CHRISTIAN LI

violin

ROHAN DE SILVA

piano

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Sonata in A major K 305

Allegro molto

Tema con variazioni. Andante grazioso

(approx. 15 minutes)

MANUEL DE FALLA (1876-1946)

Suite Populaire Espagnole

El Paño moruno – Nana – Canción – Polo – Asturiana - Jota

(approx. 15 minutes)

GIUSEPPE TARTINI (1692-1770)

Sonata in G minor ("Devil's Trill")

Larghetto affettuoso

Allegro

Andante – Allegro assai - Trillo del diavolo – Andante – Allegro assai – Trillo del diavolo – Andante – Allegro assai - Adagio

(approx. 16 minutes)

EDVARD GRIEG (1843-1907)

Sonata No. 3 in C minor Op. 45

Allegro molto ed appassionato

Allegretto espressivo alla Romanza

Allegro animato

(approx. 25 minutes)

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Valse Sentimentale Op. 51 No. 6

Tempo di valse

(approx. 5 minutes)

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Valse Scherzo Op. 34

Allegro

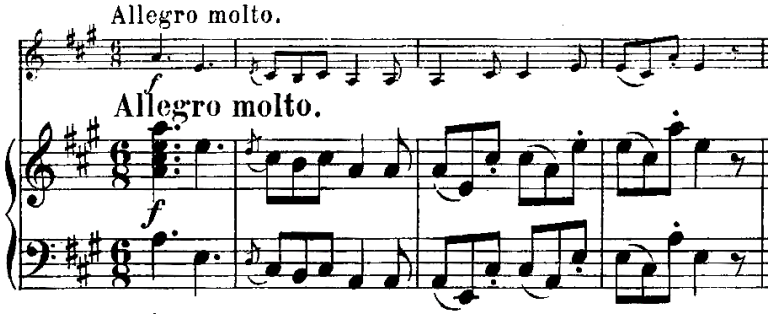
(approx. 6 minutes)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Sonata in A major K 305

The Sonata in A major for violin and piano was written in Paris in 1778 when the 22-year-old Mozart was visiting the French capital on a European tour aimed at improving his career prospects. Notable features of this sonata are its uniformly cheerful mood and the heightened prominence it gives to the violin as a "duet" partner with the piano.

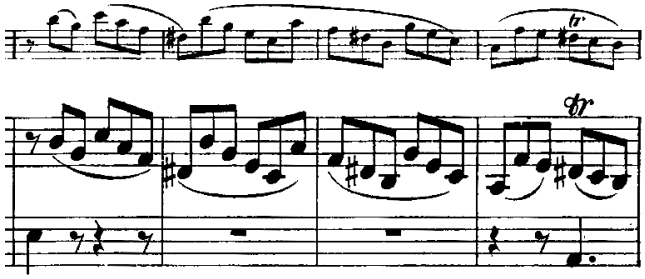
While it might seem strange to us today, in the late 18th century the sonata for violin and piano developed out of what was essentially a solo piano sonata "accompanied" by the violin and not the other way around. Mozart's early violin and piano sonatas, written when he was still a child prodigy, have just this texture, with the violin playing "back-up singer" to the keyboard's "star of the show" at centre stage.

But just as Beethoven was later to do in his Op. 5 sonatas for cello and piano, Mozart elevated the stringed instrument to become an equal partner with the keyboard, creating thereby more possibilities for textural contrasts and conversational dialogues between the instruments. This equality between the duetting partners is evident in the unison opening of Mozart's Sonata in A major, his twenty-second sonata for violin and piano.

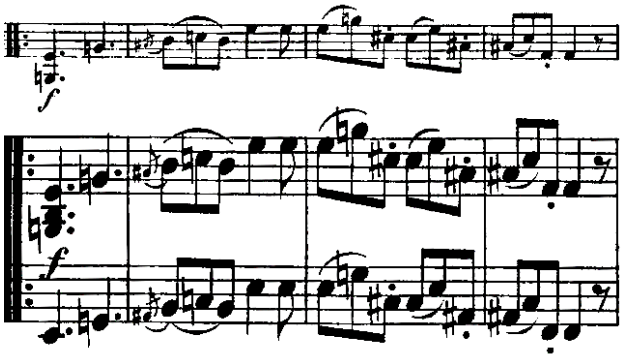


This fanfare outlining the notes of the A major triad evokes the horn calls of a hunting party galloping over hill and dale and gives a rousing sense of forward momentum to the movement.

