Johann Sebastian Bach: Partita No. 2 in D minor for Solo Violin, BWV 1004
(1720, 30 minutes)

Bach's six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin are generally regarded as among the greatest music ever written for the instrument. Probably written around 1720, they exploit a dazzling range of tone colors, textures, and moods, frequently creating the illusion of two, three, even four simultaneous melodic lines. As one critic has written, "To the violinist they are a complete world of beauty, and a training ground whereon his powers may always be proved and tested." One large question surrounds these works – why did Bach write them? As works for unaccompanied violin they are practically unprecedented, although Bach was probably familiar with their few predecessors, like the Passacaglia by Heinrich Biber (1674) and the handful of sonatas written by Paul von Westhoff in the 1690s. By all accounts Bach wasn't quite enough of a violinist to be able to play them himself. Ever the teacher, perhaps he wrote them for advanced students to develop their technique. Whatever the reason, the works remained known only to violinists and enthusiasts until they were published in 1802 and later received the advocacy of violinists like Ferdinand David and Joseph Joachim.

The Partita No. 2 opens with a stately Allemande, only a couple of chords interrupting the beauty and flow of the melodic line. The rustic, heavily accented Courante that follows leads into a lovely, passionate Sarabande, and the ensuing jaunty Gigue sounds like it could be the conclusion of the work. But these first four movements only lay the ground for the concluding Ciaccona, one of Bach's greatest and most ambitious achievements. Spanning 257 measures and taking over 15 minutes to perform, the Ciaccona begins with a strongly marked chordal theme that becomes the basis of a set of 29 variations that build in intensity and virtuosity over their roughly fifteen minutes.

Fanny Mendelssohn: Notturno in G minor, H. 337
(1838, 5 minutes)

Also known as Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel after her marriage, Cäcilie, or Fanny, Mendelssohn received a thorough musical education, like her famous younger brother Felix. They both showed tremendous youthful talent. Due to the social conventions of the day, however, Fanny was not encouraged to embrace a musical career. Early compositions of hers, in fact, were published under her brother's name. Only occasionally did she perform publicly as a pianist, and even more seldom were her works performed or published. Even after her marriage, however, she organized concerts and continued to compose substantial amounts of music, including hundreds of piano works and songs. She wrote her Notturno in anticipation of a year-long trip to Italy. Even though she had never before visited Venice, she composed the Notturno with the style and gentle rocking rhythm of a barcarolle, or Venetian boat song, a form that Felix had also featured in several pieces.

Amy Beach: Romance in A major, Op. 23
(1893, 6 minutes)

Born in New Hampshire as Amy Marcy Cheney, Amy Beach was a child prodigy who was making up her own melodies at age two and playing her own compositions at the piano at four. By her teens, she was playing public recitals as a pianist, and her new compositions were routinely published. At 18 she married a surgeon, Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, and for many years after that she was known as Mrs. H.H.A. Beach. During that time, she largely gave up piano recitals and turned to composing. By the 1920s, she was recognized as the most important and successful female composer in the United States.

Beach wrote her Romance in A major for another pioneering female musician, the then-famous American violinist Maud Powell. Powell and Beach premiered the piece at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The audience so liked it that they demanded it be played a second time. Roughly in an ABA ternary form, the work begins with a warm and memorable melody that moves between major and minor modes. The central section builds in intensity, with powerful dynamic contrasts and harmonic movement, before a final, somewhat more restrained return to the lyrical opening. One commentator has characterized the work as “an intimate journey of love, dialogue, return, and introspection.”

Luigi Boccherini: Cello Sonata in G major, G 5
(c. 1766, 13 minutes)

Luigi Boccherini was probably the most important Italian composer of instrumental music of the late eighteenth century. He was born into an artistic family including musicians, poets, and dancers. After several years of touring as a cello virtuoso, in his late twenties he moved to Madrid, where he took a post as music director for Don Luis, younger brother of King Charles III. He remained in Spain for the rest of his life, working for the Benavente-Osuna family in Madrid and serving as court composer for Friedrich Wilhelm, the nephew of Frederick the Great. Boccherini composed hundreds of chamber works, including over ninety string quartets and almost 140 quintets.

