

Three conversations and genius recognizing genius: the works by Schubert, Schumann and Ravel, each in their own way, represent a conversation between the two performers. There is no soloist, as both partners share the material in such a way that invites the audience to observe a private and intimate conversation between two people speaking in private. And then, we get to tip our hats to a 17 year old Hubay, who attended the disastrous premiere of Carmen, and instantly recognized that this was a work of genius, and created his own response to it, before the ink on the original had even dried.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Violin Sonata in A Major Op.162 D.574 “Gran Duo”

1: Allegro Moderato 2: Scherzo: Presto 3: Andantino 4: Allegro Vivace



Raised in a musical family, young Franz Schubert studied singing, viola, violin, piano and organ. His father was an amateur cellist and had his own string quartet, with whom Schubert played at every opportunity. While he never became an instrumental virtuoso, he nonetheless had an immensely music-rich childhood experience with a solid performer’s level in instrumental playing that he used to craft a body of some of the Romantic Era’s most enduring music: Symphonies, Piano Sonatas, String Quartets and no less than 644 songs that form the backbone of the Romantic German Lieder tradition. Conspicuously absent from this list of works is a Concerto (any large-scale work for solo instrument and orchestra) designed to showcase the virtuosity of the performer, and usually the composer’s own playing.

Such composer-performer virtuoso vehicles (such as Brahms, Mendelssohn, Mozart, or Paganini) simply held no interest for Schubert. Instead, the language of the song permeates many of his works, as they explore more intimate modes of expression. A case in point is the 1817 *Duo Sonata in A Major D574* which was published posthumously only 23 years after the composer’s death (hence the Opus number 162). In 1816, at the age of 19, Schubert wrote three Violin Sonatas, deliberately published as “Sonatinas” in an attempt to package them for an amateur market in Vienna. These works already revealed Schubert’s attempts to pay homage to Beethoven, whose spectre loomed as large in the field of chamber music as it did in the symphony. The *Duo* is conceived as a 4 movement Sonatina, but it is an unbroken stream of song – leading to the renaming of it. While it is relaxed and genial, it is deliberately more virtuosic than the three earlier sonatinas and not nearly as frivolous as the 1816 *Four Comic Ländler* for 2 Violins.

1 Allegro Moderato (moderate but lively pace)

A simple violin-song opens the work, which evolves as the movement progresses. The Piano and Violin pass material back and forth in a conversational and playful manner, which never dissolves into a true sonata conflict of the type that would have interested Beethoven. Exploration of minor keys are primarily for purposes of colour rather than melancholy, and the trademark Schubertian transparency reflects the model of Mozart. An episode with potential for drama is left untapped.

2 Scherzo: Presto (playful and quick)

A whirlwind Scherzo with a few surprises such as irregular phrase lengths and a surprise-modulation or two and some Beethovenian outbursts and dramatic pauses, reveals Schubert’s close study of the works of his hero. The middle section is a sinuous little Trio with crawling chromatic material that provides surprising flexibility of rhythm and harmony, providing complete contrast with the more insistent rhythms of the Scherzo, which is repeated after the Trio.

3 Andantino (steady pace)

The third movement opens like a simple Mozart opera aria, with an uncomplicated melody sung by a light soprano, with a gentle undulating accompaniment. Bird-like trills start to disturb the pastoral peace and interjections hint at something more sinister, but soon piano and violin swap places, and the pianist becomes the soprano, accompanied by the violin. Indeed, we realise we were not listening to a solo aria, but rather a conversation between both characters, sometimes nodding in agreement, passing gossip back and forth, and only the odd turn to the minor key occasionally suggesting a temporary shrugging in disagreement.

4 Allegro Vivace (lively and fast)

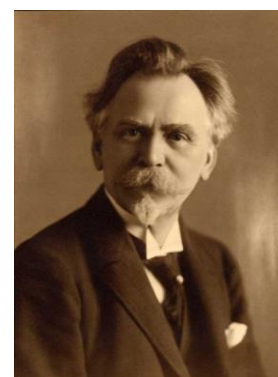
A frantic Viennese Waltz with some spicy dissonance again holds potential for darkness and melancholy that Schubert simply chose not to explore. Some slight-of-hand modulations belie the simplicity of the conception, which keeps breaking into song-like material. The movement ends neither in victory nor by making (or winning) an argument: it is the conversation of two equal partners.

While the first published title, “Gran Duo” cannot with total accuracy be ascribed to Schubert himself, it is simply the best description of the work.

Jenő Hubay (1858-1937)

Fantaisie Brillante on Bizet’s “Carmen”

Hungarian Violinist Jenő Hubay started violin lessons with his father, but by age 13 was considered enough of a prodigy to warrant going to study abroad. In Berlin, he ended up in the studio of Joseph Joachim, the greatest violinist of his day and inspiration for some of the greatest violin concertos ever written. He met Franz Liszt, who was so impressed that he encouraged the young violinist to launch a solo career. It was customary for great virtuosos of the day to write their own material to show off their skills, and Hubay was no exception. These showpieces would either be completely original works or they would be paraphrases from larger works, and opera provided a rich field of fresh tunes to “borrow”. Liszt, Chopin, Paganini, Sarasate, Kreisler – an exceedingly long list of composer-performers – all have operatic fantasies, paraphrases, variations, extracts and more, to their name.