The “triad” motive structures the second theme, as well, but with a twist: the triads are extended into a chain of 3rds that teasingly stretch their quadruple groupings over the triplet pulse of the prevailing metre:

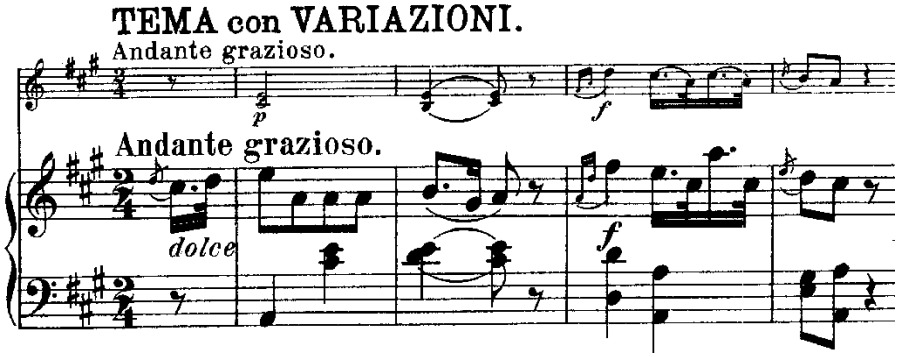


And Mozart has more tricks up his sleeve in the development section when, clever lad that he is, he turns his opening fanfare theme upside-down and dips it into the minor mode, to boot.

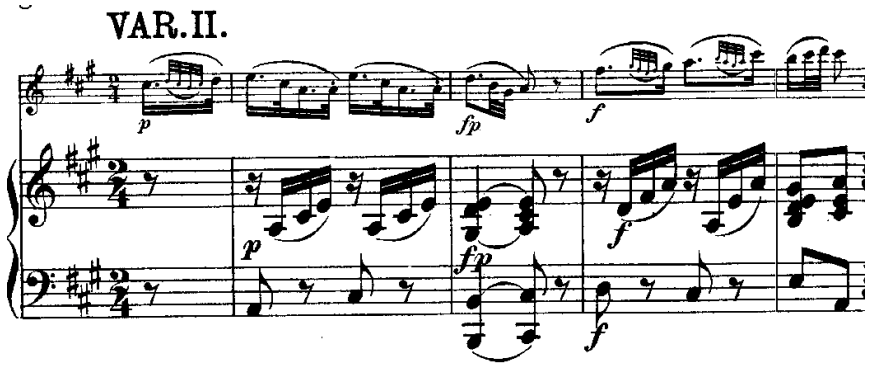


The recapitulation brings no surprises, and the movement ends in a flurry of cadences in the same horse-riding gait with which the movement began.

The sonata concludes with a gracious theme-and-variations movement featuring an elegant initial melody comprised of short phrases with feminine endings (having the harmony resolve on the weak beat), the perfect sort of thing for mincing aristocrats in stiff courtly dress to dance to.



Mozart gives the first variation entirely to the piano, with a constant babbling stream of noodling runs in 32nds decorating the main structural nodes of the theme. This, of course, allows the violin, in turn, to “make an entrance” in the following variation to display its skill as a melodic soloist.



The third variation shows the kind of call-and-response dialogue that is possible between the instruments when they speak to each other as equals. The fourth features the violin in a starring lyrical role but gives a tip-of-the-hat to the keyboard as well in a little mini-cadenza.

The traditional *minore* variation comes next, and a mischievous one it is, too, leading to the finale, in which Mozart changes the time signature to 3/8 to conclude his sonata with a toe-tapping waltz.

Manuel de Falla

Suite Populaire Espagnole

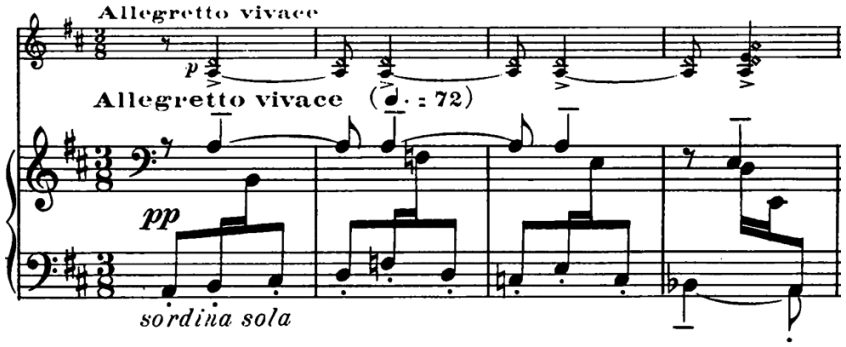
Manuel de Falla’s most popular vocal work, his *Siete canciones populares españolas* (Seven popular Spanish songs), was composed in 1914. It features authentic regional folk songs to which the composer has added a piano part bristling with added-note chords, strumming rhythms and other effects richly suggestive of the sonorities of the Spanish guitar. The work represents a musical travelogue through the regions of Spain, each song offering a glimpse into the daily life and eternal concerns of the common people.

In 1925 De Falla and Polish violinist Paul Kochanski (1887-1934) made an arrangement for violin and piano of six of the seven songs, published under the title Suite Populaire Espagnole.

