Beethoven: *Violin Sonata No. 4 in A Minor, Op. 23* (1801)

This violin sonata is a work of thwarted expectations. Composed at the start of the nineteenth century and dedicated to his young patron, Count Moritz von Fries, Beethoven's fourth violin sonata seeks to move from old territory into new, just as the world turned over into the new century. In this sonata elements of sonata-allegro form combine with newer trends in symphonic and chamber music, resulting in a strange chimera of movements that has not quite decided what it wants to be. The opening movement is marked *Presto,* the second: *Andante scherzoso, più allegretto*, and the finale: *Allegro molto*. At least on the surface, we have a fast-slow-fast progression, the classic alternation of galant-style music. However, in performance, the *Presto* is much more staid than we might expect, while the *Andante scherzoso, più allegretto* is much closer to a quick *scherzo* than a pensive slow movement. What we have recorded in these mismatches is Beethoven's play with tradition and innovation, not quite decided where and how he wishes to riff upon the classic formulae of the salon masters (*i.e.,* Haydn and Mozart).

The opening movement, *Presto*, is a musical lesson in elegance and etiquette. The piano opens with a call to the dance floor, which the violin answers with grace and poise. As the two dance around each other, careful not to step on the other's toes, we see a conscious effort to support and not outdo one's dance partner. This movement is no virtuosic showpiece for either instrument, but rather a carefully coordinated partner dance, a choreographed array of twirls and leaps the violin and piano take around each other. In true sonata spirit, Beethoven gives an equal share of the primary melodic gestures to both violin and piano, and the two often exchange parts. In the development, the violin takes off with the first statement of the new theme, closely followed by the piano's rendition. Throughout these back-and-forth parlays, the two instruments maintain an air of *sangfroid*, lending the movement its characteristically clean timbres.

The second movement, *Andante scherzoso, più allegretto* seems to indicate confusion from the very tempo marking. Is it to be played slowly? Nimbly as if it were a *scherzo*? Incorporate a little bit more joy? In true Beethovenian fashion, the tempo can be left up to interpretation, but most interpretations keep the overall meter slow to let the opening bars breathe. The piano begins with a halting figure, as if taking a stroll through a sunlit garden, stopping every so often to smell the flowers. The violin does, likewise, approaching from the other end their meeting spot. The *scherzo's* joke works because Beethoven paints here a musical picture through the interlocking motifs of violin and piano.

The finale, a rambunctious rondo, is marked in a traditional manner as *Allegro molto*. We begin this movement *in medias res*, as the piano leads us forward by the hand, to which the violin adds its voice on top. Each subsequent variation grows in virtuosity and energy, each time returning to the opening rondo theme to clarify that this is a rondo and not a theme and variations. Let the dance begin!

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Arvo Pärt: *Fratres* (1977)

The Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), put pen to paper in 1977 to compose this work that was one of the first to break a period of what he calls his "creative silence." *Fratres* (1977) explores the timbre and the sound quality of the instruments performing more than most other works for chamber groups. Originally composed for wind and string quintets, this is a transcription Pärt adopted for solo violin and piano. The opening bars are a series of broken arpeggios in the violin, allowing us to hear the instrument's entire range in just a few bars.

While portions of the work might seem to be Paganiniesque explorations of violin technique, Pärt delighted in the simplicity of the melodic material. *Fratres* is a prime example of his compositional style that he calls, "Tintinnabulation," named after small bells contained in churches. In *Fratres,* the tintinnabulation style unfolds as a combination of triadic arpeggiations (often in the violin) atop a scalar bass line (usually played by the piano). Pärt explains his love for tintinnabulation by saying that "The three notes of a triad are like bells." He hears these intervals as the clear ringing sounds of church bells, and he tries to replicate the simultaneous juxtaposition of simplicity and grandeur that bells can evoke.

Each subsequent variation in what is essentially a theme and variations takes the violin to a new register, a new timbre, and a new technique for achieving these sounds. When the piano deviates from the scalar form of the tintinnabulation, it moves into a polyphonic texture that imitates polyphony from the Franco-Flemish school of the Renaissance. We can hear, buried beneath the violin's virtuosity—a sublimation of the soul in the piano's harmonies. Where Beethoven and Debussy delighted in the complexity of melodic structures, Pärt finds joy in the simplicity of just "one note beautifully played."

