

Mendelssohn: *Concertpiece No. 1 in F Minor, Op. 113*

The concert opens with a trio featuring the clarinet, bassoon, and piano by the well-known Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847). Originally entitled, “The Battle of Prague” for its primary theme taken from an eponymous piece by František Kočvara (1750-1791), Mendelssohn’s first *Concertpiece* was born from a lively soirée of musical exchange at his house in Berlin. On a cold December day in 1832, a pair of musicians from Munich, Heinrich Joseph Baermann and his son Carl, visited Mendelssohn’s Berlin residence. The two Münchners carried with them knowledge of a kind very dear to their Berliner host: the recipe for *Dampfnudeln* and *Rahmstrudel*, two delicacies from Munich which made Mendelssohn’s mouth water. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, carried in his head an idea for a trio which he could perform with the Baermanns (Heinrich was a clarinetist, and his son played the basset horn, though most musicians today replace this with a bassoon).

The three spent a day together in Berlin, the Baermanns in the kitchen preparing the requested specialties, Mendelssohn in his study composing what would become the first of two *Concertpieces* destined for the Baermann duo. In the evening, they exchanged the fruits of their labor and played through the *Concertpiece* while dining on some delicious dumplings and strudel. The Baermann’s were thrilled with Mendelssohn’s work and soon after requested him to arrange another soirée, during which he would compose his *Concertpiece in D Minor, Op. 114*. Whoever said that food cannot inspire in us the utmost creativity? Indeed, Mendelssohn’s chamber music party is a scene played out again and again in the homes of musicians today, as we gather to share in the beauty of music alongside the joys of breaking bread together.

Mendelssohn’s *Concertpiece in F Minor, Op. 113* is a game of equals, beginning with an attention-grabbing *tutti*, followed by a clarinet flourish and then one in the bassoon. The bassoon then takes on an undulating ostinato which it passes back and forth with the piano while the clarinet sings out a beautiful pastoral melody over it. Then the two switch, and the clarinet lays a smooth bed over which the bassoon can sing out. As the piano drops out, we enter the realm of dramatic dialogues, where the clarinet and bassoon engage in a musical conversation not unlike a Shakespearian balcony scene. In fact, Mendelssohn had composed his renowned music for Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* just six years prior, so he was already deeply engaged with the dramatic medium of the theater. After the opening *Allegro con fuoco* comes a dreamy *Andante*, a tranquil fantasy in which both instruments show off unbridled levels of lyricism, accompanied by a tip-toeing piano, which leads right into a mini duo-cadenza right before the final *Presto*. This final *rondo* allows both clarinetist and bassoonist to show off their virtuosity, one after the other. Listen for each variation of the main theme and the buildup of technical intensity until it all melts

back into a restatement of the romping first theme. Each instrument demonstrates the breadth of its technical capabilities, the clarinet reaching up to its highest registers, and the bassoon down into its lowest. But, through it all, we can clearly feel the compositional hand of someone eager to dig into his plate of *strudel*.

Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Madeleine Dring: *Trio for Flute, Oboe, and Piano*

Passing off the relay now to the flute and oboe, the clarinet and bassoon take a short break in Dring's *Trio*. Madeleine Dring (1923-1977) was a (far too) little-known yet greatly adored English composer of the mid-twentieth century. Dring began her musical career at the Royal College of Music with a scholarship for violin performance on her tenth birthday in 1933, having demonstrated extreme prowess on both the violin and piano from her early studies. After graduating, Dring often composed for the radio and musical theater. In 1947, she married her husband, Roger Lord, longtime principal oboe of the London Symphony Orchestra, and he was often the muse and dedicatee for her works of which many prominently featured the oboe. She composed this *Trio for Flute, Oboe, and Piano* in 1968, and it was premiered across the Atlantic by her husband on oboe, Peter Lloyd on flute, and André Previn on piano.

The *Trio* consists of three movements, the first of which is marked *Allegro con brio*. The flute and oboe begin in homophony and remain in this texture for much of the movement, causing their two voices to continually melt together, with brief moments when one pokes out over the other. You might even be fooled into thinking there is only one woodwind instrument playing alongside the piano, so completely does Dring succeed in melding the colors of the oboe and flute together. The second movement, *Andante semplice*, begins with a climbing arpeggiation in the piano that leads us into yet another dreamworld. The oboe starts a lullaby-like solo, to which the flute responds in kind. Then she writes, *più espressivo*, and the flute launches into a rhapsodic secondary theme, ultimately joined by the oboe. Each instrument in the woodwind duo portrays its own character and carries that persona throughout the movement. Finally, the *Trio* ends with an *Allegro giocoso* straight from an old Hollywood movie. The piano sets the stage with an intensely discordant ostinato, almost as if signaling the imminent danger of an oncoming train. The flute and oboe, finally now at odds with each other, fight in an increasingly virtuosic display of pyrotechnics. A free-for-all cadenza ends their duel, capping off this delightful *Trio* by Madeleine Dring.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Glinka: *Trio Pathétique in D Minor*

« *Je n'ai connu l'amour qu'à travers le malheur qu'il cause* »