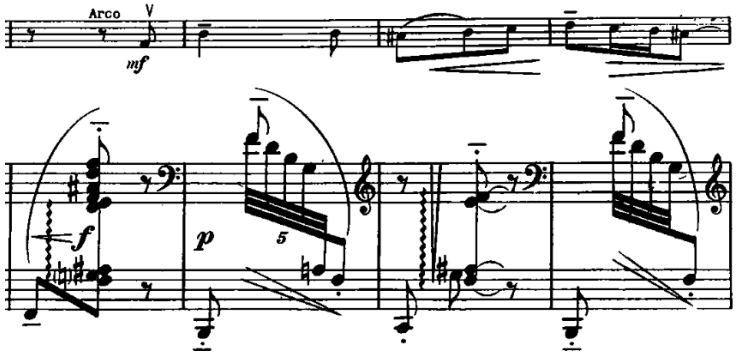
* * *

El Paño moruno (The Moorish cloth) warns that a fine cloth, if stained, sells for a lower price in the store — the implication being that young girls should avoid getting the "cloth" of their good reputation "stained" by an illicit love affair.

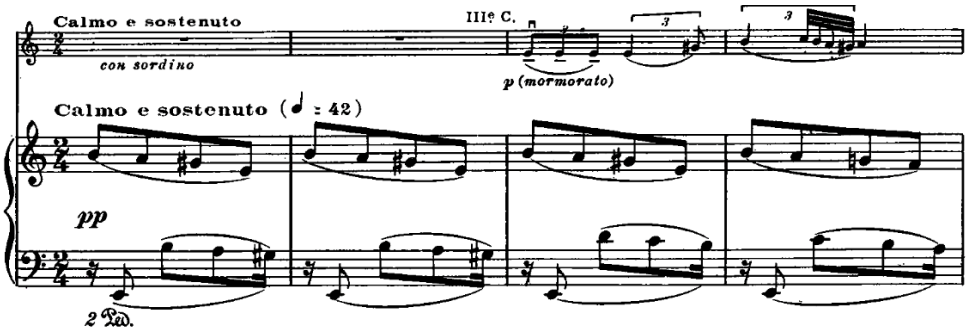
The sounds of Spain open the piece with an evocation of the crisp snap of the castanets and a tangy reference in mm. 2–4 to the Andalusian or Phrygian cadence (D-C-B flat-A in the bass), typical of flamenco music:



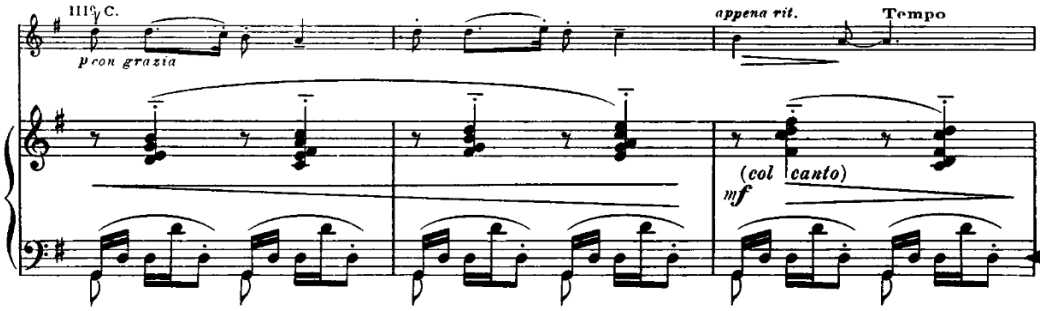
And the score abounds with guitar-strumming gestures in the piano part:



The Andalusian *Nana* is a lullaby, said to be the one that De Falla's mother sang to him when he was an infant. A rocking rhythm is created in the piano by a syncopated accompaniment over a soothing, sleepy pedal point in the bass.



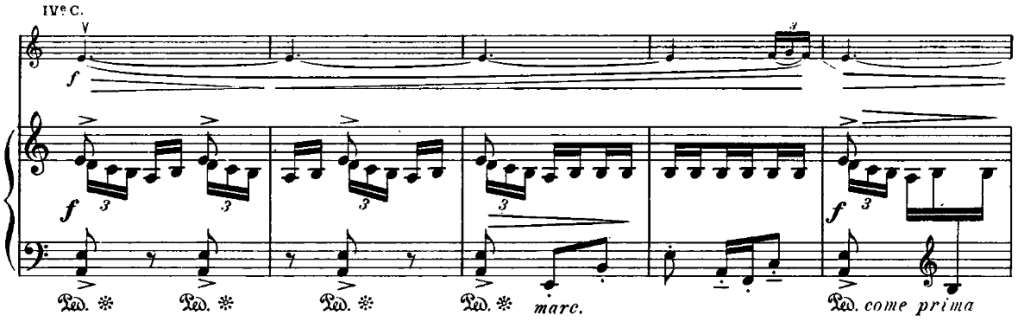
The whimsy of lovesickness fills the *Canción*, a rollicking tune known all over Spain.



