Program Notes

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) was a prolific German composer during the first half of the 18th century. Having produced over 1,100 works, Bach was famously known for creating music that represented the essence of the Baroque era. Baroque music was known for its abundance of polyrhythmic texture, theme and variations form, fugue and counterpoint, as well as sacred or noble themes.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, composers wrote and performed chamber sonatas, as well as partitas (or suites) which were typically dance music popularized throughout the Baroque era. These partitas were composed in dance movements: allemande, bourrée, chaconne, corrente, sarabande, minuet, loure, gavotte, and gigue. These dances are all characterized by their national backgrounds and rhythmic differences. Bach completed his partitas and sonatas for solo violin just before 1720, which is dated on all the works' manuscripts. During 1720, Bach delved into the realm of instrumental music, specifically solo violin music. This was due to his position as Kapellmeister at the court of Leopold, during which he did not compose any church music.

The ***D Minor Partita*** has the fewest movements of all Bach's partitas, only using the allemande, corrente, sarabande, giga, and ciaccona. The opening movement (allemande) presents a variety of rhythms performed in a fast manner, while in contrast, encompasses a connected, steady "flow" of solo melodic material. This work does not resemble a dance in sound or notation, but rather exemplifies philosophical elements. The music, though steady in motion and movement, acts similarly to that of a conversation between two individuals, which can be heard through the terraced dynamics and slurred phrases, providing direction from one point to the next.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) was a prodigious Austrian performer and composer. As the firstborn son of Leopold Mozart, he was taught violin and keyboard at a very early age, and was known as a "child prodigy," due to his virtuosic performances and his vast knowledge of music composition. The Classical music era was a time of exclusivity; music composition and performance were left to the upper-classes, while working class citizens were unable to attend the Classical symphonies and operas. Thus, Mozart's publications were created solely for the purpose of satisfying the bourgeoisie, and regal nobility that paid for his compositions on commission.

In 1778, Mozart composed a series of sonatas for piano and violin, which he assigned "Opus 1;" despite having composed numerous works already; the title signifies that these violin sonatas were the first major start of his career. Mozart titled these works "the Mannheim sonatas," after his five-month residence in Mannheim, Germany.

One of the Mannheim sonatas is the ***Sonata in E-flat Major***. The first movement is written in sonata form, so the music appears in three sections: exposition, development, and recapitulation. The first movement's exposition begins with a loud, triumphant sound. The beat is steady and static, which adds to the clarity of the first movement. The violin grows soft, graceful, and smooth, and then returns back to the loud, staccato articulation. The first movement oscillates from smooth, elongated rhythms, to shorter, faster rhythms. A number of key changes occur, from E-flat major, to C minor, and even G major. Several mood changes occur, as well; the piece begins with a victorious, triumphant sound, but when the development section arrives, the mood changes into a mysterious, anxious tone. When the recapitulation arrives, and the same triumphant sound is heard once again. The first movement of Sonata in E-flat Major concludes in the same way it started: bold and confident. These emotions may allude to how Mozart felt at the start of his career.

Petyr Ilych Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) was described as a precocious and sensitive person. At the age of five, he started piano lessons with his caretaker, with whom he bonded closely. Unfortunately, Tchaikovsky's father resigned from his career, dismissed the caretaker, and the whole family moved from Moscow to St. Petersburg, Russia. Furthermore, a young Tchaikovsky was dropped off at a boarding school in St. Petersburg, completely cut off from his family until 1852. In 1854, Tchaikovsky's mother died from cholera, which led him to using music and composition as a coping mechanism. It is without a doubt that Tchaikovsky carried a lot of emotional trauma throughout his life, and to make his grief and anxieties worse, he was a homosexual man in 19th century Russia, which was a death sentence. Tchaikovsky lived his (rather short) life in denial, consistently struggling with internal conflict with his sexuality, up until his suicide in 1893.

Tchaikovsky was a profound composer during the era of Romanticism. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the purpose and motivations behind compositions evolved from profit and religious themes. Composers were creating their works for themselves, rather than their employers and clients. Romantic composers used deeper, more sentimental reasons for their works, rather than monetary incentives. Tchaikovsky suffered sorrow for a majority of his life, thus he composed his works from a tormented, deeply emotional perspective.

