Program Notes Written by James Pegolotti for Concerts by the Danbury Concert Association from April 20, 1996 to October 20, 2019. A total of 60 programs.

Alpha List by Composer V: George Perle to Antonio Soler

George Perle (1915-2009) Toccata (1969)
George Perle may not be well known to the average classical music listener, but he was an influential composer and professor of music in many universities; his books on "twelve-tone" music and on the music of Alban Berg are considered classics. As the New York Times said in Perle's obituary: "He seemed not to mind that his writings on music theory, Berg and 12-tone music had overshadowed his own composition for much of his life." A composer in a variety of forms, he received a 1986 Pulitzer Prize for his Fourth Wind Quintet. His well-received Piano Concerto No. 1 (1990), commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, was recorded featuring pianist Michael Boriskin, who for years was a Danbury resident. Perle was so pleased by Boriskin's performance that he wrote a second piano concerto and dedicated it to Boriskin.

In Italian, the verb "toccare" means "to touch, to feel, to handle," as in this writer's recalling his mother telling him: "Non ti tocca quella torta" ("Don't touch that cake!") But in piano music, the name "toccata" suggests aspects of pulsing, percussive music. Of course, there is nothing more important in piano playing than "touch," so in one sense all works are toccatas. But as a musical form, it is one of the earliest, particularly in organ music.
Perle wrote this about the 1969 work: *"The Toccata, like almost everything I've written but rather more decisively than many of the pieces that precede it, I think, reflects my preoccupation through all these years with something one might provisionally call 'post-diatonic tonality.' If I tried to say anything more about this concept in this brief note, it would be misunderstood. Besides, I hesitate to tell listeners in advance what they ought to hear in a new work of mine, beyond what is already implied in the title itself."*

Michael Brown, piano November 16, 2013

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) Spring and Fall from "The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires"
In the 1950s and 1960s, Antonio Vivaldi's almost forgotten 200-year-old "Four Seasons" appeared in several LP recordings, initiating a national love affair with the work. In the 1990s, after the death of Astor Piazzolla, his music---tango rhythms meshed with jazz and classical form and called "nuevo tango"---similarly began a dizzying rise to popularity in this country. Naturally when people found out that Piazzolla had also composed a "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires," special attention focused on this Italian-Argentinian's work, a musical joust with the Venetian Vivaldi.
Piazolla, Argentine born, spent his formative years New York, where his father, a barber, had taken the family. There he presented young Astor with a bandoneon, an Argentinian accordion-type squeezebox. While sparring in Little Italy with playmates Rocky Graziano and Jake LaMotta, he learned to play this tango-related instrument concurrently soaking up New York jazz and getting some classical music training. Later in Paris and striking out into new methods of composing, he showed Nadia Boulanger, the great teacher of modern composers, his new works. Wasting no words, she told him to stick with the tango as the basis for his compositions. That he did in everything from a symphony to fugues inspired by his strong love of the music of

Bach. In 1965, now back in Argentina, he wrote "Buenos Aires Summer," but it took him five years to finish the other three seasons. The Piazzolla "Seasons" have been arranged for a myriad of instruments, including saxophone quartets, guitar quartets, symphony orchestras and piano trios. Today's Trio Solisti arrangement is by J. Bragato and M. Bachmann.
Each of Piazolla's seasons follows a common structure: first comes the theme, followed by a quiet interlude, then a return to the original melody. (Vivaldi's work had each season in three movements.) "Spring" is the sprightliest with its exhilarating ascending and descending curvature of notes, certainly indicating the vitality of the season. "Fall" is more self-reflective, particularly in the central cello solo, wistful of the passing summer and speculative of the oncoming winter. Expressive indeed. ***Trio Solisti April 3, 2011***

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) Two Tangos: Coral, Canyengue
There is no doubt that Astor Piazzolla's "Nuevo tango" works have become popular. For example, three of the last five DCA concerts have featured works by this Argentine-born composer who spent many of his young years in the United States. But the tango was in his blood. The tango, resulting from a distillation of Spanish rhythms, was initiated in the shadier side of Buenos Aires, in bars and brothels, similar to sites where ragtime gestated in the USA. It became acceptable among polite society as wealthy Argentinians
(I wonder where they learned it?) took the tango to Paris. There it became a 1913 sensation. The tango's more sensual side was toned down in New York by the pre-WWI trend-setting dancers Vernon and Irene Castle, who featured it in their national tours. Then came Rudolph Valentino and a sexy tango that rattled many a female psyche in the movie *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, released in 1921, which was also the year of Astor's birth. After a repression during the Peron era, the tango emerged healthy and pulsating in the 1980s, urged along by the special works of Piazzolla, who meshed classical music, jazz and the tango rhythms into attractive works.
The tangos "Coral" and "Canyengue" were written for string orchestra with the "ONE, 2, 3, 4" beat of the tango largely underplayed. "Coral" opens sadly with a 5-note motif that permeates the short work. The tango rhythm is only evident briefly in the center of the four minute work. The very word "Canyengue" denotes a rhythmic style of tango from the 1900s—playful and danced in a close embrace. Full of on-and-off beat rhythms, "Canyengue" ends in a burst of passionate music. ***A Far Cry May 7, 2011***