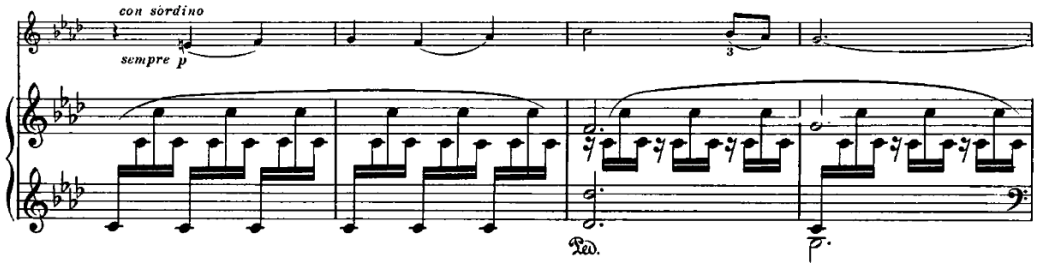
While the lyrics tell of "treacherous eyes" that it "costs dear to gaze into," the song's jostling rhythm and breezy melody imply that the singer is over the affair already.

Polo rages and wails with the dark fury of flamenco-inflected Andalusian gypsy music. The subject is sudden love, and it is not going well at all as the singer sings, "A curse on love and the one who gave me to know it!"

It features a rich build-up of guitar sonorities in the piano part.

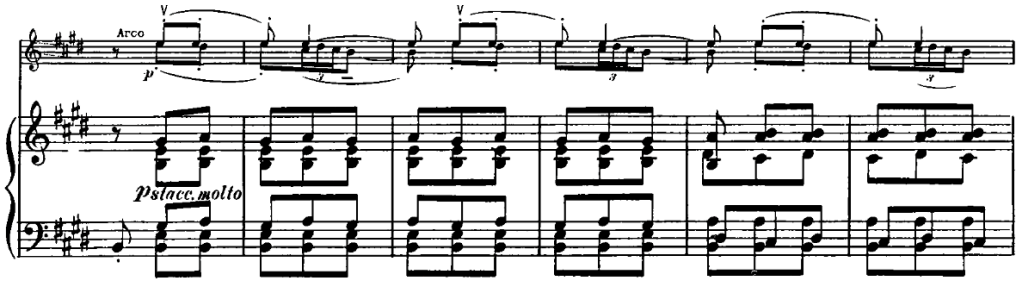


The mood changes to one of bewildered sadness in the *Asturiana* from Northern Spain.



The hypnotic ostinato figures and open intervals in the piano evoke the numbness of unfathomable grief.

By contrast, nothing could be livelier than the Aragonese ***Jota*** that concludes the suite.



The words of the original song, telling of a parting at the window and the promise of another rendezvous tomorrow, inspire this whirling piece in triple time danced to the rhythmic clicking of castanets. But the parting keeps getting interrupted by lyrical sections evoking the last lingering looks of the lovers, reluctant to part.

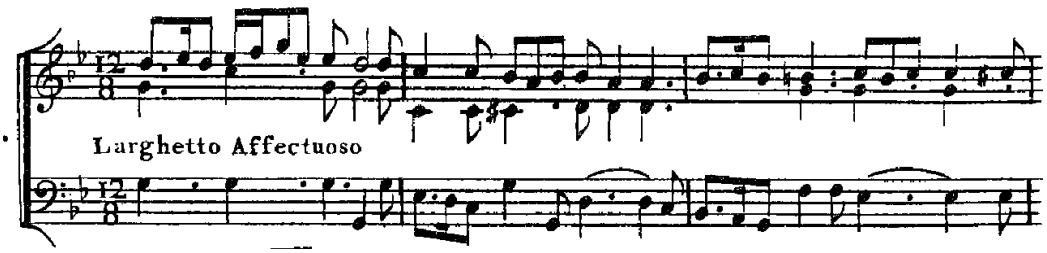
Giuseppe Tartini

“Devil’s Trill” Sonata in G minor

Legend has it that one night in 1713 the Devil came to Tartini in a dream and performed on his violin in such an astonishing fashion that upon awaking the composer was left deeply shaken. Determined to re-capture the experience, he is said to have composed what has come down to us as his “*Devil’s Trill” Sonata*, a work justly renowned for its technical challenges, chief amongst them the extended trill passages in double stops of its final movement.

The work is structured in a modified form of the *sonata da chiesa*, a Baroque instrumental genre in four movements alternating between slow and fast tempi. This fits in well with the legendary narrative, portraying the soul-snatching Lord of the Underworld as seeking alternately to slowly beguile and rapidly bedazzle the mesmerized Tartini as he lay dreaming in his bed.