Opera was accessible to all social classes in the nineteenth century. It was often deliberately in the language of the local population, and when it was not, this would have political consequences and other class-implications. Since there was no recording process available, one got to know operas by attending them, or buying an arrangement or a songsheet. Operatic material therefore surfaced in daily life away from the stage.

Hubay was 17 when he attended the premiere of George Bizet’s opera *Carmen*. The work was instantly rejected by the critics – it showed a murder on stage and the lead character was a woman whose scandalous personal behaviour could be talked about but not sung about! He went home after opening night, enthralled by the work’s melodic richness, and – from memory – transcribed as many themes as he could remember, and started writing his own Concert Fantasy, becoming the first in a long line of performers to pay homage to the genius of Bizet who was completely devastated by the failure of his opera, dying only a few months later, unaware of how popular his *Carmen* was set to become.

Hubay draws on his own Hungarian heritage: while the tunes may be all Bizet, they are introduced with cadenzas and elaborated in ways that reflect the Hungarian Rhapsodies of Liszt and even Brahms. While some arias and duets are simply quoted, Hubay builds in flashy cadenzas between phrases or sections, in the style of the gypsy fiddlers of his childhood. The work is dedicated to one of Hubay’s mentors, the violinist Henri Vieuxtemps and some of the cadenzas quote violinistic passages favoured by Vieuxtemps.



Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

Three Romances, Op.22

1 Andante molto 2 Allegretto 3 Leidenschaftlich schnell

Clara Wieck was born in Leipzig to a talented singer mother and a difficult and domineering father who was nonetheless one of the best piano teachers in Germany. He pushed his daughter's musical education to the point where the prodigy, at age 14, gave the premiere of her own composition, a Piano Concerto, with Felix Mendelssohn conducting. By 18 she had become one of the most renowned concert pianists in all of Europe. Robert Schumann was so entranced by her playing as an 8 year old, that he enrolled for music lessons with Clara's father – which in those days involved moving in with your teacher. By 18 he was madly in love with Clara and asked for her hand in marriage. Her father did everything to stop the relationship, including planning a concert tour, but eventually Robert sued him and the courts ruled that the two were free to marry.

Clara was the breadwinner – she had a performing career of 61 years – in addition to being a mother of 7 children, a busy teacher and concert pianist: these factors made composing strictly a pastime for her. She set new standards of performance that continue to this day, including the playing of recitals and concertos from memory. Robert was most supportive of her compositions, praised them highly, and encouraged her to write more: he even created a composition studio for her in their new home in Düsseldorf, and arranged for his own pupil, the young Johannes Brahms, to babysit the 7 children so that he and Clara could work in peace. She was also a great promoter and performer of chamber music and, for example, gave 238 recitals with the great violinist Joseph Joachim. It was for Joachim and herself that Clara composed the Three Romances Op.22.

“Romance” was a title favoured by Clara and other romantics, for an instrumental work of a tender, sentimental and lyrical character. These works are less excitable than the “Fantasy” pieces by both the Schumann-couple and others that have more dramatic and darker undertones.

1 *Andante molto (at a walking pace)*– A beautifully sung violin melody opens the set, with conversational counterpoint provided by the piano. A surprisingly chromatic piano part reveals a composer of poise and sophistication. Even the “Animato” middle section remains tenderly reflective and wistful.

2 *Allegretto – (a little lively)* Even though the second Romance starts in the minor key, the instruction is to play “with tender presentation”. The middle section – in a happier major key and mood, is full of playful trills and embellishments.

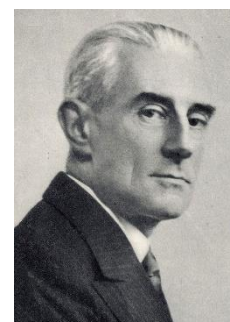
3 *Leidenschaftlich schnell (Passionately fast)* builds a long instrumental vocalise over rippling arpeggios that dominate the opening and closing sections, leaving the middle section for harp-like figures and occasional dialogue between the two instruments.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major Op.77

1 Allegretto 2 Blues: Moderato 3 Perpetuum Mobile: Allegro

The era is World War I, and a truck driver is on the front line in Verdun in France, transporting fuel and weapons in a truck- in the middle of a harsh winter. Because of the danger of being shot at, the truck may not switch on its lights. Because it is carrying fuel, one bullet from enemy fire would lead to disaster. “Day and Night”, wrote the driver, “without lights on roads damaged by explosions, carrying loads double what my truck should carry. And always in a hurry because I was in range of enemy guns”.



