VANCOUVER RECITAL SOCIETY

2025/26 SEASON

MACIEJ KUŁAKOWSKI, cello
JEAN-SÉLIM ABDELMOULA, piano
Sunday, November 30, 2025
VANCOUVER PLAYHOUSE

From the Artistic Director

Dear Friends,

We're delighted to welcome cellist Maciej Kułakowski and pianist Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula back to the VRS. Both artists have appeared on our stage before, just not together. They met at the Kronberg Academy in Germany where they established a special rapport, and they perform together fairly regularly on the other side of the pond.

Their program is certainly not run of the mill, even if it comes to a rousing close with the César Franck Sonata. The other works are by Janáček, Nadia and Lili Boulanger, Robert and Clara Schumann, and Beethoven.

I'd like to thank our Season Sponsor, the Peak Group of Companies, and the Sponsor of the Next Generation Series, the John C. Kerr Family Foundation, and the Royal Bank Foundation, which also supports our Next Generation artists.

Today's concert sponsors are Cathy and Ian, and we are most grateful to them for their support.

In addition to thanking the City of Vancouver for supporting us through its Grants in Lieu of Rent program, I would like to single out the backstage and front of house staff, who are helpful, competent, warm and supportive. We never take them for granted.

This is the final concert of 2025 for us. We'll be back here at the Playhouse on January 18 for the Canadian debut of the young pianist Tiffany Poon… a concert you won't want to miss. Remember, concert tickets make excellent stocking stuffers!

Wishing you all a Happy Holiday Season and a hopefully less fraught 2026.

Sincerely,

Leila

CELLPHONES

The use of cellphones and recording devices is prohibited in the concert hall. Please take this opportunity to turn off all electronic devices.

音乐厅内禁止使用手机，禁止拍照，录音，录像。请观众关闭所有电子器材，谢谢您的合作。

Program

Maciej Kułakowski, cello
Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula, piano

Sunday, November 30, 2025
Vancouver Playhouse

LEOŠ JANÁČEK (1854–1928)
Pohádka

(approx. 11 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Variations on
"Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen"

(approx. 10 minutes)

CLARA SCHUMANN (1819–1896)
Three Romances for Violin and Piano Op. 22
Andante molto
Allegretto. Mit zartem Vortrage
Leidenschaftlich schnell

(approx. 10 minutes)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)
Adagio and Allegro Op. 70

(approx. 9 minutes)

INTERMISSION

NADIA BOULANGER (1887–1979)
Three Pieces for Cello and Piano
Modéré
Sans vitesse et à l'aise
Vite et nerveusement rythmé

(approx. 8 minutes)

LILI BOULANGER (1893–1918)
Nocturne
Assez lent

(approx. 3 minutes)

CÉSAR FRANCK (1822–1890)
Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano
(arr. for cello)
Allegretto ben moderato
Allegro
Ben moderato: Recitativo-Fantasia
Allegretto poco mosso

(approx. 30 minutes)

Maciej Kułakowski, cello

Early Life & Education: Born in Poland to a family of classical and jazz musicians, Maciej studied at the Stanislaw Moniuszko Academy of Music in Gdańsk, at the University of Mannheim and at the University of Music Franz Liszt in Weimar, prior to entering the Kronberg Academy. In 2022, he completed his studies at the Kronberg Academy with Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt.

Performances: Highlights this season include concerts at Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Pierre Boulez Saal, Kölner Philharmonie, Casals Forum in Kronberg and Schloss Elmau.

As soloist he appears with Poznań Philharmonic Orchestra, Olsztyn Philharmonic Orchestra, Opole Philharmonic Orchestra, Toruń Symphonic Orchestra and Polish Baltic Philharmonic.

This season Maciej also takes part in the Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) 40th Anniversary European Tour and returns as a Faculty Guest to Morningside Music Bridge in Boston, USA.

Recordings: In 2022, Delphian Records released Maciej's debut album of French music, *Beau soir,* to critical acclaim. He went on to record Penderecki's complete solo cello music, released in 2023.

Photo credit: Kaupo Kikkas

Awards & Prizes: In 2015, at the age of 19, Maciej won First Prize and a special award at the Lutoslawski International Cello Competition. He was a Laureate in the finals of the 2017 Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels and a prize winner at the 2019 YCAT International Auditions in London.

Maciej Kułakowski is represented by Young Classical Artists Trust, London, UK

Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula, piano

Photo credit: Kaupo Kikkas

Early Life & Education: Born in Switzerland, Jean-Sélim studied at La Haute École de Musique Lausanne with Christian Favre, Guildhall School of Music & Drama with Ronan O'Hora, the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, Kronberg Academy with Sir András Schiff and Ferenc Rados, and at the Barenboim-Said Akademie with Jörg Widmann.

Performances: This season Jean-Sélim returns to the Wigmore Hall, Heidelberger Frühling and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern festivals and will play Schumann's Piano Concerto at the Royal Concert Hall in Nottingham.

As a composer, he was commissioned in 2023 by the Orpheus Chamber Music Competition to write a new work for piano trio, and he wrote and recorded the soundtrack for the feature film *Colombine* directed by Dominique Othenin-Girard.

Recordings: Jean-Sélim recorded Janáček's complete solo piano music for Delphian Records with previously unrecorded works. As a composer, his new work for cello and piano premiered at the 2022 WEMP Festival in Pully.

Awards & Prizes: Jean-Sélim's awards include the Guildhall Wigmore Prize, the Lili Boulanger Memorial Fund Award (Boston) and top prizes at the Čiurlionis Piano Competition (Vilnius), Grieg Composition Competition, YCAT International Auditions and the Lausanne Concours d'Interprétation.

Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula is represented by the Young Classical Artists Trust, London, UK

Program Notes

Leoš Janáček
Pohádka

Leoš Janáček is a one-off in music history. His is a voice of visionary ecstatic utterances, of mysterious murmurings evoking the folk music of his Moravian heritage, all tinged with the blurry soft hum of its favourite instrument, the cimbalom.