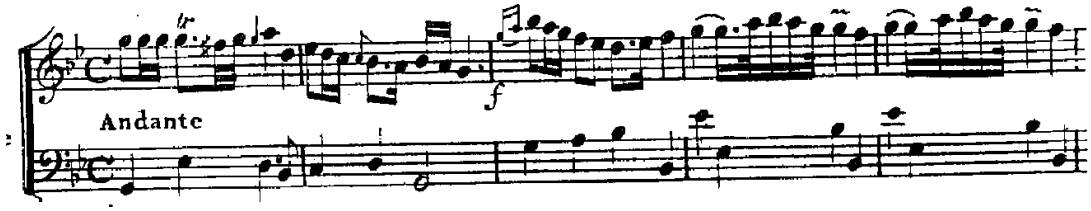
The beguiling begins in the opening *Larghetto affettuoso*, marked by a gentle *siciliana* pulse evoking a mood of pastoral innocence made all the more endearing by frequent *appoggiature* in the melodic line.



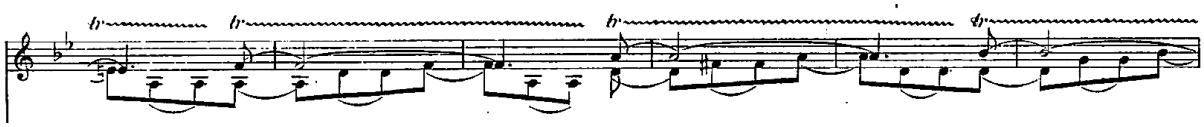
But a searching chromatic quality in the harmony inserts more than a touch of pathos into both halves of this movement in binary form.

Bedazzlement comes in the second movement *Allegro*, also in binary form, which opens with a series of trumpet calls before settling into a *moto perpetuo* of 16ths richly decorated with trills in a foretaste of the fireworks to come.

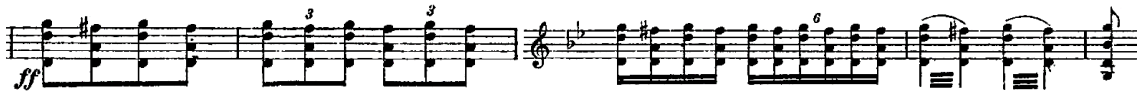
Intense lyricism returns at the opening of the final movement with a highly ornamented melody proceeding at a slow and deliberate pace, like the dark and moody *lassan* of a Hungarian rhapsody played by a gypsy fiddler.



But these nocturnal musings are continually interrupted by the virtuoso high jinks of the Devil's displays of virtuosity, culminating in a pair of passages in which the violinist plays a trill on an upper string while arpeggiating chords on a lower string below.



Following performance tradition, Christian Li will conclude this movement with Fritz Kreisler's even more hair-raising cadenza, featuring passages such as this:

