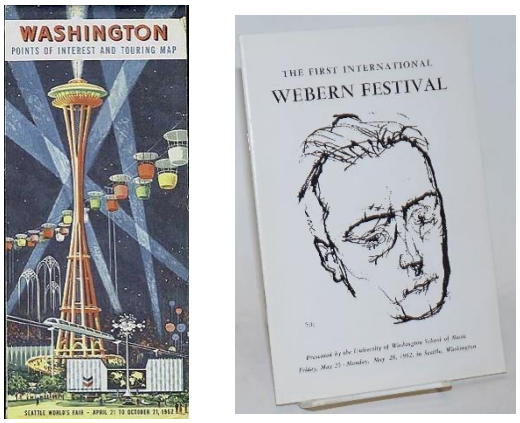
Anton Webern in 1912

Webern's *Two Pieces* is his first completed work, written when he was fifteen years old in 1899 and only published in 1970 when the cellist Gregor Piatigorsky rediscovered it. Webern played the cello and his mother the piano, and in this simple piece, we can hear a young composer exploring the limits of timbres of his instrument, trying to find his way across both instrument and music staff. The second movement can best be described as the improvisatory musings of the mother-son duo, each conversing with the other on their respective instruments. Although the piece seems to end with a final cadence in the piano, the cello enters with one last statement, ever the recalcitrant teenager who must have the last word in the conversation.

Although the two halves of this concert open with miniature pieces written by the Austrian composer Anton Webern (1883-1945), they could not be more different from each other. Where Webern's *Two Pieces* (1899) could be considered the exploratory musings of a teenage composer, his *Drei Kleine Stucke Op. 11* (1914) is the realization of his mature musical aesthetics refined and concentrated down to their most elementary components. Anton Webern, a member of the Second Viennese School of composers alongside Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, was instrumental in exploring twelve-tones serialism (as pioneered by his teacher, Schoenberg) and applying it to the techniques that defined Common Practice composition, including counterpoint, fugue, and canon. A defining feature of Webern's music was its abstraction – there is no story to tell in his music; it is, at its most fundamental, an exploration of what composers can do with tones. Webern met an untimely end in 1945, when he was shot by an American soldier because he broke a curfew imposed on his house because of his son-in-law's alleged black-market activities during the Allied Occupation of Austria. Despite his relative obscure end, Webern's music found a ready audience in the United States after the first International Webern Festival held at the University of Washington in 1962, a coterminous event with the World's Fair held in Seattle. From this fascinating combination of events was born the idea that Webern's music was the "music of the Space Age" – the music that would come to define the technological positivism of the latter half of the twentieth century, though that honor was short-lived.

Webern's *Drei Kleine Stucke Op. 11,* by contrast is extremely short – a treatise on musical composition more than a piece of music meant to be enjoyed. It contains Webern's musical experiments laid out in a distilled and atomic format. Lasting just over two minutes, the piece is a snapshot of where Webern was going to take his music over the course of his career, and a definitive rupture with the neo-Romantic work that defined his youth.



Publicity materials for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair and the First International Webern Festival

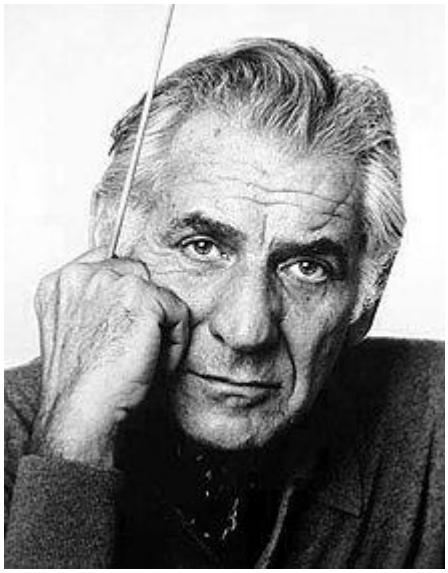
Robert Schumann's music is full of contrasts – many tend to see the sudden shifts in his musical mood as a reflection of the mental illness that plagued him for most of his adult life (commonly speculated to be a form of bipolar disorder). The *Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70* (1849), is no exception to this, with the extremely calm first movement standing in stark contrast to the frenetic energy of the *Allegro*. Schumann himself was born in 1810 in Saxony (now part of Germany). Despite having professed musical talent, he entered the University of Leipzig to study law at his family's behest. He soon abandoned his law studies for a fairly successful gig as a music critic, pianist, and eventually composer. He married the daughter of his piano teacher, Clara, in 1840. Their relationship was one of mutual love and support, though there are rumors that a close family friend of the Schumann family, a certain Johannes Brahms, held secret affections for Clara.

