Leoš Janáček (1854-1928): Violin Sonata, JW VII/7

As Czech composer Leoš Janáček reached his sixtieth birthday, Europe was quickly approaching catastrophe. Just days earlier, Archduke Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated in Sarajevo. A month later, war erupted between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, a conflict which quickly spread across the globe. During those first months of war, “when we were expecting the Russians to enter Moravia,” Janáček wrote his first edition of the Violin Sonata, revising it multiple times before completing the final version in 1921. Those seven years would prove both personally and politically tumultuous for Janáček: after years of neglect his opera Jenufa found international acclaim, but an extramarital affair and an obsession with a much younger woman put strain on his marriage. The end of World War I in 1918 saw independence for Czechoslovakia, something the fiercely nationalistic Janáček saw as one of the few good outcomes of the war.

Reflecting on the Sonata, Janáček wrote that in this work he “could just about hear the sound of steel clashing in [his] troubled head.” The main theme of the first movement is dark and brooding. It contains a lilting quality reminiscent of the composer’s vocal writing, which he based on the speech patterns of his native Czech.

Janáček composed the Ballada as a separate work, and then incorporated it into the Sonata. The movement is characterized by its graceful, lyrical melodies and evocation of the pastoral, a reflection of Janáček’s work collecting and cataloging Moravian folk music. The opening bars of the Allegretto see the violin and piano engaged in a biting call-and-response, melodic fragments falling like shards of busted glass. Janáček sets this against a more lyrical, dreamy middle section, but this short-lived reverie ends with a return of the movement’s opening material.

In the Adagio, the piano plays an exhausted dance; the violin responds with both angry, fragmented outbursts and tender lyricism. These motifs build to an intense climax as both melodies ascend to a fever pitch. A high tremolo in the piano’s right hand, marked con forza, represents “the Russian armies invading Hungary;” despite this sonic onslaught, the violin continues its yearning, mournful tune. The movement closes as it began, subsiding into despair.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828): Fantasie for Violin and Piano in C Major, D. 934

Like the Moravia of Janáček’s sixties, Schubert’s Austria was rife with political unrest. He lived his entire adult life in what became known as the Biedermaier period. This thirty-three-year period between 1815 and the March Revolutions of 1848 was characterized by relative peace and prosperity for Austria, but also violent political repression. In the wake of the devastating Napoleonic Wars, Austria’s leaders created a secret police force to root out dissent, liberalism, and potential revolution. In 1820, Schubert and his friends were arrested on unfounded charges of plot-
ting to overthrow the government, and though Schubert was released, the disturbing experience had a profound effect on him.

Ludwig van Beethoven's death in the spring of 1827 was also devastating to Schubert, and would shake the foundations of Vienna's musical culture as mourners searched for a new composer to take up his mantle. Though barely thirty and in relative obscurity, Schubert, a native Viennese, saw himself a natural successor to Beethoven's legacy. It was not to be. Less than two years after Beethoven's death, Schubert would succumb to an unconfirmed illness (diagnosed as typhoid fever at the time) at the age of thirty-one; his last request was to hear Beethoven's Fourteenth String Quartet.

The economic stability of the Biedermaier period promoted the growth of a middle class with money to spend on at-home music-making. To fill this niche, composers like Schubert wrote pieces playable by small groups of amateur musicians. Schubert's wealthier friends often hosted house concerts of his music that would come to be called “Schubertiades.” The Fantasy in C major, however, Schubert wrote for public performance to capitalize on the vogue of virtuoso Niccolò Paganini. Written for Czech violinist Josef Slavík, one of Paganini's young rivals, the Fantasy provides ample fireworks.

In the slow, stately introduction, the tone of the piano's soft tremolos recalls a swelling orchestra. Veering between major and minor keys, the violin intones a tender, graceful melody with aching upward leaps. The second movement is a true bravura showpiece for both violin and piano: large leaps, whirlwind chromatic passages, and triple stops are just a few of the challenging virtuoso effects demanded of the violin. Melodies from both instruments wind around each other in dazzling counterpoint.

The third movement is a set of four variations on “Sei mir gegrüsst!”, one of Schubert's more popular songs. Though he alters the melody, the theme and accompaniment are in the spirit of the original. Variations 1-3 form the centerpiece of the Fantasy, virtuosic and playful with darting violin figurations. The fourth variation evokes the lyricism of the original theme.

A return of the slow introduction launches the finale, followed by a boisterous Allegro vivace. An abrupt change of key and a return of the third movement's theme follow, and a short Presto – essentially a coda – provides a thunderous conclusion.

**Claude Debussy (1862-1818): Violin Sonata in G Minor, L. 140**

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. Smear

“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!”

Béla Bartók (1881-1945): Violin Sonata No. 1, Sz. 75

The conclusion of World War I saw the creation of an independent Czechoslovak nation for Janáček, but for neighboring Hungary, homeland of Béla Bartók, the end results were devastating. The Treaty of Trianon rent the country into pieces, creating economic anxiety and crises within and without Hungary’s drastically shrunken borders. Like Janáček, Bartók was a proud patriot who studiously collected folk music as a means of exploring and celebrating national identity, but the post-war fracturing of Hungary led to severe restrictions on his travel.

Bartók was also known for his fierce opposition to fascism. Following Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor, Bartók and his compatriots organized a music festival in blatant opposition to Nazism. During a 1939 performance Bartók gave of the First Violin Sonata in Italy, a fight broke out between his detractors and supporters. The violinist wanted to leave, but Bartók, still playing the piano, supposedly shouted, “I like this! My partisans are standing up for their views!” Later that year, in response to Hitler’s increased militarization, Bartók refused to let German radio stations play his music. These and other bold stances against the fascist regimes in Europe forced him and his wife Ditta, a Jew, to flee to the United States; they would remain there until Bartók’s death from leukemia in late 1945.

While closer to the traditional Austrian sonata structure than Debussy’s sonata, this work takes a much more radical approach to harmony and form. The violin and piano rarely share thematic material and seem isolated and disconnected from one another. Frequent changes in tempo and melody feel improvisatory, revealing the influence of Hungarian folk music on Bartók’s own work.

The second movement begins with a plaintive solo for violin. Rumbling chords in the lowest range of the piano create a sense of foreboding to the middle section of the movement, heightened by the violin’s ominous, dissonant ripostes. The movement closes as it opened, the sparse texture of the solo violin painting muted scenes of alienation.

A series of frantic, wild folk dances, the finale is a rhythmic and technical tour de force for both violin and piano. The keening violin, portentous in its dread, careens relentlessly forward, the piano close behind. Building to a frenetic climax, the dizzying violin passages and dance rhythms come crashing down as the sonata concludes on one last clanging chord.

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