“I've only known love through the unhappiness it causes”

-Mikhail Glinka's epigraph to the first edition of the *Trio Pathétique*

Here the clarinet and bassoon retake the stage to present Glinka's *Trio Pathétique*. Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857) composed this *Trio* in Milan (1832) to perform with two colleagues from the Teatro alla Scala Orchestra, Pietro Tassistro on clarinet and Antonio Cantù on bassoon, Glinka himself taking the difficult and dynamic piano part. As legend goes, Cantù, upon finishing the read-through of the piece, and deeply moved by the emotionally and technically demanding bassoon lines in the third movement, exclaimed, “Ma questo è disperazione!” (“But this is desperation”). Glinka, inspired by Cantù's feelings then decided to add the *Pathétique* epithet to the *Trio* as well as the above-cited epigraph to the first edition. While Glinka also published a version of the *Trio Pathétique* for violin and cello, the original instrumentation retains the depth of physical and sentimental maturity necessary to successfully execute a performance of the piece.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato* can best be described by its binary form, the first half of which follows neatly *sonata-allegro* form, while the second half branches into a more lyrically unstable thematic exploration. The three instruments begin in unison, and the texture is marked throughout the opening gambit by a two-bar motif: half note, two quarter notes, a dotted quarter note, an eighth note, and finally a quarter note followed by a quarter rest. This rhythm follows an undulating melody that falls by a fifth in the first bar, only to climb back up a sixth and fall back down to the starting note by the second bar. This primary motif is then repeatedly called upon by all the instruments, anchoring us through time and space. As it is passed back and forth, juxtaposed against a falling scalar lament, we start to see where the musicians saw desperation in the pages of the score. As the second half, characterized by its melodious interchanges, melts away we suddenly find ourselves in the *scherzo*.

The next movement, *Scherzo: Vivacissimo*, the piano takes the virtuosic reins from the bassoon and clarinet. All three instruments proceed to pass off a staccato motif of three quarter notes, almost like a musical hot potato. They then join together for a moment of pure, unadulterated joy before the *Trio*. In the *Trio*, the bassoon begins with a solo, and the clarinet responds with its own version of the theme, and finally the piano gets a chance to provide input. The three come together in full texture right before the return to the *scherzo*. A *lento* coda of extreme gravity ties into the slow movement to follow.

In the third movement, *Largo*, Glinka thins the texture down to a duet for the majority of the time. The piano sets the scene with an undulating ostinato over which the clarinet sings out a heartbroken rhapsody. As the clarinet cries in its most treble registers, it signals the end of its emotional soliloquy, and the bassoon prepares its answer. Beginning with a scalar descent not unlike a lament, the bassoon drops to the lowest abyss of its register, from which it pulls itself out, note by note. We finally understand Cantù *disperazione*. Once the piano articulates its response, the clarinet and bassoon sing together for the first time in this movement in a coda that mirrors the calm before the storm.

Allegro con spirito: the final movement is a joyous celebration of all that love has to offer when it deigns to bless us with happiness rather than sorrow.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Images, clockwise from top left: *Dampfnudeln*, *Rahmstrudel*, Mikhail Glinka, Madeleine Dring

Source: Wikimedia Commons and British Music Collection

Gernot Wolfgang: *Ghost Train*

GHOST TRAIN for flute, bassoon and piano was commissioned in 2013 by the Los Angeles based concert series Chamber Music Palisades.

The 10-min. piece's name refers to so-called *ghost notes*, which are prevalent throughout the composition.

Ghost notes are performed with “negative accents” (they are softer than their preceding and subsequent notes), and often with incomplete sound production. They are frequently used in jazz, and also in other kinds of music by percussion instruments such as the snare drum.

There is a good amount of "traveling music" in the piece, therefore its title - *GHOST TRAIN*.

Gernot Wolfgang

Los Angeles, June 2019



Gernot Wolfgang (b. 1957)

Source: gernotwolfgang.com

Julius Röntgen: *Trio for Flute, Oboe, and Bassoon, Op. 86*

Born into a musical family in nineteenth-century Leipzig, Julius Röntgen (1855-1932) grew to become an important figure for both German and Dutch musical institutions that are now synonymous with the idea of “classical music.” His father was a first violin in the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and his mother was a pianist. His maternal cousin, born just a few years after him in 1859, Julius Klengel was a world-renowned cellist. Having learned both music and more traditional subjects at home, Röntgen entered the German musical scene at age 14, when he met Franz Liszt at a party. He then attended the University of Amsterdam, but finding the city’s music education to be lacking in terms of serious musicianship, he spearheaded the foundation of both the Amsterdam Conservatory and Concertgebouw during his career. Well-connected in musical circles (he knew and often collaborated with Brahms, Liszt, Flesch, Casals), Röntgen has had an indelible impact on both music education and performance on the Continent. Even after he retired from his professional life, he and his legacy have continued to foster music composition in Amsterdam. His son, Frants, was an architect and he designed his retirement villa, *Gaudeamus*, located in Bilthoven. Today, the villa hosts the Gaudeamus Society, an organization dedicated to the promotion and preservation of contemporary Dutch music composition.