Portrait of Robert Schumann, Kriehuber.

In any case, Schumann's life was often disrupted by and dictated by the throes of his mental condition – he sometimes went long stints without composing, and other times he composed 20 works in one year (as was the case in 1849). Having just composed a concerto for four French horns and orchestra, he decided to publish a chamber work for the same instrument, and thus was born the *Adagio and Allegro*, initially composed for French horn and piano (with alternative violin and cello solo parts included in the published score). Schumann died in 1856, two years after a suicide attempt in which he jumped into the Rhine.

The cello adaptation of the *Adagio and Allegro* retains some of the awkward beauty of the original – the long unbroken phrasing of the first movement (making breathing a challenge for the horn) and the intervallic runs in the second culminating a high E flat which sits out of the comfortable register of both cello and horn. If the first movement is a tranquil romance between the two instruments, a midnight conversation between lovers, dragging far into wee hours of the night, then the second movement is an abrupt wake up call, the pair having only just fallen asleep at the break of dawn. The *Allegro* quite perfectly embodies the picture of a honeymooning couple scrambling to pack their bags to reach their flight home (catching a breather only in the taxi ride from hotel to airport – the recapitulation of the *Adagio* theme), and their triumph as they board the plane seconds before the gates close. You can imagine any scenario you like when listening, but pay attention to the play of opposites, the abrupt changes between moods, and the contrasts inherent in this piece – it will enrich the experience.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) was a force of nature and icon in the American music scene, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, chamber music, musicals, and other works for the theater. He is perhaps best known for the *West Side Story* musical and the operetta *Candide*, but he also had an extremely prolific career as a conductor, leading a number of major orchestras around the world, including the NY Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, among others. In 1971, during the height of the Vietnam War, Leonard "Lenny" Bernstein presented the multifaceted work, *MASS*: "a theater piece for singers, players, and dancers" to mark the inauguration of the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. *Three Meditations from MASS* is a selection of three instrumental interludes from within the broader scope of this multi-modal work, arranged for the cello and piano. The following note from the composer should be kept in mind when absorbing this excerpted work.



Leonard Bernstein in 1977

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

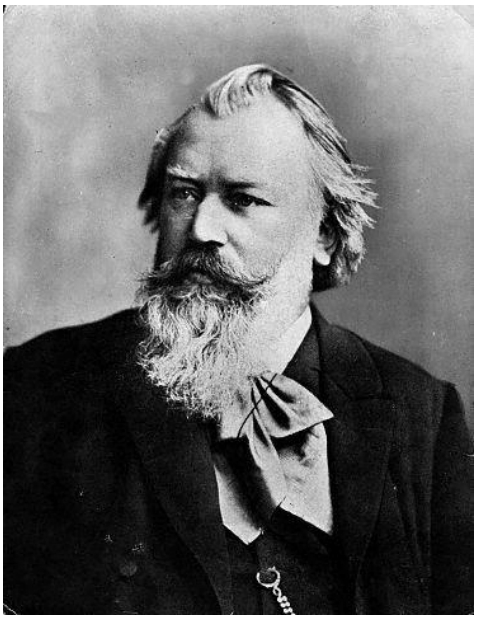
"Since MASS is primarily a dramatic stage production, these excerpts can convey at best only a certain limited aspect of its scope and intention. Essentially it is concerned with a celebration of the Roman ritual using the Latin text of the Catholic liturgy; but simultaneously there is a subtext in English reflecting the reactions, doubts, protests, and questionings — positive and negative — of all of us who are attending and perceiving this ritual. By 'all of us' I mean to include all who are assembled on stage and, by extension, the audience itself."
– Leonard Bernstein