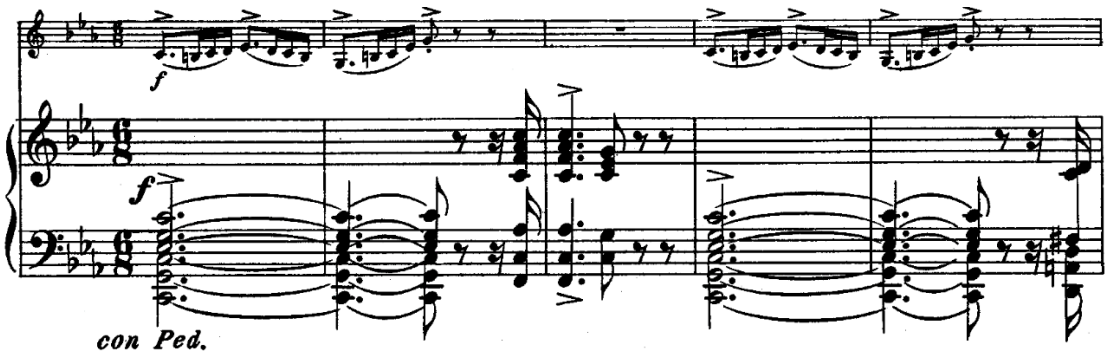


Edvard Grieg

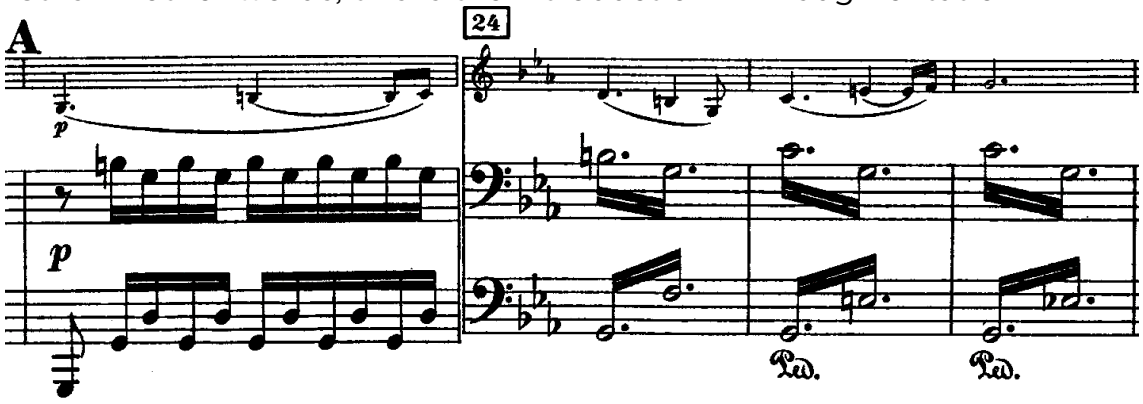
Sonata No. 3 in C minor Op. 45

Edvard Grieg's *Third Violin Sonata* was his last piece of chamber music, and it very quickly became one of his most popular. Grieg premiered it at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in late 1887 performing with Russian violinist Adolph Brodsky (1851-1929), who just six years before had premiered the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in Vienna.

The first movement opens with a squirrelly introduction, restlessly spinning around the notes of the C-minor scale.

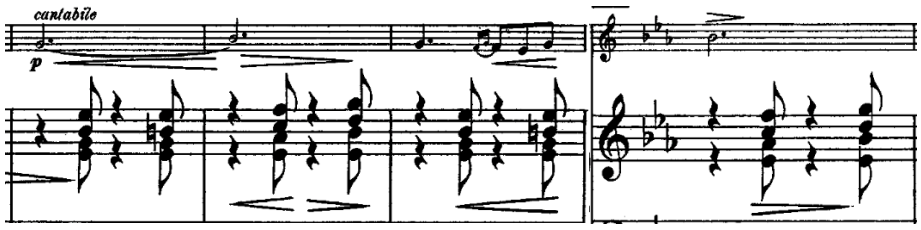


The import of this introduction becomes clear when the first theme enters in the violin. It has the same up-and-down melodic outline as the spinning motives of the introduction but with the 16ths slowed down to quarter notes and 8ths. In other words, this is the introduction — in augmentation.

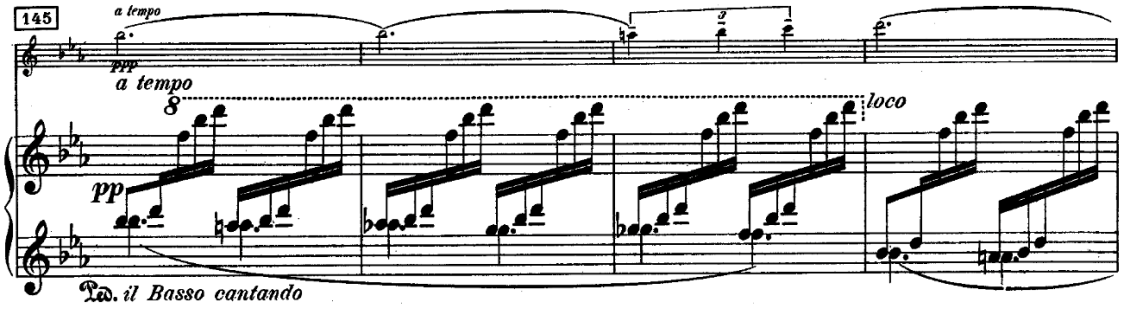


Despite being comprised of just arpeggiated major triads, this theme sounds unusually tense and urgent due to the piano's fretting accompaniment in tremolos.

Lyrical repose arrives, however, with the singable second theme, based once again on triadic intervals.



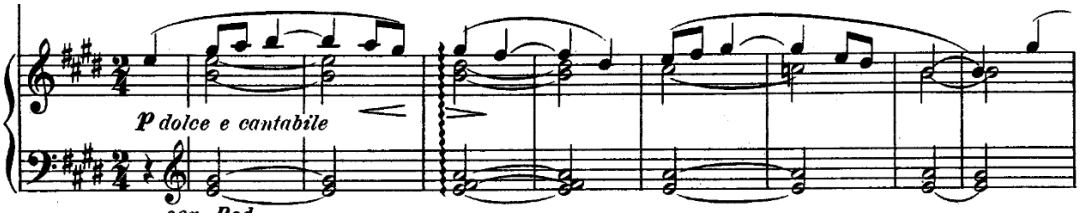
The development section begins by basking in the glorious string tone of this second theme's long-held notes, supported by a swirling vortex of piano arpeggios in the accompaniment.