Many of his works, composed either for himself or one of his patrons – like Friedrich Wilhelm, an amateur cellist – feature the cello in a prominent role. That includes around a dozen concertos as well as over thirty cello sonatas. The latter are hard to date precisely, aside from a set of six, probably Boccherini's most famous sonatas, published in London in 1772. One of these is the present Sonata in G major, which begins with a slow, song-like movement, marked Largo, that leads into a short solo cadenza for the cello. The ensuing Allegro alla Militaire lives up to the tempo marking with a rather swaggering, march-like rhythm. The work ends with a flowing, graceful Menuetto.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Clarinet Quintet in A major, K. 581
(1789, 33 minutes)

Mozart’s last decade of his life, spent in Vienna, was a series of ups and downs, with the latter unfortunately predominating. Financial worries, increasingly bad health, and his gradually waning fame as both a composer and a pianist weighed heavily on him. One of the redeeming features of those years, though, was his friendship with the clarinetist Anton Stadler, a performer in the city’s court orchestra. Mozart – who had always loved the sound of the clarinet, but was particularly taken with Stadler’s abilities – wrote a number of works for his friend, including one of his last masterpieces, the Clarinet Concerto, and the Clarinet Quintet, written in the summer and early fall of 1789. Stadler was known for the beauty of his tone in the lower, so-called chalumeau, range of the clarinet, and Mozart made a point of exploiting this range in his Quintet (the work is, in fact, often performed on the lower pitched basset clarinet).

The lyrical, autumnal first movement sets the mood for the entire work; the five instruments interact as equals, with a fair amount of contrapuntal interplay. The clarinet takes more of a lead in the beautiful slow second movement. The short minuet third movement is noteworthy for the clarinet solo featured in the central trio section. The final movement is a set of five variations on a bouncy theme resembling a child’s song; Mozart develops this simple tune in a number of ways, including the introduction of a counter theme in the first variation, a minor key third variation, a slow fifth variation of surpassing loveliness, and a perky coda to conclude.

Robert Schumann: Piano Quintet in E-flat major, Op. 44
(1842, 28 minutes)

Robert Schumann tended to spend extended amounts of time on particular genres. 1842 was his year for chamber music – after composing the three string quartets, Op. 41, Schumann moved on to the Piano Quintet, sketching the work in just five days in September 1842. Completing the first draft of the work on October 12, Schumann further revised it before a private performance at the home of some friends on December 6, 1842. Composer Felix Mendelssohn was the pianist on that occasion, and he suggested a few further revisions to the work's central movements. Schumann dedicated the Piano Quintet to his wife Clara, who served as the pianist at the work's first public performance, on January 8, 1843 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Clara Schumann went on to play the Quintet, which she described as “splendid, full of vigor and freshness,” many times throughout her life.

A striding, energetic theme opens the first movement, leading into a melancholy dialogue between viola and cello that produces a second theme, marked dolce (sweet). These ideas, especially the first, are developed and move rather far harmonically, with considerable, almost concerto-like opportunities for display for the pianist, before the main themes return in their original form. Described by Schumann as being in the mode of a funeral march, the second movement contrasts that march with two other episodes, one of them a song for the first violin and cello, the second a furious variant of the march theme led by the piano and with flurries of sixteenth-notes from the strings.

Similar in mood to the first movement, the third movement Scherzo is based largely on scale-like ideas, both ascending and descending. The main scherzo theme is interrupted twice, the first time for a lyrical imitative canon featuring violin and viola, and the second for a more extroverted, heavily-accented dance theme. Exciting polyphonic writing highlights the final movement, which is built on multiple melodic ideas dominated by a rugged dance. The music eventually builds to a powerful double fugue based on the opening melodies of the first and fourth movements.

Program notes by Chris Morrison