As American conductor Kenneth Woods puts it:

> *Janáček comes from nowhere and leads to no one. There is simply no music before or after Janáček that sounds like his. His music is infinitely easy to recognize and completely impossible to replicate.*

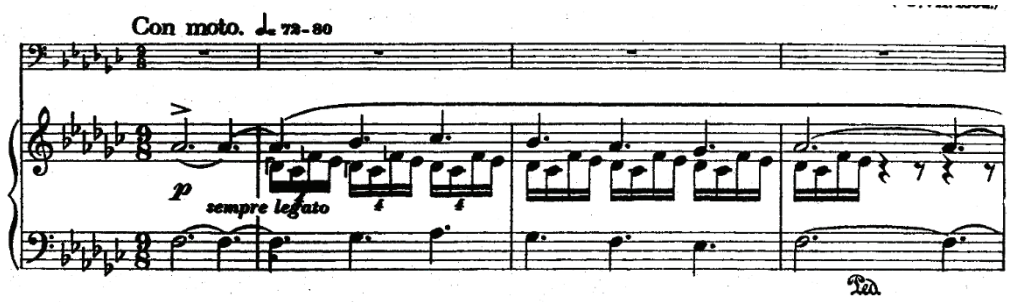
Janáček was fascinated by the study of speech rhythms, and his music, while often misty and atmospheric, is strongly imprinted with the rhythm of the human voice. Utterly indifferent to the compositional conventions of his time, he creates his textures out of short bursts of melody that shimmer with sudden changes of modal colouring. These build to powerful emotional climaxes by the repetition of ostinato fragments that rarely seem to start on the strong beats of the bar.

Janáček's *Fairy Tale* (Pohádka) for cello and piano dates from 1910 and after numerous revisions reached its final form in 1923. Like much of his instrumental music, this three-movement work is programmatic, loosely based on scenes from *The Tale of Tsar Berendey* by the Russian poet Vasily Zhukovsky (1783–1852).

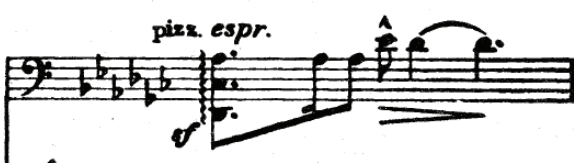
While the story is long and convoluted, the gist of it is that the handsome young Tsarevich, Prince Ivan, has had his soul promised to the King of the Underworld, Kashchei, but on mature consideration Ivan decides that he would much rather run away with the grumpy King's fetching young daughter, Maria. This is a decision which leads to an adventure-filled chase over hill and dale until the two lovers finally reach safety and live happily ever after.

Just how Janáček's score relates to the events of the tale is not really clear, but many interpreters see the cello in the role of the young prince and the piano as Maria. Steven Isserlis offers a very suggestive version of how the music illustrates the story, as follows.

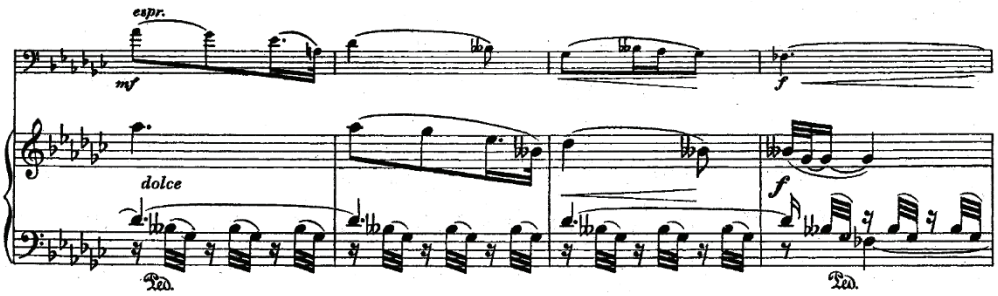
The first movement, he says, opens with the dreamy setting of a magical lake where Ivan and Maria first meet.



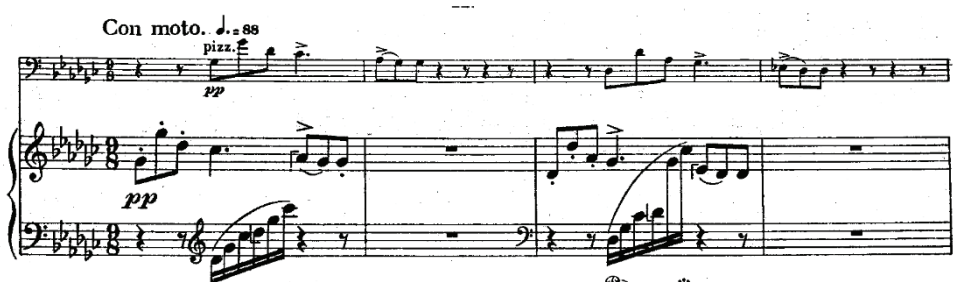
The prince soon cheerfully chirps into the scene with his signature dotted-rhythm motif:



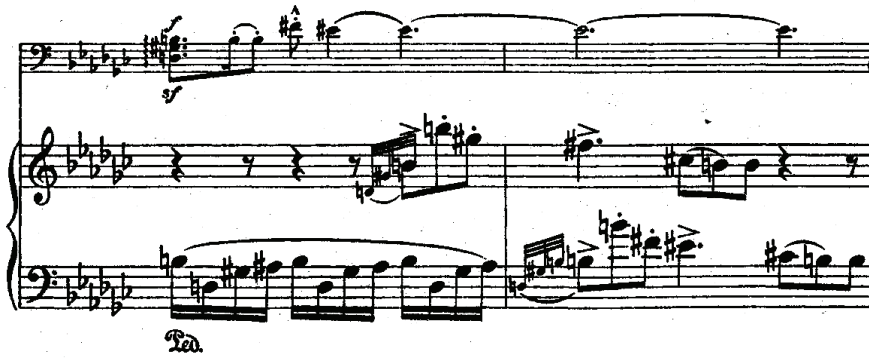
Enraptured by each other's company, they fall into a love duet, but then big bad Kashchei arrives, and they have to escape to the pounding of horses' hooves, represented by small ostinato fragments in the texture:



The second movement is full of magic. It opens with a hopping motive as the two lovers feel quite perky after their narrow escape.

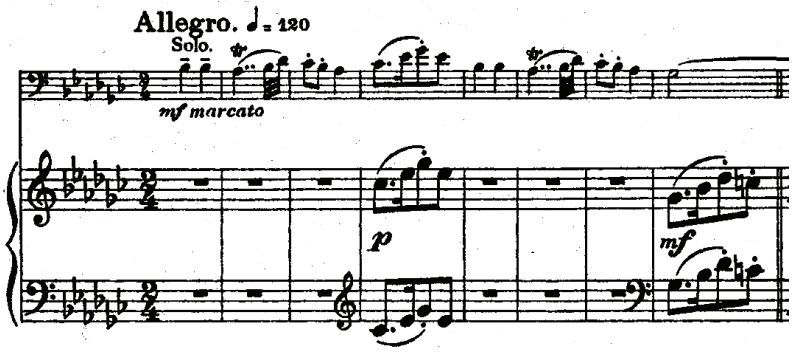


But trouble is on the way. The harmony gradually turns dark and the texture more turbulent as Prince Ivan gets a spell put on him so he will fall in love with someone else. And in a fit of pique Maria turns into a blue flower, as any young girl would do under the circumstances. This prompts an achingly lyrical outpouring in the middle section. The juxtaposition of the prince's motif and the perky hopping motive from the opening makes clear that the only question on young Maria's mind is: What has happened to my beloved Ivan?