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Claude Debussy: *Sonata for Violin and Piano in G Minor* (1917)

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 1914, Debussy had pulled himself out of a rut—both mentally and physically—and began a series of sonatas for diverse instruments which was to be his last great project. Unfortunately, colon cancer would claim the brilliant composer in 1918, just months after he premiered his third and final sonata: the *Sonata for Violin and Piano in G Minor* with Gaston Poulet on violin during his last Parisian concert in May 1917. He had intended to compose six of these sonatas.

The cancer had wreaked havoc on his body well before he wrote this sonata. At the beginning of the sonata project, Debussy wrote to the conductor Bernardo Molinari: "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 seemed to me more beautiful than ever." Gone was the enthusiastic young man of *Jeux* and *La Mer*, replaced with a man ravaged by world events and his own body but eager to bring music back into his life.

The *Sonata for Violin and Piano* unfolds in three short movements, each of which is far shorter than one would expect for such a rich work. The first, *Allegro vivo*, is an insistent declaration of love. The piano begins with a tentative opening, upon which the violin cries out, as if it knows time is limited. We then slip into a dreamlike reverie in the development of the movement, the violin weaving intense bursts of passion into a placid pool of sound. The movement ends with an Iberian twist, a melodic gesture reminiscent of a Spanish matador's *danse macabre*.

The second movement, *Intermède*, is more than just a connecting movement between one and three. It is also a dance, but with what kind of partner, we remain in the dark. The momentum is generated by the piano's varying modalities of *staccato* lines beneath a more *sostenuto* violin part. The violin ends by climbing up into the highest registers for one final leap to the bottom.

The finale is marked *très animé*, and the piano does not disappoint with an opening gesture to show off nimble finger work. The violin follows suit with an equally frenetic line, until it all dissolves into a morose rhapsody. The piano then picks us back up into the fantasy realm of dancing elf-kings and their horrific deeds with a line reminiscent of Schubert's *Erlkönig*. After this interlude, we fall back into the instruments' darkest registers to set up the bombastic coda.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

César Franck: *Sonata in A Major for Violin and Piano* (1886)

Born in Liège, César Franck (1822-1890) moved to Paris as a teenager, and remained there for most of his adult life. He was a renowned organist and spent a good portion of his career as the primary organist for the Basilique Ste. Clotilde in Paris. In 1872, he was appointed as a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, where he coached a number of Paris's most well-known composers in the late nineteenth century, including Vincent d'Indy, Ernest Chausson, and Claude Debussy. Yet he is most well known today for his *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. Featured in numerous films and even a recent Korean television series, the *Franck Sonata* has been adopted into mainstream culture as a representative example of what beautiful Romantic era music can be.

But the first seedlings of its reputation as a *romantic* sonata were born with the sonata's dedicatee, the acclaimed Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931). At the occasion of Ysaÿe's marriage to Louise Bourdeau in 1886, Franck composed this sonata and presented it to the newlywed couple as a gift. Ysaÿe took a great liking to it, and championed the work for decades afterward, which quite likely contributed to its current popularity and connotations with amorous topics. Jascha Heifetz even performed the Franck *Sonata* during his final recital in 1972.

The Sonata contains four movements, each of which is more beautiful than the last. The opening movement is a pensive conversation between violinist and pianist, each chord progression a cue for the violin to further muse on the condition of love. The second movement takes its identity as a playful *scherzo* seriously, the piano and violin falling over each other to outshine the other in their proclamations of love. The piano plays *moto perpetuo* throughout a sizable portion of this movement. In the third movement, *Ben moderato: Recitativo-Fantasia*, the violin embarks on a rhapsodic exploration of *amour* from its very first entrance, which is treated almost as a cadenza. The fourth movement is almost saccharine in its insistence on melodic conversation between violin and piano. The two even engage in a canon at multiple points across the movement, the violin following the piano's lead. Franck takes a standard musical practice and turns it into an audible instantiation of *déjà vu*; I heard you before, and now I see you standing before me. But do I deserve your love? Why yes, yes I do.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley