original 1909 version; six were omitted in Bartók's 1945 revision for the British publisher Boosey & Hawkes) were settings of Hungarian and Slovak children's songs and game calls that retained the original melodies but were fortified with simple but harmonically unconventional accompaniments. Bartók distilled these accompaniments from the countryside practices on which he was then becoming expert rather than using the standard conservatory-bred chord changes. He referred to this process of bringing a peasant melody into a cultivated setting as "the mounting of a jewel," and few works encapsulate the many facets of Bartók's musical personality—as teacher, pianist, composer, folklorist, and Hungarian nationalist—better than *For Children*.

In 1926, the brilliant Hungarian virtuoso Joseph Szigeti, whose recent American debut in Carnegie Hall had confirmed his international reputation, transcribed seven numbers from *For Children* for violin and piano as the *Hungarian Folk Tunes*. Bartók was so pleased with Szigeti's arrangements that he agreed to give a joint recital with him in Budapest the following year. (Three years later, Bartók himself arranged forty-four pieces from *For Children* as the Duos for Two Violins.) Bartók and Szigeti thereafter remained steadfast musical allies—Bartók wrote the Rhapsody no. 1 (*Folk Dances*) for Szigeti in 1928; they performed together on numerous occasions (including a memorable recital at the Library of Congress in 1940, Bartók's first appearance after emigrating to this country); and the violinist was instrumental in arranging both the 1938 commission from clarinetist Benny Goodman that resulted in *Contrasts* (also inspired by Hungarian folk idioms) and the 1943 commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation that allowed Bartók to compose the Concerto for Orchestra.

The *Hungarian Folk Tunes* embody many of the styles and moods of the country's indigenous music: melancholy, dance-like, humorous, fiery, and bardic. Though Szigeti did not note them in his transcriptions, several of Bartók's original pieces have titles that denote their source or content: **Parlando** (i.e., "in a spoken manner"), **Andante con moto** (*Soldier's Song*), **Allegro vivace** (*Swineherd's Dance*), *Andante* (*Ballad*), and **Poco vivace** (*Drunkard's Song*).

## CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

(Born October 9, 1835, Paris; died December 16, 1921, Algiers, Algeria)

### **Violin Sonata no. 1 in d minor, op. 75**

**Composed:** 1885

**Published:** 1885

**Dedication:** Martin-Pierre-Joseph Marsick

**Other works from this period:** *Allegro appassionato* for Solo Piano, op. 70 (1884); *Wedding Cake* in A-flat Major for Piano and Strings, op. 76 (1885); Symphony no. 3 in c minor, op. 78 (1886); *Le carnaval des animaux* (1886); *Havanaise* in E Major for Solo Violin, op. 83 (1887)

**Approximate duration:** 24 minutes

Saint-Saëns was nearly fifty before he applied his elegant craft to the composition of a violin sonata. The Sonata in d minor, dedicated to the Belgian violinist and Paris Conservatoire faculty member Martin-Pierre-Joseph Marsick, was composed in 1885, when the composer had finally regained his health on a trip to Algiers after the exhaustion occasioned by the premiere two years earlier of *Henry VIII*, the fifth of his thirteen operas. The sonata is evidence of the French interest in the traditional Classical genres of symphony, concerto, and chamber music that flourished following the founding of the Société Nationale in 1871 by Saint-Saëns and some of his colleagues to foster the musi-

cal life of the country (and to redress the pervasive influence in France of Germanic Wagnerism after the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870). Saint-Saëns, who had been nurtured on the musical literature of eighteenth-century Classicism, produced some three dozen chamber works during his long life, from the Quintet for Piano and Strings of 1855 (when he was twenty) to the Bassoon Sonata of 1921 (at age eighty-six)—a body of work that led the Irish musicologist and composer Arthur Hervey to comment, "It may be said with truth that Saint-Saëns was the first French composer who showed himself able to compete successfully in the intimate and yet supremely difficult genre [of chamber music] with the German masters of the past."

The Violin Sonata no. 1, like Saint-Saëns's Third Symphony (*Organ*) and Fourth Piano Concerto, is divided into two large parts, each of which contains a pair of linked movements. The opening section of the sonata is built from two themes: a melody of anxious melancholy in compound triple **meter** and a broadly heroic strain given by the violin above the rippling accompaniment of the piano. These handsome themes are juxtaposed until they lead without pause to the *Adagio*, which is built on a contemplative song entrusted to the violin. The music becomes more animated as it proceeds but rediscovers its halcyon demeanor by the end of the movement. Part II begins with a sparkling scherzo that recalls similar movements of Mendelssohn in its aerial sprightliness; a long-note melody in the violin provides contrast in the central **trio** section. The finale, which

follows without pause, is an uninhibited display of blazing virtuosity for both participants (Saint-Saëns was a master pianist throughout his life; he practiced for two hours on the morning of the day that he died in Algiers in 1921), one of the greatest showpieces in the violin-sonata repertory.

The American critic Robert A. Hague writes:

Saint-Saëns's Sonata no. 1 is marked by the perfection of craftsmanship, the grace of proportion, and elegance of finish, together with the lucidity of thought and the sincerity and simplicity of emotion characteristic of his best work. A product of the composer's maturity, this music has intimacy, refinement, delicacy of shading; it reflects the calm and happy spirit of an artist who, seeing his ideas plainly and clearly in his mind's eye, goes about arranging them in their proper patterns with loving care.



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