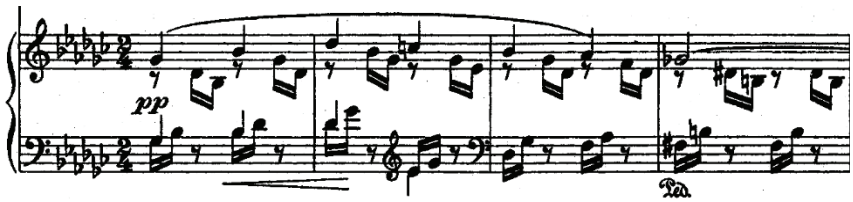


But fortunately, a magician who does house calls finally releases them from their spells, and they return to the hoppy good spirits with which the movement began.

The last movement sees the couple rejoicing in their good fortune with an opening dance-like tune, trilling with excitement:



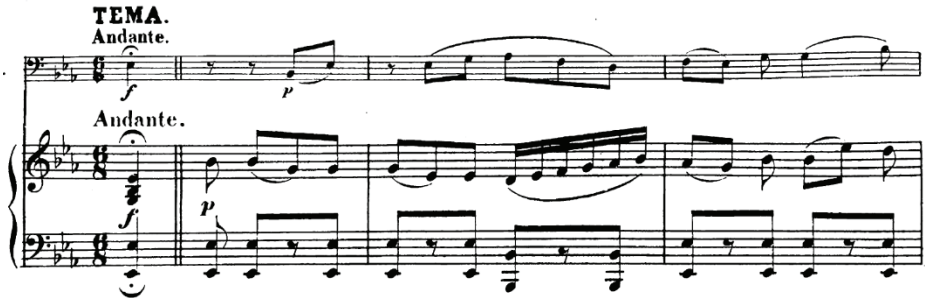
This soon blends into a more lyrical melody animated with an accompaniment texture pulsing with the type of short motivic snippets that Janáček loves to employ.



The movement ends quietly, in contemplation of a magical adventure successfully completed.

Ludwig van Beethoven
Variations on “Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen”

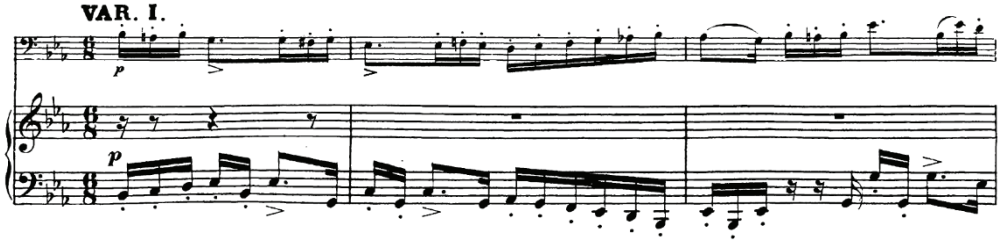
Beethoven’s Variations on “Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen” from Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* was composed in 1801. Beethoven picks as his theme this simple folk-like tune:



This melody is from a duet between Pamina, who has just learned that Tamino loves her, and Papageno, who laments that he can’t even get a Friday-night date. Despite this difference in their amatory status, there is one thing they can both agree on in song, and that is that “Love sure is grand, isn’t it?”

The original form of the duet – with each singer presenting the tune separately, then both singing together – is preserved in the variations that follow. Of course, when you are “covering” a Mozart tune, the bar for wit and elegance is set rather high. So Beethoven is on his best behaviour here, combining the twin virtues of contrapuntal ingenuity and textural variety in the best Austrian tradition. Thus, while fulfilling the formal expectations of the genre – figural ornament, a variation in the minor mode, a lyrical adagio preceding a toe-tapping finale – he makes sure that each variation is as different as possible from its neighbours by giving each a distinct rhythmic and textural profile.

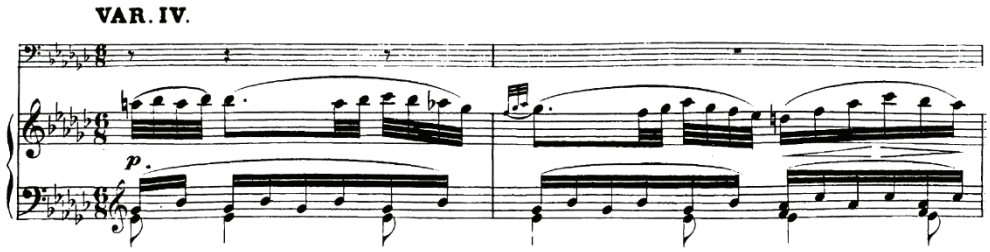
A good example is the first variation,



which treats the theme like chopped liver, doling it out in punchy little rhythmic chunks and leaving you dazzled by a musical mosaic that echoes the opening four-note motive in virtually every bar.

Variation 2 can’t get enough of runs, while Variation 3 sings the praises of the melodic ornament known as the turn.

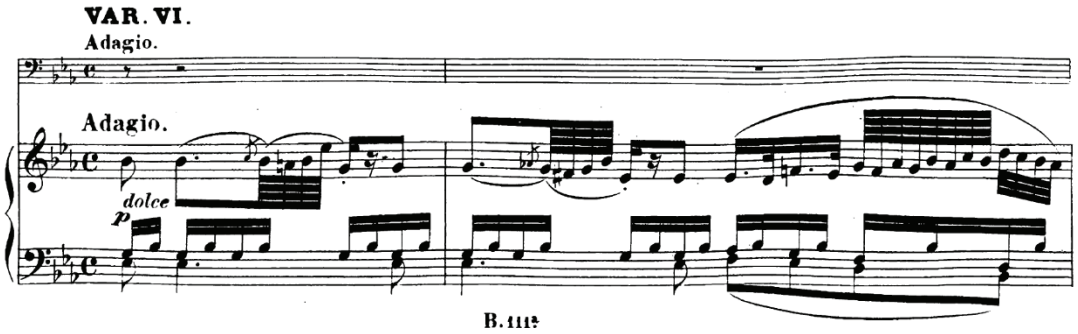
Variation 4, the inevitable *minore*, takes a walk on the dark side in the unusual key of E-flat minor to offer a portrait of psychological fragility and lyrical introspection.



