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PROGRAM NOTES

James Ehnes, violin, and Andrew Armstrong, piano
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Sonata No. 5 in F Major, Op. 24

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: 1770, Bonn, Germany

Died: 1827, Vienna Austria

Composed: 1801

The popular “Spring Sonata” did not get its nickname until after Beethoven's death. Yet while it is not authentic, the sobriquet is quite appropriate for this sonata, which is characterized by a special warmth and serenity throughout its four movements. Written during 1800-1801 together with the more tempestuous Sonata in A minor, Op. 23, it was published — like its companion piece — with a dedication to one of Beethoven's patrons, Count Moritz von Fries.

The first movement opens with one of Beethoven's most endearing lyrical melodies. Subsequent themes show a little more dynamic energy, but it is more like a gentle breeze rustling the leaves than a strong wind, let alone a storm. The second-movement Adagio is based on a single melody of rare delicacy, played in turn by both instruments.

Beethoven's shortest sonata movement, the scherzo, grows from a simple rhythmic idea, repeated constantly by the piano, with an off-beat response from the violin. The trio section, which takes only about twenty seconds to play, is a continuous rush up and down the scale in the form of two highly condensed musical phrases.

The final Rondo opens with a melodious theme followed by a slightly more rhythmical first episode. The second episode provides contrast by switching to the minor mode, syncopations in the rhythm, and chromatic half-steps in the melody. However, these tensions prove to be only temporary, and the peaceful rondo theme soon returns, confirming the joyful and sunny atmosphere that has dominated the entire composition.

Sonata No. 1 in D Major, Op. 12, No. 1 **Ludwig van Beethoven**

Born: 1770, Bonn, Germany

Died: 1827, Vienna Austria

Composed: 1798

Mozart had developed the genre of the violin sonata from a keyboard piece with an almost negligible violin part to a duo for two completely equal partners. For Beethoven, that equality was a given from the start, as were the sonata, variation, and rondo structures that Mozart had employed in his sonatas. Yet Beethoven greatly increased the level of contrast between the themes and extended the range of modulations far beyond anything found in Mozart.

To 21st-century ears, these three sonatas may indeed sound like “early Beethoven,” and we like to think about them in terms of their proximity to Mozart. Yet that is not necessarily how his contemporaries heard it, and a review published in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* in 1799 shows that the more radical middle-period works were not the first ones to raise the eyebrows of a conservative critic. The anonymous reviewer was confused and deeply disturbed by the unusual modulations in Opus 12, which he found “bizarre and painful,”

hearing only “scholarship and again scholarship, but no nature, no real singing.” Even if his assessment sounds surprisingly harsh today, one must give the critic credit for taking such a close look at the works under review, subjecting them to such a thorough analysis. And one must acknowledge the extent to which Beethoven was already rocking the boat in these seemingly innocuous pieces of Hausmusik.

Sonata, variation, and rondo, respectively, are the forms of the three movements of the D-major sonata. In realizing these forms, Beethoven’s personal fingerprints are present at every turn, from sudden dynamic changes, accents on the “wrong” parts of the measure, to virtuosic runs and trills, and much more. Perhaps the most forward-looking moment in the sonata is the conclusion of the last movement, with a last-minute modulation to a distant tonality and the ingenious return to the home key, followed by a brief moment of suspense and an abrupt ending.

Violin Sonata in G Minor, L. 140 **Claude Debussy**

Born: 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died: 1918, Paris, France

Composed: 1917

In 1916, as Janáček’s opera *Jenufa* received its overdue Prague debut, and as the Battle of Verdun raged along the Western Front, Claude Debussy was slowly dying of cancer. Photographs from that year show Debussy gaunt and hollow eyed, and his personal correspondence reveals a man burdened

with sorrow. “Exhausted by chasing phantoms but not tired enough to sleep,” he wrote his wife, “...Nothing ... but my poor anxious heart and an urgent desire to see the end of this marking time which is like a premature burial.”

When the war began, anti-German sentiment led French composers – including the nationalistic Debussy – to write propagandistic works to fill the void left by German music. As the body count soared higher and Debussy’s own body continued to fail, he fell into a deep, world-weary melancholy. “When will hate be exhausted?” he demanded. “When will the practice cease of entrusting the destiny of nations to people who see humanity as a way of furthering their careers?”

Despite the Sonata’s brevity, Debussy struggled tremendously to complete it. He based the structure not on the popular sonata form, but on the chamber music of eighteenth-century France; the intimacy and dance rhythms further illuminate this musical heritage. The texture of the first movement is thin and sparse, the mood both fatigued and agitated. Later, multi-octave arpeggios in the piano give a sense of

spaciousness, evoking the waves of the sea which forever inspired Debussy. His mastery of tonal color is evident in the variety of violin articulations and textures in the piano. Marked “capricious and light,” the second movement, with its staccato bursts and pizzicato, provides a jaunty contrast to the first. Smearred notes in the violin mimic the playing of Gypsy fiddlers.

“By one of those very human contradictions,” wrote Debussy, the finale is “full of happiness and uproar.” He added that one should not be “taken in by works that seem to fly through the air; they’ve often been wallowing in the shadows of a gloomy brain.” Of the frequent shifts in tempo, key, and mood, he added, “It goes through the most curious contortions before ending up with a simple idea which turns back on itself like a snake biting its own tail – an amusement whose attractions I take leave to doubt!”

Flight of the Bumblebee

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (arr. Jascha Heifetz)

Born: 1844, Tikhvin, Russia

Died: 1908, Lyubensk, Russia

Composed: 1899-1900

This piece comes from an opera by Rimsky-Korsakov, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. *Tsar Saltan* is the tenth of his fifteen operas. As was fairly common with music for both operas and ballet, suites were made from some of them so that they could live in the concert hall as well as on stage. Rimsky-Korsakov composed the music for *Tsar Saltan* in 1889–90, and the opera was premiered in the fall of 1900.

The Flight of the Bumblebee comes from the third act of *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* when the dashing young Prince Guidon is transformed into a bumble bee to make a

‘flying’ visit to his father’s court. The Flight of the Bumblebee is Rimsky-Korsakov’s most well-known and instantly recognizable work, and there are many arrangements for various instrumental configurations. Though only a couple of minutes long, it is wonderfully vivid and illustrative.

Over the centuries, the greatest violinists wrote or arranged music to show off their talents and dazzle the audience. Jascha Heifetz adapted Rimsky-Korsakov’s famous “Flight of the Bumble Bee” for violin.