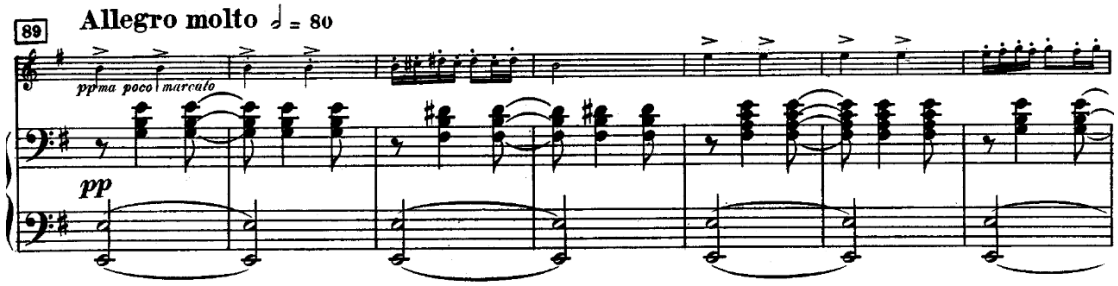
But when things slow down the squirrelly motives of the introduction begin to range freely once again, leading climactically in a great crescendo to the recapitulation.

This recapitulation not only offers up again the first and second themes, but also recalls the lyrical opening of the development section in the major mode before suddenly changing its mind and speeding rapidly to an emphatic C-minor conclusion.

The moodiness of this opening movement is banished by a slow movement, *Allegretto espressivo alla Romanza,* filled with fairy-like fantasy. It opens with a piano solo singing out its magical first theme in the high register.



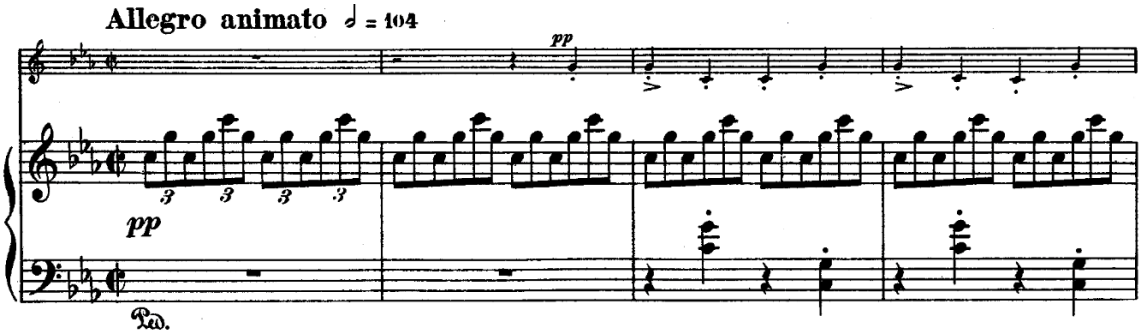
The charm of this movement is only increased by its dance-like middle section with a rustic drone tone in the bass.



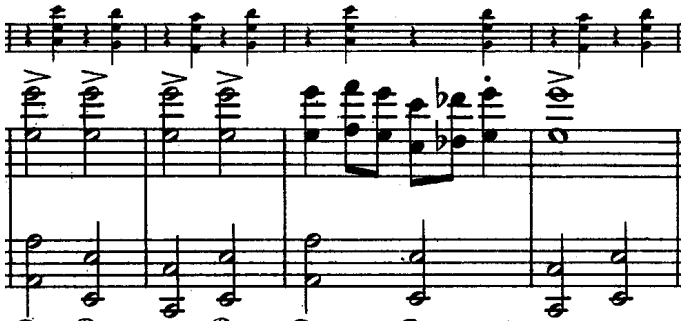
Despite being in the minor mode, this section is full of affectionate phrases and endearing turns of melody. The return of the opening melody in the final section features the violin in the high register, like a voice from Heaven supported by pulsing chords in the piano accompaniment.

The finale is in a strange sort of sonata form — without a development section. It has the form A-B-A-B, a manner of proceeding that gives pride of place to the *character* of its two themes rather than to the manipulation of their constituent *motives*. And characterful these two themes are.

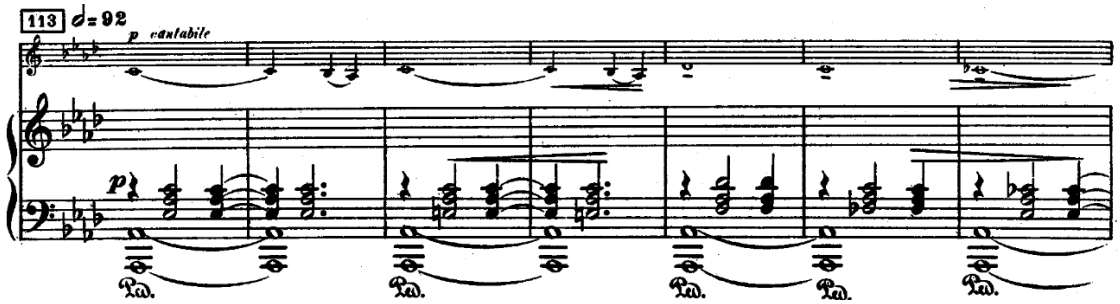
The first theme jangles with the sounds of open intervals, in both the melody and in the accompaniment.