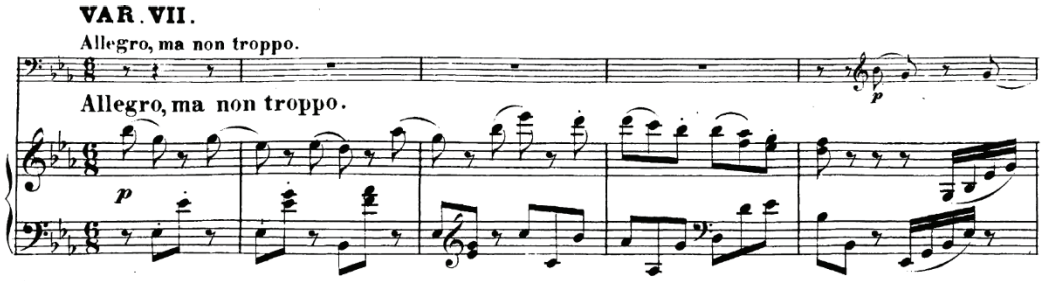
Here is where the cello gets to unburden itself emotionally in the deep bass register, accompanied by a rather spooky bare-bones accompaniment in the piano.

Variation 5 has no time for moping, and it picks up the pace in a merry game of tag between the instruments.

The variations reach their emotional epicentre in the lavishly ornamented and lyrical ***Adagio*** of Variation 6



before the expansive Variation 7 finale skips its way home,



but not without a bit of minor-mode turbulence, mind you, in its drama-filled last-kick-at-the-can ***Coda***.

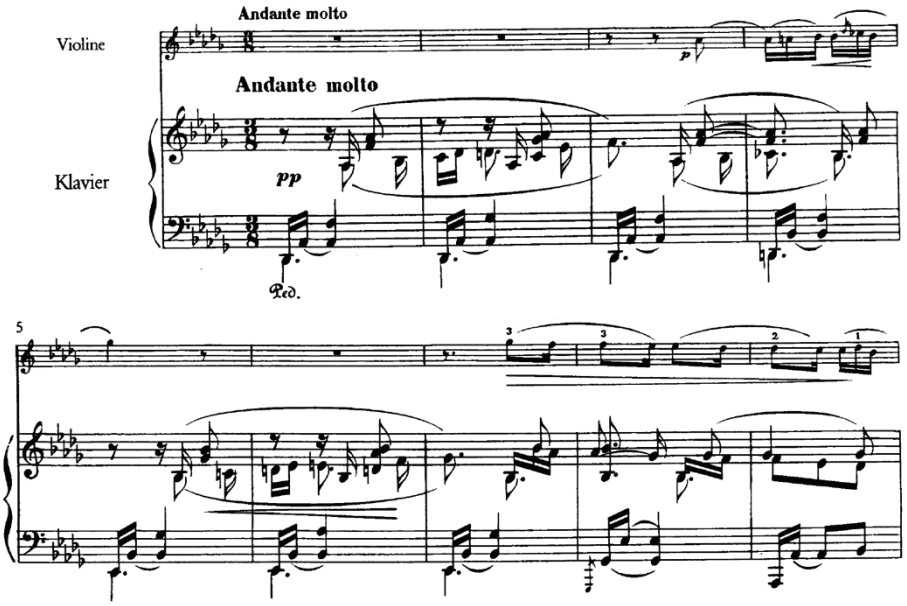
Clara Schumann
Three Romances for Violin and Piano Op. 22

When in 1853 Robert Schumann was admitted to a sanatorium after his suicide attempt, the world lost two fine composers, not one, because from that point on, his wife Clara – the love of his life and mother of their eight children – virtually ceased composing.

She had a unique voice as a composer, quite separate from that of her husband, but for the next forty years she devoted herself to caring for her family and promoting her husband's works in her position as one of Europe's most respected and admired concert pianists. Her *Three Romances for Violin and Piano*, the last work she composed in that fateful year 1853, give us the measure of what was lost.

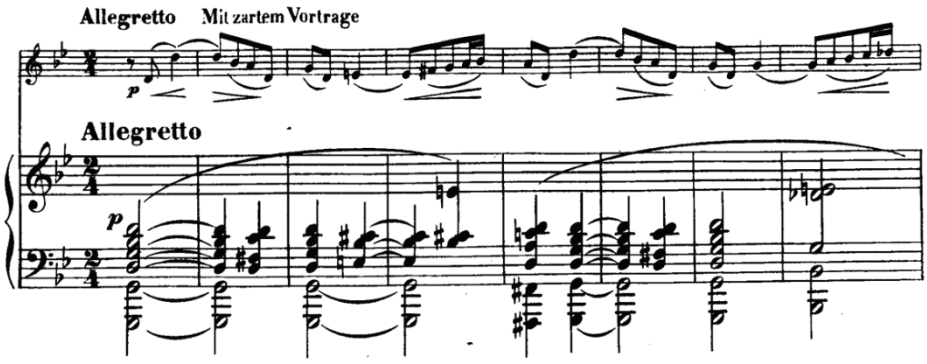
While this work was written for and dedicated to the legendary concert violinist Joseph Joachim (1831–1907), with whom Clara often performed it on tour, it nevertheless is a classic example of *Hausmusik*, music to be played at home, by the hearth, before an audience of friends and loved ones. These *Three Romances* are broadly lyrical without aspiring to achieve dramatic intensity or aiming to make grand statements of any kind. Each begins in an unassuming manner and ends peacefully. There is a Biedermeier warmth and coziness in each that reminds one of Mendelssohn, while the depth of sonority coming from the middle and lower registers is distinctly Brahmsian.

The ***Andante molto*** represents well the heartfelt sincerity of feeling in the set as a whole, with its warm harmonic drapery, its striking conversational intimacy between the instruments and its melodic lines dimpled with endearing chromatic appoggiaturas.



