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Violin Sonata no. 2 in A major, RV 31 by Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

At the turn of the 18th century, concertos and sonatas were an extremely popular form of composition for the violin. Vivaldi was recognized as one of the greatest Baroque composer, virtuoso violinist, and teacher. He composed many instrumental concertos for the violin and a variety of other instruments, as well as sacred choral works and more than forty operas. In 1708, he composed a set of twelve sonatas for violin and continuo, Op. 2, and had it published by Antonio Bortoli in Venice the following year. While Vivaldi would later revolutionize the concerto genre in his Op. 3 compositions, titled "*L'estro armonico*" in 1711, he continued to push for additional publication of his Op. 2 sonatas, having been dissatisfied with the Bortoli publication. Some information and instrumental labeling were accidentally omitted in Bortoli's edition. Vivaldi eventually found a publishing firm in Amsterdam by the name of Estienne Roger, and had his Op. 2 sonatas republished in 1712. In this new edition, there are fully notated figured bass and there was also no double stopping for the violin which makes his collection of sonatas ideal to arrange for wind instruments.

Vivaldi's Op. 2 sonatas were written in the "*Sonata da camera*" or "chamber" sonata form, which was made popular by Corelli. The form consists of three to four movements of Baroque dances, preceded by a prelude. Each dance is capable of different stylizations in terms of tempo (faster or slower), melody (polyphonic or contrapuntal), texture (imitative or non-imitative) amongst other features. The A major sonata No. 2 from the Op. 2 collection follows this form completely. It begins with a "*Prelude a capriccio*", a virtuosic rapid broken-chord figurations over pedal notes which is followed by a short "*Presto*" featuring busy sixteenth notes in the cembalom, before the *Corrente* dance in triple meter. Contrasting to the vibrant *Corrente* dance, an *Adagio* slow movement follows soon after in a recitative style functioning as a bridge before another dance, the *Giga*, that acts as the closing movement to the sonata.

Thème et Variations by Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Olivier Messiaen was one of the most enigmatic composers in the 20th century. His compositions are highly individualized; blending intellectually organized compositional systems with profoundly religious, yet deeply expressive emotions. Messiaen is a synesthete, where he is able to perceive colors when he hears sounds. In many of his compositions, he tries to “produce pictures” via sound, writing specific notes to bring about specific color sequences and blends. Messiaen also found birdsong fascinating, notating bird songs worldwide and incorporating them into his music. His innovative use of color, harmonic modes of limited transposition, complex rhythms as well as birdsongs are features that make his music unique.

Messiaen's *Thème et Variations* was written in 1932 as a present to his wife, violinist Claire Delbos. They premiered it together with Messiaen on the piano, a few months after their marriage. The opening theme in the violin is plaintive, and yet it is yearning for something out of reach, supported by harmonically unconventional chords in the piano. The variations that come after the theme flow effortlessly into one another - they are based as much on rhythmic inventions as melodic or harmonic departure. In the first variation *Modéré*, the same phrase structure of the theme is repeated, but with more harmonic and rhythmic acceleration. In the second variation, *Un peu moins modéré*, there are many exchanges of canonic 8th note figures between the violin and piano. This bright but steellike 8th note figure comes back many times in different pitch and register, and it is also juxtaposed with a passionate lyrical motive. Both parties reunite at the end to propel us into the third variation. In this variation *Modéré, avec éclat*, the harmonic and rhythmic pace is being heightened even more. The violin part has more passionate 16th notes while the piano part moves more quickly throughout the variation. The penultimate variation, *Vif et passioné* is filled with fervent spirit that drives forward with its tempo, that builds up into the final variation, which begins with insistent piano chords with a reinstatement of the theme in the violin, this time in a higher register. The chords in the piano oscillate in a fuller scale, which accompanies the grander theme in the violin. Writer, composer and pianist John Novacek has suggested that this finale represents religious transcendence and resolution.

Violin Sonata No. 3 in D minor, Op. 108 by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Brahms started writing his third violin sonata in 1886, almost immediately after finishing his Sonata No. 2 in A major during a summer holiday in Thun. However, it took another two years before he completed the work when he returned to Thun in 1888 for another vacation. He dedicated this sonata to Hans von Bülow, who was a pianist, famous conductor, and champion of Brahms' music. This sonata was premiered in Budapest with Jenő Hubay on the violin and the composer himself at the piano in 1888.

This work is the most dramatic amongst the three violin sonatas; it has a great variety of musical characterizations within a relatively short span of its four movements. In the first movement *Allegro*, the violin plays a lyrical but *sotto voce* theme while being accompanied by a ruminating murmur in the low registers of the piano. Immediately after the violin's closing cadence of the first subject, the piano proceeds to enter with an explosively heroic chordal reenactment of the soaring theme, driving the music to a more affable second theme. In the development section, the piano hovers over the dominant A pedal for almost 50 bars beneath the mysterious motivic deliberations of the violin. The development seamlessly gives way to the recapitulation, where the violin restates the theme but in an octave lower, and the piano plays an elaborated version of the original accompanying figure. The recapitulation continues, this time with a low D pedal followed by a final *sostenuto* statement of the first subject across three octaves that lands itself in the key of D major.

Balancing the dark and mysterious mood of the first movement, the *Adagio* opens with a lyrical aria in the violin accompanied throughout by the piano. The character of this movement is romantic and nostalgic, stated *espressivo* in the violin part right at the beginning. This melody goes through modulations and crescendos that lead to a passionate climax, played in thirds on the violin. The movement ends with a brief echo of the opening theme that leads to a final, reflective cadence in the key of D major.

In contrast to the second movement, the piano takes center stage in this *scherzando* third movement (*Un poco presto e con sentimento*). Off-beat chords and pizzicatos in the violin part, coupled with light yet fleeting runs in the piano part creates a magical ambience. The *Presto agitato* finale begins in a stormy fashion, with the violin playing vigorous double stops while the piano plays big powerful chords. The theme in the violin begins on the same note as the first movement, but unlike the *sotto voce* theme, here it is presented in a very persistent manner. A range of textures from throbbing syncopations to eerie unisons ensures a variety of ideas pulsing throughout the movement. The turmoil finally unleashes into a full fledged return of the first subject that leads into a thundering conclusion in the home key of D minor.