In 1875, Tchaikovsky composed his first piano concerto in B-flat minor. Two months after that concerto was published, he composed his first work for violin and orchestra, which he titled ***Sérénade Mélancolique,*** and kept in the same key of B-flat minor. This piece exhibits somber and sullen tones, but grows in intensity as the music progresses. The volume swells and the rhythms become more animated, until the return of the opening theme, where the music slows and darkens once more.

Musicologists have described Sérénade Mélancolique as a symbol of Tchaikovsky's inner torment: the sullen, sorrowful opening theme is dark, much like his childhood and early career; the middle section is chaotic, yet beautiful. Perhaps the middle section of the serenade represents the inner battle between denial and acceptance, two feelings with which Tchaikovsky struggled immensely.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) was known as one of the most important composers of the 20th century. As a Hungarian composer, Bartók had pride in his national identity, which led to his collecting of over a thousand folk dances and tunes, as well as composing music with a nationalist style. Nationalism in music refers to musical ideas and motives that reflect specific countries or regions, cultures, and ethnicities. Additionally, Bartók was an ethnomusicologist meaning he collected, recorded, and studied music from different cultures. He devoted a lot of time to study and travel, and visited numerous villages and towns throughout Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Upon hearing folk music performances, Bartók recorded them with an Edison phonograph that he carried in his suitcase. Bartók later emigrated to the United States after his home country became a fascist nation. He worked at Columbia University as an ethnomusicologist, and later died from leukemia in 1945.

In 1915, Bartók composed six short piano pieces, which he made into a suite and later titled ***Romanian Folk Dances***. Eventually, he created an arrangement for string orchestra, and later, an arrangement for solo fiddle and piano (for Zoltán Székely, a violinist with whom Bartók collaborated frequently.) I personally cherish these fiddle works due to their similarities to Appalachian folk music I played in my past!

The first movement, "Joc cu bâtă," displays a multitude of musical patterns, and a lovely communication between piano and violin. The rhythms presented are similar to that of a waltz, despite the first movement being in double-time, rather than triple. The piano begins in an ominous manner, with strong downbeats in a minor key, and then the violin steps in with a more triumphant, jovial sound. Beginning in a lower range, the violin's volume swells as it ascends into a higher tone.

The second movement, "Brâul," presents a tender, merry sound, oscillating between sharp and short articulation, and slurred, "flowing" articulation. Much like the first movement, "Brâul" utilizes rhythmic and melodic patterns, with the violin beginning in a lower range, and then progressing into a higher octave. The second movement ends abruptly, leading directly into the exposition of the third movement, "Pe Loc."

"Pe Loc" is a significantly different movement due to its complete change in register, as well as timbre. The piano introduces the piece, and the violin arrives with harmonics (a tone produced by lightly touching the string, rather than pressing down.) This movement certainly stands out from the rest of the five folk dances, due to the high pitches produced, and the slow andante tempo. "Pe Loc" is a nationalistic movement; the violin's tonality and melodies are a reference to Romanian culture.

The violin and piano are more graceful in sound and rhythm throughout the fourth movement, "Buciumeana." The dissonant sounds created between the instruments are actually a reference to Bartók's time in the Balkan regions of Romania. The composer himself felt the dissonance and contrasting intervals were indicative of "pure" folk music from Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia.

The fifth movement, "Poargă Românească," is a brisk and jarring piece, from the constantly-changing time signatures to the skip-like melodies produced by the violin. The alternation between double time and triple time further asserts this movement as a folk dance. Also, the violin's grace notes add a more jovial and free sound to the music; Bartók added these to create a more syncopated, merry sound quality.

Lastly, "Măruntel" refers to other performances Bartók encountered during his travels in Romania. Every melodic and rhythmic pattern presented is actually a reference to different folk songs he encountered and documented for later research. The piece begins with a bold introduction, then displays a wide array of patterns and double-stops, meaning two strings played at once. Much like the other movements of the suite, "Măruntel" grows in volume and range as the piece progresses, eventually leading to the grand finale, which Bartók included as a rendition of another Romanian folk dance he had heard abroad.

~Notes by Chloé Sergent