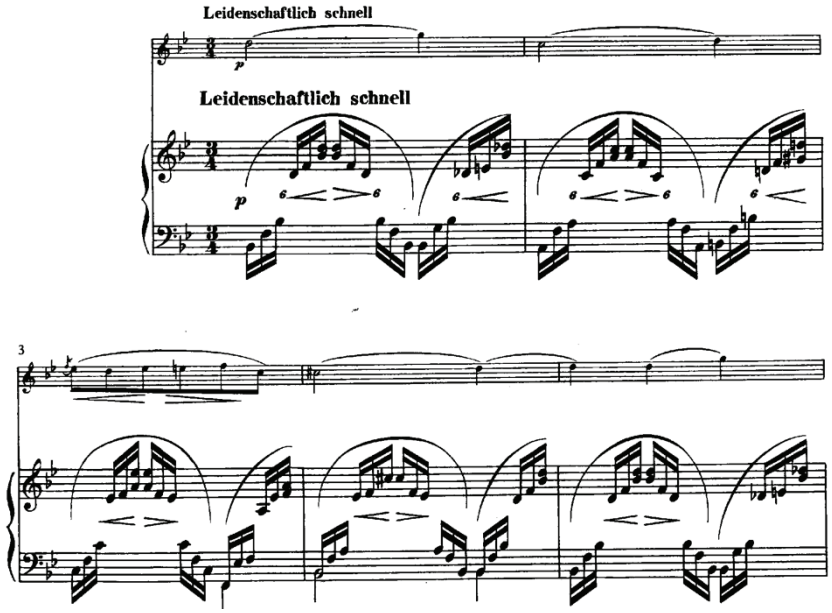
The composer's way of alternating duple and triple groupings within the bar line gives the melodic flow the naturalness of human speech.

The ***Allegretto*** movement opens with a plaintive melody in the minor mode, made all the more expressive by the yearning intensity of its repeated large leaps.



In the middle section, however, these same melodic gestures turn buoyantly cheerful when placed in the major mode and embellished with trills.

In the last movement, marked ***Leidenschaftlich schnell*** (passionately fast), the piano largely abandons its conversational role, preferring instead to simply furnish the harmonic background for the violinist's wide-ranging and intensely lyrical melodic line.

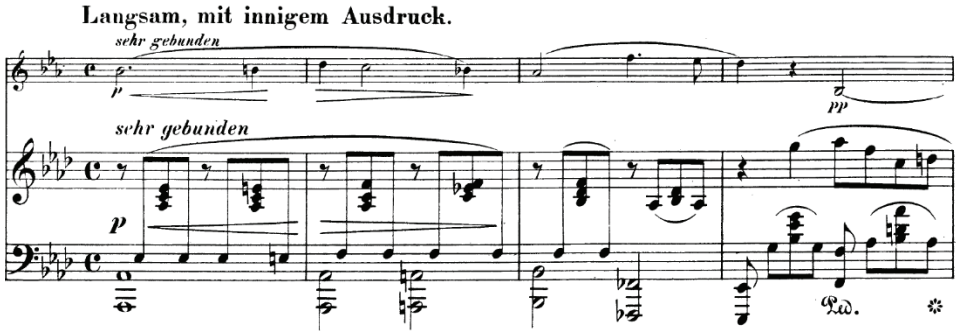


The rippling, strumming and plucking of the piano's frequently changing accompaniment patterns provides an underlay of textural contrast within this unusually rapturous romance.

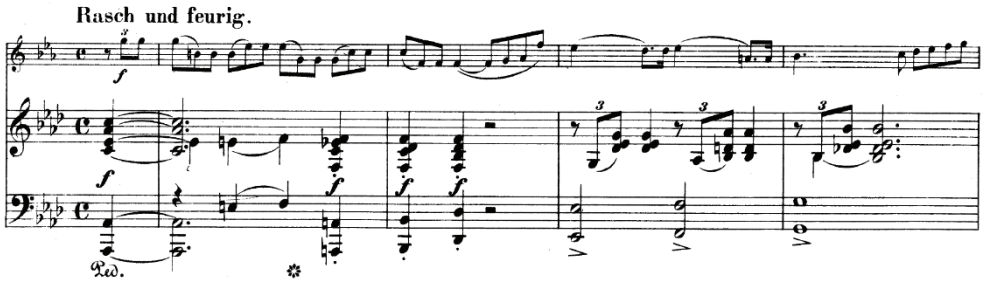
Robert Schumann
Adagio and Allegro Op. 70

Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro* Op. 70 was written in 1849, and for horn, not for cello. Intended as a piece of *Hausmusik*, i.e., art music written to be performed in a domestic setting by amateur performers, it sought to take advantage of recent advances in instrument design that had allowed the horn to play in precise semitone steps by the use of valves. This, of course, is not a problem for the cello, violin or oboe, which are listed on the title page of published scores as alternate instruments for the piece.

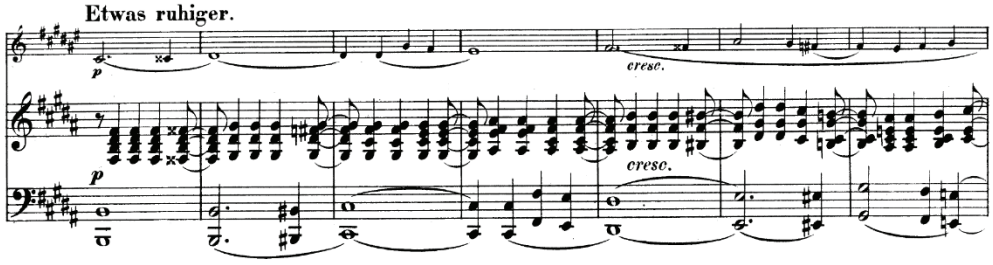
Marked *Langsam, mit innigem Ausdruck* (slowly, with intimate expression) the ***Adagio*** is written in the sentimental Biedermeier style of the period, with numerous languid sigh motives built into the melodic line and a frequent exchange of loving phrases between the instruments.



The love-fest gets an abrupt wake-up call, however, when the ***Allegro*** breaks out, marked *Rasch und feurig* (fast and fiery).



Here the cello has its work cut out for it to reproduce the piercing fanfare timbre of the horn. But Schumann's scoring of the piano part allows the solo instrument to shine when it needs to while providing a palette of rich harmonic support rising up from the bass regions of the keyboard. This is especially true in the contrasting middle section



where the solo instrument gets to sing out in its mid-range as it recalls the introspective mood and tender tone of the opening *Adagio*.