His *Trio for Flute, Oboe, and Bassoon*, composed in 1917, begins with a quaint musical vignette. Marked *Allegretto con spirito*, the first movement is highly peculiar in its dedication to the musical story it tells. The flute begins in the stratosphere, with a very specific performance direction: *quasi un’ucello* (‘almost like a bird’). Once the oboe and bassoon join in, the game is clear; we are listening to a family of birds flying through the air (one might imagine the bassoon to be the father, the oboe to be the mother, and the flute their child). As they weave around each other, soaring through the open skies, gusts of wind occasionally buffet them around and they engage in cheery conversation, the parents showing their little one the sights over which they pass.

But once we come to the second movement the entire mood changes drastically. *Poco andante, quasi una fantasia* displays a stark difference from the previous movement. Here the oboe takes the center stage with a solo statement of the primary theme. Then, the flute uncharacteristically takes the role of rhythmic accompaniment, while the bassoon sings a lyrical counter theme. Röntgen keeps the texture thin throughout the movement, rarely venturing beyond a duet and often keeping two voices in homophony throughout.

Finally, the *Allegretto* is a quirky village dance. The bassoon provides a rhythmic ostinato while the flute and oboe dance around each other. Then, the meter suddenly shifts into triple time and all three instruments start to twirl around the dance floor. A return to duple

meter lets the flute take the spotlight, cascading to and fro. What we have here is a theme and variations, but each variation provides a distinct metrical and musical interpretation, allowing the dance to morph through a variety of guises, from joyful to dark. The coda returns to the bird-like sketch of the first movement and our family of ducks turns around to take a satisfied curtain call.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Julius Röntgen

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Saint-Saëns: *Caprice sur des airs danois et russes*, Op. 79

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was one of the most influential French composers of the nineteenth century, and his works were often described as masterpieces demonstrating the full range of a given instrument. One looks to his *Organ Symphony* and the *Carnaval des Animaux* as stellar examples of his ability to explore some of the furthest reaches of our instruments' capabilities. Saint-Saëns composed the *Caprice on Danish and Russian Airs* in honor of the Danish Princess Dagmar, who became Maria Feodorovna, the Tsarina of Russia by marrying Alexander III in 1881. Maria Feodorovna, the dedicatee of the *Caprice* was the mother of Russia's last Tsar, Nicholas II, and she outlived the tragic events of the Bolshevik Revolution by a decade.

The *Caprice*, so named because it takes as its primary thematic material one Danish folksong and two Russian folk melodies, premiered in St. Petersburg on April 21, 1887, to great acclaim. This original ensemble consisted of Paul Taffanel on flute, Georges Gillet on oboe, Charles Turban on clarinet, and Saint-Saëns himself on piano. The *Caprice* so deeply reaches for the technical and expressive range of the primary woodwind instruments that Arthur Rubinstein, then director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, mandated that all his wind students attend the work's final performance later that week. Indeed, Saint-Saëns himself proclaimed the following: "I refuse to arrange the Russian piece, and I would not like it to be arranged. On reflection, I became convinced that it would become insipid, deprived of the instruments for which it was made." He himself was convinced that no string quartet or other combination of instruments could truly do justice to the timbres brought together by the woodwind trio and piano combination. The *Caprice* was a resounding success and soon found itself being performed the world over, notably in London and in Rio de Janeiro months after the Russian premiere.

The *Caprice* is contained in one continuous movement, but we can divide it into an introduction, a theme and variations on a Danish air, then two Russian themes introduced and developed in quick succession, followed by a coda. The thick *tutti* introduction is punctuated by piano flourishes very reminiscent of the *Carnaval des Animaux*. Each woodwind instrument then has a turn at singing the main theme, but the piano leaves no page unfigured with its shimmery decorations.

The flute then introduces the Danish theme in 6/8 time, transporting us to the frozen tundra of northern Europe, the piano blowing gentle gusts of the chilly wind over us. Saint-Saëns plays a lot with the textures, often reducing down to one instrument then slowly building back up the full group with massive drama. The next variation on this theme is a virtuosic display of its furthest reaches. A syncopated piano and flute duet then introduces the final

Danish variation, which by now has become a sparse but haunting melody accompanied by relentless rhythmic drive in the piano.

The Russian airs begin with a rhapsody in the oboe, slowly introducing this heart wrenching melody. The clarinet responds to the oboe solo, drawing us East to the land of the Tsars. But then, a swift transition to *Allegro vivace* with a twirling piano ostinato precedes the clarinet's exposition of the second Russian air; this time the theme is certainly a dance. The four instruments then tumble over each other, sometimes stopping to help one of them up, other times simply rolling along with the frenetic energy of the dance. The dance finally melts into a lyrical coda while the piano maintains the same level of energy, but the woodwinds take turns singing out a final encore. Each instruments gets a final chance to show off their technical prowess before the curtains fall.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Camille Saint-Saëns (left) and Tsarina Maria Feodorovna (right)

Source: Wikimedia Commons