This theme, tossed merrily between the instruments, is nothing if not folklike in its simple tunefulness and rugged rhythmic punchiness. It even develops an outright strut, as gleeful as a high-kicking cakewalk.



The second theme brings a radically different mood to the fore, taking the bright edge off the proceedings with a hesitant melody, full of passionate sighs, that starts off in the low register of the violin



and moves up gradually to reach the lyrical "sweet spot" in the instrument's timbral range.

The recapitulation renews the contrast between these two themes, the one pulsing with animation, the other slow-paced and nostril-flaring in its open-hearted lyricism. In the end, though, it is the feverish excitement of the first theme that takes this C-minor sonata to its excited C-major conclusion.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

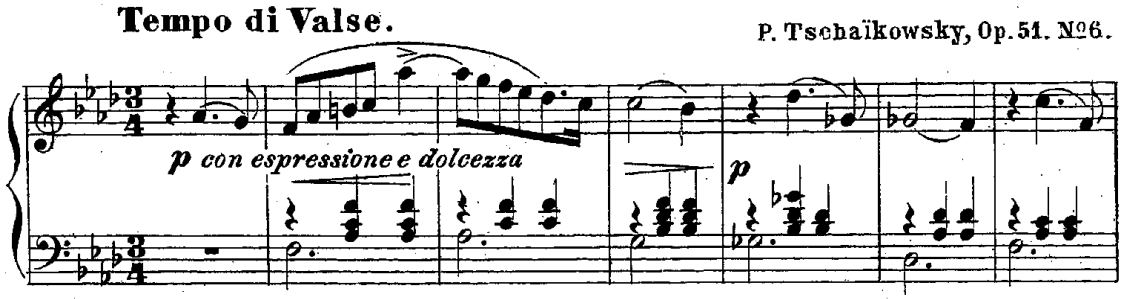
Valse sentimentale Op. 51 No. 6

Valse scherzo Op. 34

Christian Li ends his program with a brace of waltzes by Tchaikovsky, a composer whose ever-popular ballets and dance-like concerto finales showed him to be a consummate composer of music for the dance.

Tchaikovsky's *Valse sentimentale* is the last of six small piano pieces composed in 1882 on commission from his publisher Pyotr Jurgenson (1836-1903) and issued as the composer's Opus 51.

Written in F minor, it is a classic *valse triste* in the style of Chopin, replete with rising and falling melodic lines and endless heaving sighs at phrase endings.

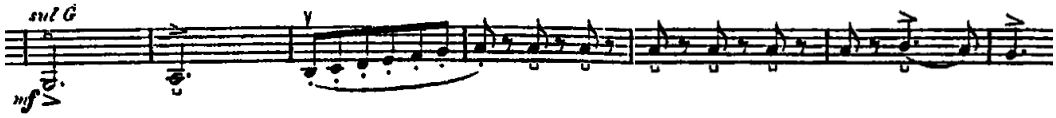


A contrasting middle section ventures briefly out of the minor mode, but the piece's dominating mood is one of wistful melancholy and a kind of Slavic, soulful introspection at which Tchaikovsky excelled.

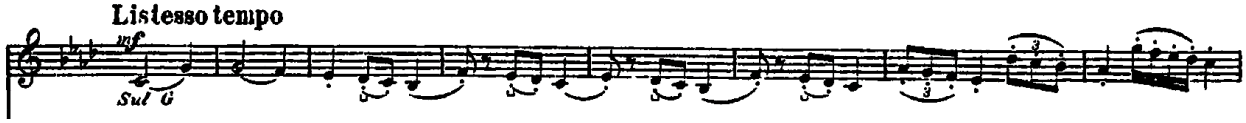
* * *

By contrast, playfulness and elegance are the dominant traits of Tchaikovsky's *Valse scherzo* Op. 34, originally written for violin and orchestra in 1877 and then transcribed for violin and piano by the composer.

Sounding very much like a piece from one of the composer's ballets, it features a lightly tripping melodic line replete with repeated notes that make the hesitations and lilt of the waltz vivid to the ear.



Its middle section strikes a more lyrical but still playful tone, with its many whimsical hemiolas in triplet figures that make the listener alternately hear triple and duple meter in turn.



This piece is renowned for its technical difficulties, especially its many passages in double stops — which is perhaps why it was a compulsory piece for violinists at the XV Tchaikovsky Competition in 2015.

There is even a cadenza at the end of the middle section with a concerto-like climax.

Elegance and poise alternate with virtuosity and bravura to make this the ideal "closer" for Christian Li's first recital in Vancouver.

Donald G. Gíslason 2024