Nadia Boulanger
Three Pieces for Cello and Piano

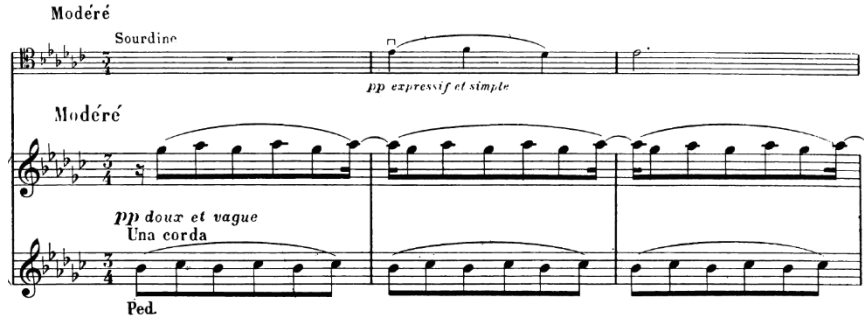
Nadia Boulanger and her sister Lili were born into a distinguished family of French musicians. Their grandfather, Frédéric Boulanger (b. 1777) had been a professor at the Paris Conservatoire and was married to Marie-Julie Halligner (1786–1850), a mezzo-soprano who had sung in the premiere of Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment* in 1840. Their father, Ernest Boulanger (1815–1900), was also a professor at the Conservatoire and a composer of numerous comic operas, having won the prestigious Prix de Rome prize at the age of only 19.

But by far the most famous and influential member of the family was Nadia Boulanger, the most important musical pedagogue of the 20th century, whose students included Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Philip Glass, Burt Bacharach, Quincy Jones, Dinu Lipatti and Astor Piazzolla, to name but a few.

As a composer, she wrote works for orchestra and for chamber ensembles, as well as over 30 songs. Her compositional style is similar to that of Debussy in many ways. Like Debussy, she uses whole-tone or modally tinged scales, ambiguous but vividly colouristic harmonies in sequences of parallel chords, stabilized by long pedal tones in the bass.

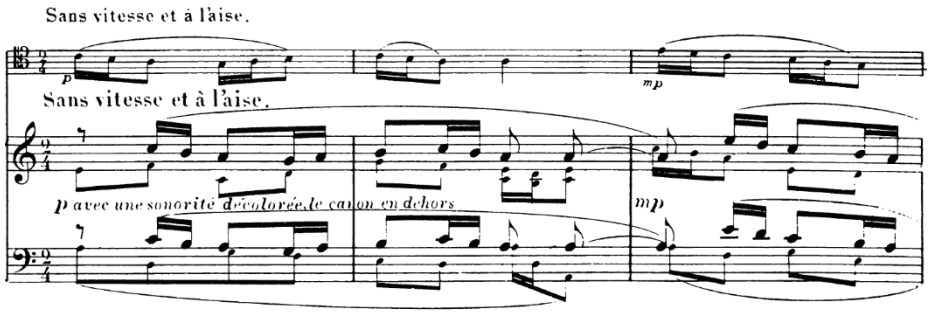
Her exquisitely crafted *Three Pieces for Cello and Piano* were written in 1911, originally for organ but then transcribed for cello and piano in 1914. The titles given to these pieces in the original organ version say much about the intended character of each.

The opening movement, marked *Modéré*, is indeed the very soul of Impressionist moderation, with the cello playing *con sordino* and the piano making much use of the *una corda* (soft pedal).



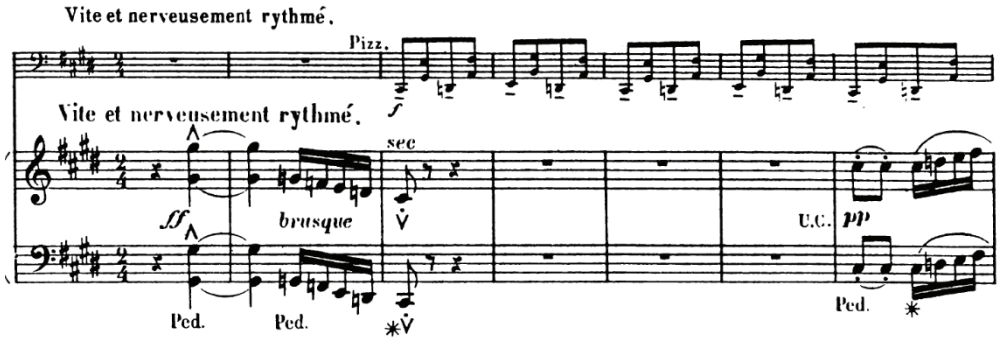
Originally entitled *Improvisation*, its improvisatory air is communicated in the utter simplicity of its musical materials, with a veiled ostinato of murmuring piano tone serving as background to a melody line in the high register of the cello that obsesses over a motive of small range and modal character, announced at the outset.

The second piece is meant to be played *Sans vitesse et à l'aise* and was originally labelled *Prélude*, perhaps in reference to its constant pattern of 16th-note motion, in the manner of a Baroque "pattern" prelude.

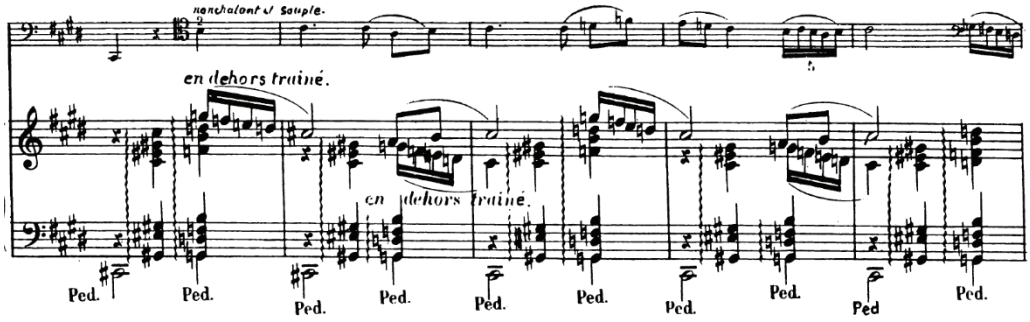


But despite the gentle flow of its folk-like modal melody, this simple-sounding piece is much more complex than it seems, structured throughout in close canon between cello and piano.

The third piece in the set, marked *Vite et nerveusement rythmé* contrasts wildly with the restrained tone and delicacy of sentiment that characterized the first two pieces in the set.



Originally labelled *Danse espagnole,* it grabs the listener's attention with muscular pounding rhythms in the piano and equally emphatic *pizzicati* in the cello. The rhythmic texture gets roughed up further with a move to 5/4 meter, but a lyrical middle section of improvisatory character



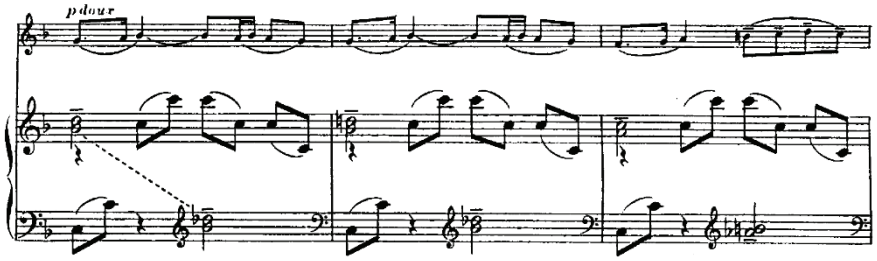
balances out the rambunctious nature of the opening and closing sections.