A photograph of 1916 shows the driver posing in a tin hat and an enormous fur coat – required because the cabs of the trucks were open to the elements and any stray ordnance. Letters to his friends detail the bevy of breakdowns and near-misses he encountered on a daily basis.

The driver of that truck was also the composer of *Bolero*. Although Maurice Ravel was a celebrated composer when the war broke out and could have avoided military service, he was passionately determined to enlist. He was clear-eyed about what might happen, referring to his new Piano Trio as “a posthumous work”. By 1917 his health had deteriorated from stress and trauma: he was “Skin and bones, thin and neurotic” and given a medical discharge from the military. The next two works he composed were *Le Tombeau de Couperin* – a piano suite with each movement dedicated to a personal friend, killed in the war, and the second his *Violin Sonata*.

The post-war works reveal a composer with radically new aesthetic exploration. He sets out to explore the basic incompatibility of the two instruments, actively underlining their basic differences. The dryness of the piano writing, which incorporates bi-tonal and whole-tone material carried over from the Impressionist period, underlines a violin that can scamper erratically, and pluck like a banjo, before letting out howls and moans of discomfort.

1 Allegretto (a little lively) At times as stark and bleak as a Shostakovich quartet, there is also an undeniable optimism and affirmation in this movement. Lyricism provides soothing in the context of a harsh World War that had not quite concluded yet.

2 Blues: Moderato – Ravel’s post-War machinistic writing is set up through rhythmically regular, repeated chords, against which the violin explores a Jazz aesthetic, Blues-notes and all. Some writers have described the chromatic portamento-sliding patterns as “weeping figures”. The movement builds to an angry climax, the likes of which we have seen in the Piano Trio and Left Hand Piano Concerto. Others have heard a relentless military march rather than a Blues Banjo in this work.

3 Perpetuum Mobile: Allegro (fast perpetual movement)

One could subtitle the movement *The Flight of the French Bumble-Bee*. It struggles to start, like the Wartime truck driver desperately trying to get the engine going, but once it is off, it is off on a desperate, relentless chase, dodging bullets and potholes, only to reach the destination in a triumphant rain of G Major arpeggios. Ultimately the War does not win. There is something undeniably life-affirming about the climax of this sonata, that keeps drawing performers to it, despite its formidable technical difficulties.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Jordan Brooks started violin lessons at the age of seven under the tutelage of Anne Marie Swanepoel at the Beau Soleil Music Centre in South Africa. In 2020, he received a full scholarship to study at the prestigious Chetham's School of Music in Manchester.

Since the age of 11, he has performed as a soloist with various orchestras in South Africa, including the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra, the Cape Town Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, the Hugo Lambrecht Symphony Orchestra, as well as numerous performances with the Beau Soleil String Ensemble. Jordan has also performed in numerous recital venues, such as The Casa Labia, Erin Hall, The Baxter Theatre, the Welgemeend, and several wine farms in Stellenbosch. In the UK, he has performed in venues such as The Stoller Hall, Bridgewater Hall, St Martin-in-the-Fields, St James Piccadilly, and The Conway Hall.

As the former concertmaster of the Cape Town Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, Jordan performed in numerous concert venues in Cape Town, as well as being involved with many collaborative concerts with well-known national and international artists. He was also selected to play as an extra in the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra in various symphony concerts. In 2018, Jordan was a member of the MIAGI orchestra where they toured Europe for six weeks, performing in concert venues such as the Elbphilharmonie and the Concertgebouw. During his time in Manchester, Jordan received the opportunity to play in the Manchester Camerata ensemble under the baton of Gábor Takács-Nagy.

As an active chamber musician, Jordan has participated in numerous chamber festivals in South Africa, including the Stellenbosch International Chamber Music Festival. He has been involved in a variety of Chamber Projects with The Cape Chamber Music Collective, Manchester Camerata, Manchester Collective, and the Barret Duo Institute in Norway.

Enriching his training, further input came from masterclasses by well-known performers and teachers such as Marc Bouchkov, Alexander Gilman, Philippe Graffin, Christina Brabetz, Gareth Lubbe, André Swanepoel, Gordon Back, and Gábor Takács-Nagy.

Jordan is currently a first-year student at the Royal College of Music under a full scholarship given by the ABRSM. He now studies with violin pedagogue Radu Blidar and plays on a Claude Pirot violin.

Tertia Visser is an accomplished South African pianist who studied under national and international piano masters, John Antoniadis and London-based Martino Tirimo, after winning the prestigious Mabel Quick Overseas Scholarship.

A truly diverse musician, Tertia has performed as a soloist, chamber music partner, and collaborative pianist at home and abroad. In November 2016, she received her Fellowship from the Trinity College of Music, London.

She has been organizing the very successful Erin Hall concert series in Rondebosch since the beginning of 2014.

When not performing, Tertia lectures at the South African College of Music and enjoys teaching her private pupils.