Claude Debussy in 1908

Claude Debussy's parents originally intended to enroll their son in a naval academy, to become a sailor of the wide-open seas before his musical talent was discovered by the piano teacher (and former pupil of Chopin) Mme. Mauté de Fleurville. It is perhaps no small coincidence that Mauté de Fleurville was also the mother-in-law of the *symboliste* poet, Paul Verlaine, whose artistic vision greatly influenced Debussy's own. Though his calling was in music, Debussy never forgot the summers he spent in the Côte d'Azur as a child, and the organic push and pull of the ocean is a fundamental characteristic of his compositional style. In 1915, Debussy was in a rut, having just undergone surgery for a cancer which left him incapacitated for the greater part of a year. In a letter to the conductor Bernardo Molinari, he wrote: "When I tell you that I spent nearly a year unable to write music…after that I've almost had to re-learn it. It was like a rediscovery and it's seemed to me more beautiful than ever." The Debussy who wrote this cello sonata was not the same man who wrote *Jeux* or *La Mer*. The Debussy of 1915 was a man who had lost his connection to his passion and rediscovered it, finding new life in the compositional process along the way. Like all of Europe, Debussy had also experienced the initial horrors of World War I, and gotten a taste of humanity at its very worst, another factor which colored his renewed interest in his compositions.

Debussy's *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (1915) is a three-movement work encompassing a range of musical timbres and colors in a short span of time. The first movement (*Prologue)* is characterized by its resemblance of French baroque rhythm, based on dotted rhythms in a 3:1 proportion not dissimilar to the overtures of Rameau and the *Galant* style. The sweeping melodies of the cello pair perfectly with the characteristically Debussyan piano writing. The second movement (*Sérénade)* features punchy pizzicato lines in the cello with a distinctly Spanish flair that nicely complements the natural articulation of the piano. The cellist in both this and the *attaca* finale must explore the boundaries between the guitar and the cello, replete with numerous *pizzicato* passages and even instances where the cellist must strum the instrument as if it were a guitar. Beyond all, this piece is not just a rediscovery after a convalescence for Debussy, but an exploration of the timbral affordances of the cello and piano combination.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was renowned not only for his reverence of the music of the first Viennese School, but also for a fairly astringent personality. Brahms was not a cuddly character, despite what his bearded portraits might indicate; rather he was exacting in his musical demands, both of himself and his musical partners. His partnership with the virtuoso cellist, Robert Hausmann, inspired not only the cello sonata, but also the *Double Concerto* for violin and cello. In 1886, Brahms composed the *Cello Sonata in F Major, Op. 99*, some twenty years after he premiered the first cello sonata and it was subsequently championed by Hausmann in Europe. Brahms put the finishing touches on this monumental work for the cello and piano not long after a summer stay in Thun, Switzerland. Brahms greatly enjoyed this idyllic vacation, and some of that bubbly happiness spilled over into sonata.



The iconic 1889 Brasch portrait of Brahms

The sonata proceeds in four movements: *Allegro vivace*, *Adagio affettuoso* (in F# major), *Allegro passionato* (back in F minor), and *Allegro molto*. These four movements range the breadth of human emotion, starting with an impassioned exploration of harmonies and timbres in the first movement. A key defining feature of this opening movement is the tremolo passages which outline it, in the piano at the very beginning and in the cello at the very end of the exposition. The unorthodox first movement (despite its adherence to sonata form) leads into the even bolder harmonies of the *Adagio*, performed in a very distant key to F major: F# major. This move to an extremely tonally unrelated land is not in vain, for in the larger scheme of the sonata, it is almost like an upper neighbor between the first and third movements. The *Allegro* scherzo brings us back to the home key of F natural, (but now in the minor mode). The cello has to adopt multiple characters in this movement, switching between a melodic voice and a very rhythmically driven lower voice in a split second. The finale is in the form of a *rondo*, bringing us back to principal theme a number of times before finally sending us off with a roaring gesture after a complex pizzicato passage.

-Program notes by Saagar Asnani