Lili Boulanger
Nocturne

Marie-Juliette Boulanger, known professionally as Lili, was the extraordinarily talented sister of pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. Whatever musical gifts she might have received by family inheritance, however, they did not extend to her physical health. She remained frail throughout much of her short life and died at the age of 25 in 1918, the same year as Debussy.

Nocturne (1911) is the first of her *Deux Morceaux* for violin or flute, and displays her interest in the finely nuanced tone colours of French impressionism.

The nighttime stillness of ***Nocturne*** is conveyed in the lulling drone of its slow-moving harmonies, underpinned with long-enduring pedal tones in the bass that shift harmonic interest to the delicately nuanced tone colours of the upper voices. These pedal tones echo up and down through three octaves of the texture to swaddle the piece's thoughtful, wandering melody in a warm harmonic glow throughout.



Just before the end, connoisseurs of all things Debussy will no doubt notice a sly quotation from *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, prompting an exchange of raised eyebrows and knowing glances with their fellow Debussyists sitting nearby.

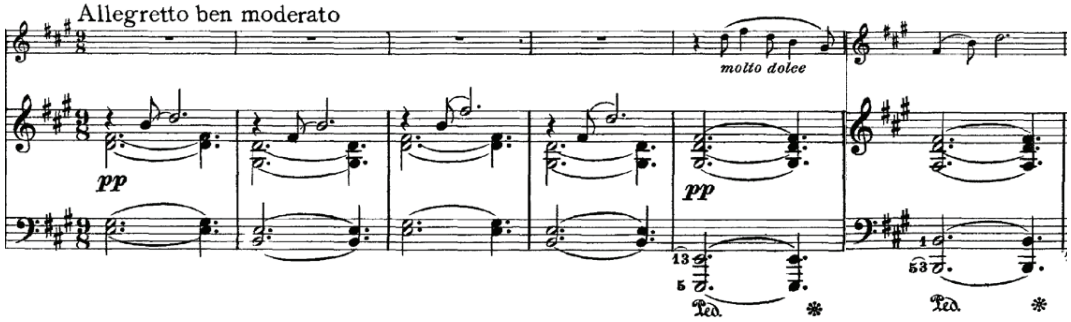
César Franck
Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano (arr. for cello)

It will be a while yet before the *Huffington Post* is read by musicologists as a scholarly journal, and yet Alan Elsner, the Huff-Po reporter covering developments in 19th-century Belgian chamber music, is not wide of the mark in observing that:

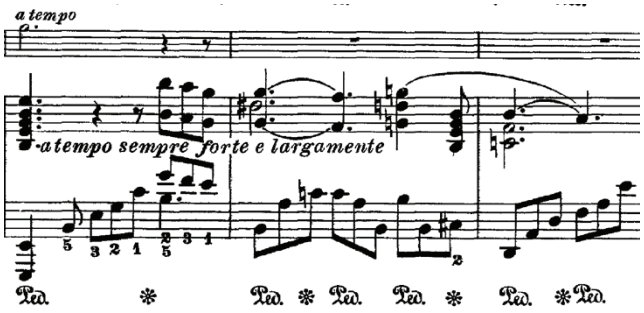
> *There is a kind of breathless religious ecstasy to Franck's music–soaring themes; simple, pure harmonies; those ceaseless, swirling, gliding accompaniments. This, one feels, is truly the music of the angels.**

The work inspiring such shortness of breath and heady spiritual delirium in the intrepid journalist is, of course, Franck's *Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano*, a wedding present by the composer to the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. The sonata was in fact performed at the wedding in 1886 by Ysaÿe himself and a wedding-guest pianist.

The ***Allegro ben moderato*** first movement floats in a world of harmonic uncertainty. It opens with a number of dreamy piano chords, each followed by a simple chordal interval, as if giving the pitches to the instrumentalist, who then obliges by using them to create a gently rocking, barcarolle-like melody, the outline of which will infuse much of the work as a whole.



This theme, played by the violin over a simple chordal accompaniment from the piano, builds in urgency until it can hold it no more, and a second theme takes centre stage in a lyrical outpouring of almost melodramatic intensity but ending in a dark turn to the minor.



The violin will have none of it, however, and dreams both sleepwalkers back to the major mode for an amicable review of the two themes, both in the home key. The serenity of this movement results from its rhythmic placidness, often featuring a sparse, simple chordal accompaniment in the piano, and very little rhythmic variation in the wandering pastoral "de-DUM-de-DUM" triplets of the violin.

Where drama breaks out for real is in the ***Allegro*** second movement, one of the most challenging in the chamber repertoire for the pianist. This sonata-form movement bolts from the starting gate with a swirling vortex of 16ths in the piano, fretting anxiously over a chromatically creeping theme in the mid-range that is soon picked up by the violin.

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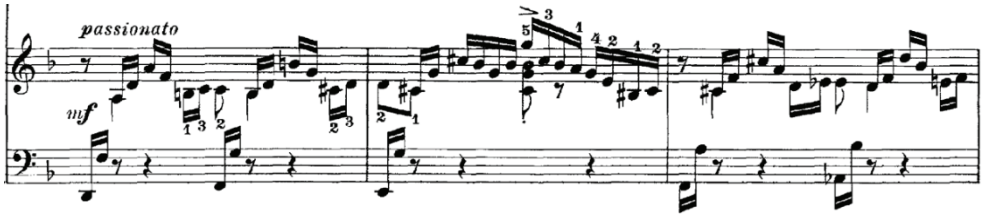
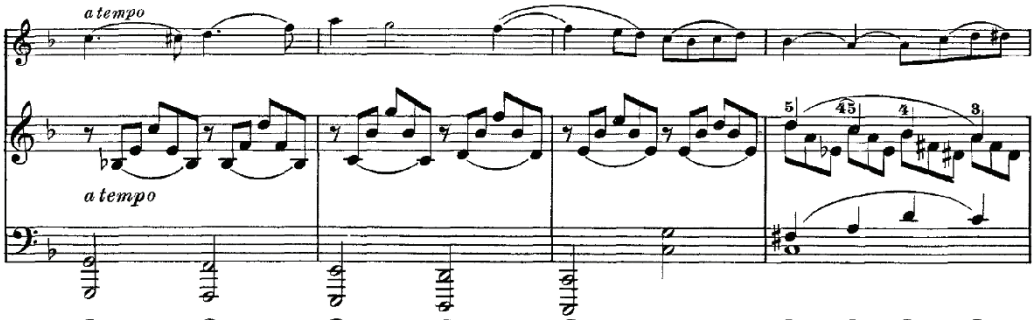
* Huffington Post (29 Nov. 2011)

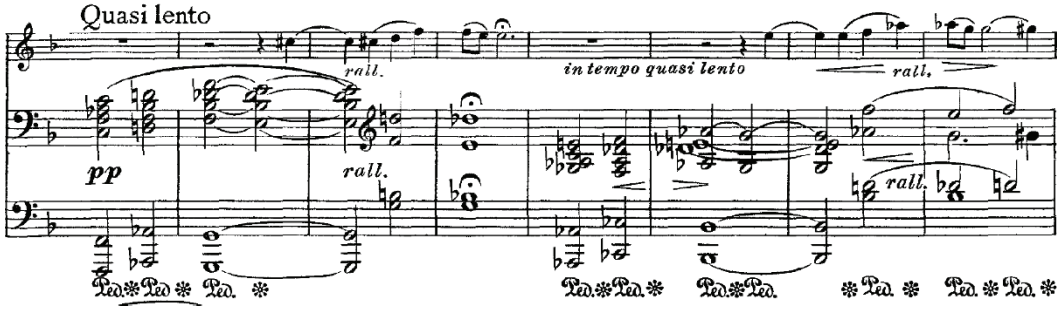


Its worrisome collection of motives is based on the same small-hop intervals that opened the first movement, but reversed in direction and cast in the minor mode.

A sunnier mood prevails in the second theme,

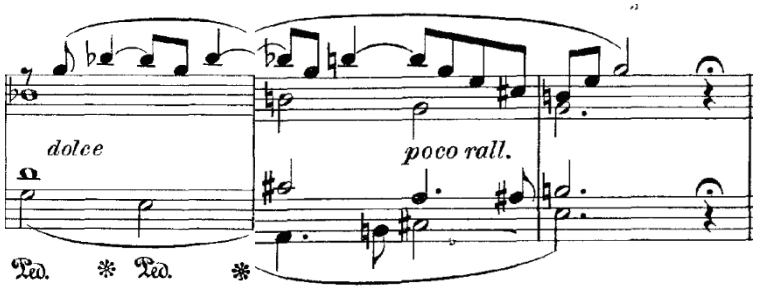


which, however, ebbs away as both instruments take stock of the ground covered in a sober interlude marked Quasi lento, which is based on the opening "fretting" theme, but in augmentation, i.e., longer note values.

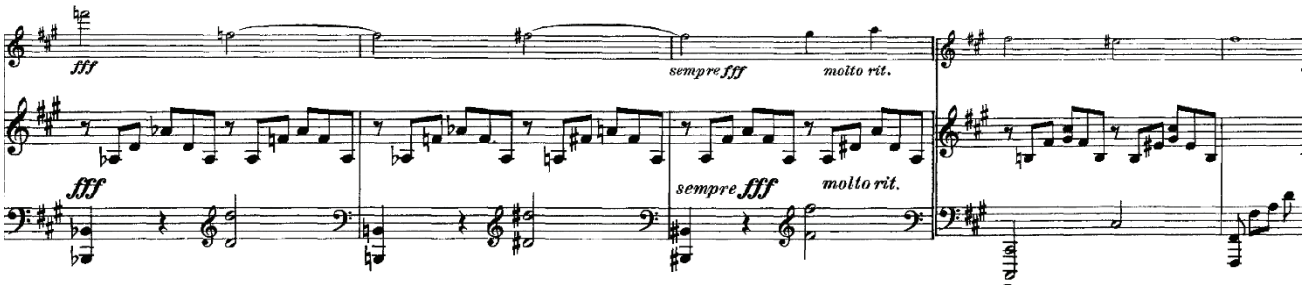


The development section engages in a full and frank discussion of the two themes until the convulsive agitation of the opening theme returns in the recapitulation. Despite the turbulence roiling at the heart of this movement, it still manages to pull a major-mode ending out of a hat for its final cadence to conclude its "race-to-the-finish-line" coda.

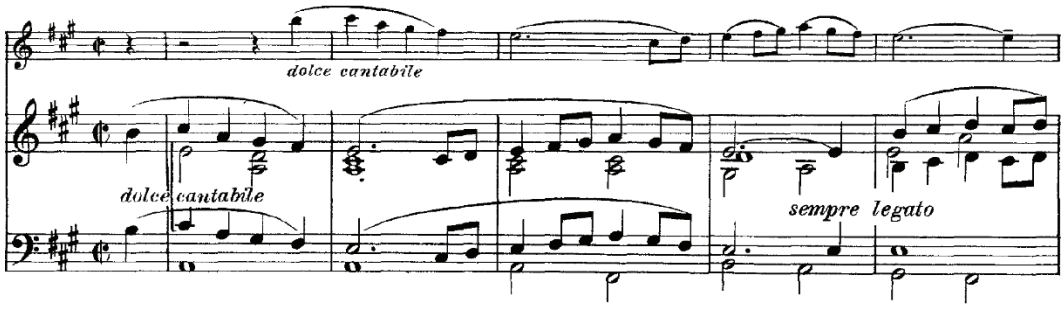
The slow third movement, a free-form meditation marked ***Recitativo-Fantasia***, is bruised with the memory of the first movement's bliss. Its opening musings contain a bewildered quotation of the first movement's opening theme.



As this thematic material is brooded over, the violin tries to change the subject several times in distracted flights of fancy, but eventually agrees to join with the piano in a ruminative journey that passes from nostalgic reminiscence to heart-wrenching pathos. The searing intensity of the octave-leap "wailing" motif at the end of this movement is the most profound moment in the sonata. No major-mode ending here.



All tensions are eased, all hearts healed, however, in a last-movement rondo that offers up a simple tuneful melody in continuous alternation with brief sections of contrasting material.



This tune, so harmonically rooted as to suit being presented in strict canonic imitation (like a round), is shaped from the melodic outline of the theme that opened the sonata, bringing its journey full circle. Even the "wailing" motif from the previous movement is recalled to the stage to give it, too, a happy ending.

British musicologist David Fanning got it right when he intuited the celebratory meaning beneath Franck's remarkable use of imitative counterpoint for the end of this "wedding present" sonata:

> *It is hard to resist reading this as a musical symbol of married bliss, especially when the dialogue is placed even closer together, at a distance of half a bar rather than a full bar, on the deliriously happy closing page.*

Program notes by
Donald G. Gíslason, 2025

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