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) Sextet for Piano and Winds (1932)
What is it about Poulenc's music that makes it so recognizable? The answer may be in Poulenc's own words: music has to be "leavened with that lightness of spirit without which life would be unendurable." He seems to have channeled the Jazz Age energy of the era into classical terms. Though Poulenc would call his sextet "a homage to the wind instruments which I have loved from the moment I began composing," it took some time to perfect it. Written in 1932 and first performed the following year, Poulenc had some trepidations about its structure and it remained unpublished; then in 1939 Poulenc revised it and the final product had its first performance in Paris in December 1940. Paris was occupied at the time by the Germans, so the Parisians could read into his music both the jollity of the Follies Bergere as well as the sadness of occupation. The work begins with a flourish, followed by a reflective mood. These contrasting modes are found throughout the three movements, but especially notable in the second movement, which begins with one of Poulenc's most beautiful melodies. Though a jaunty theme soon insists itself,

the languid theme returns as in a dream. The sextet even finishes in a quiet mode, even after a typical Poulenc bounciness

New York Chamber Soloists May 18, 2013

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) Overture on Hebrew Themes for Clarinet, Strings and Piano, Op. 34

In 1918, Sergei Prokofiev, with the reluctant blessing of the Communist Party, left Russia to spend several years in the United States. In 1919, while in New York he was contacted by a group of emigre Jewish musicians whom he had known at the music conservatory in St. Petersburg. They had organized a small ensemble--- strings, clarinet and piano--- with the hope that their concert revenue could help to build a music conservatory in Palestine. They requested a work for them using Jewish folk songs. Since Prokofiev knew nothing about such songs, they provided him with a book of them. Prokofiev was a melodist first and foremost and though initially uninterested in the concept, once he studied the melodies and found himself taken by their sometimes gypsy-like flavor, he said yes. Within two weeks he presented his friends with the "Overture on Hebrew Themes." The premiere in 1920 had Prokofiev at the piano. Framed in sonata form, the work contrasts two themes: first a klezmer-type melody is announced by the clarinet and then the second more reflective melody is introduced by the cello. So popular did the Overture become that Prokofiev rescored it for small orchestra.

New York Chamber Soloists May 18, 2013

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953) Sonata No. 2 in D minor, Op. 14

"He had white-blond hair, a small head with a large mouth and very thick lips…and very long, awkwardly dangling arms, terminating in a bruiser's powerful hands." This was a description of 21-year old Sergei Prokofiev in the year 1912 when he wrote his second piano sonata. Four years before he had graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatory and had won the "battle of the pianos"---five of the best piano students each playing a "classic" piano concerto of their choosing? Prokofiev's choice? His own piano concerto! Nothing immodest about this young man. And from then on, he set his own never-boring course of composing.

Prokofiev's second piano sonata, according to the pianist and Prokofiev expert Barbara Nissman, is the Russian's first mature sonata, a "defining work." Prokofiev himself identified years later the five principal elements which always dominate his music; each is found in this sonata: 1) the classical element (traditional sonata form), 2) innovation (unusual transitions from quiet to bravado), 3) toccata or "motor" element (second movement), 4) lyric element (e. g., second theme in first movement is Chopinesque), 5) element of humor (as in the last movement, where persistent jabs of C sharp in the quiet middle of the movement, Nissman says, are like a buzzer that Prokofiev keeps pushing.) In 1918, Prokofiev performed concerts of his own piano works in Carnegie Hall and a major New York critic harrumphed that "the pianoforte solos…invite their own damnation, because there is nothing in them to hold attention." Most people today find Prokofiev's music not only attention-grabbing, but highly melodic and bursting with energy---- and he never overstays his welcome. ***Alex Alguacil, Piano September 26, 2010***

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36 in B-flat minor

Rachmaninov composed only two piano sonatas, with the second the most often played. From its first dramatic chords, it is of the grand manner. The distinctive style of the Russian composer--- contrasting massiveness with simple lyrical moments---is well displayed. Written in 1913,

concurrent with his choral work, "The Bells," the sonata also provides discernable segments of tintinnabulations.

In later life, Rachmaninov had a desire to reduce the length of some of his earlier works as well as improve their transparency. He told a friend in the early 1930s that "I look at my early work and see how there is a lot that is superfluous." (In this sonata, he removed some 150 measures and thinned out others.) Yet, some have suggested that since his means of livelihood in the 1930s were in performances of his own works, perhaps he wanted to shape some of the works more appropriately for his aging hands. Vladimir Horowitz, a fellow Russian, became this sonata's champion in the 1940s, and now it is performed often and usually in the 1931 version.

The sonata does not have the long, romantic themes Rachmaninoff used in his piano concertos. Here he makes the listener work harder. With the downward flourish that begins the work (and so much of the work uses "falling note phrases") there is a three-note chromatic phrase that repeats in many ways throughout the sonata. In the second movement, a more folk-song element is felt, with emphasis on circling around three close notes. The third movement begins also with a flourish, mimicking the start of the sonata, and downward cascading scales cannot help but give the feeling of bells pealing. In the final minutes of the sonata the musical passion provided could not have come from anyone else but the great Russian romantic.

Xiayin Wang, piano April 10, 2016

Maurice Ravel (1975-1937) Gaspard de la Nuit

In 1836, the French poet Aloysius Bertrand wrote "Les fantasies de Gaspard de la Nuit" ("The fantasies of Gaspard of the night"). When Ravel was searching for an inspiration to compose what he wanted to be one of the most difficult piano works ever written, he turned to three of these fantasies: "Ondine" (the water nymph), "Le gibet" (the gibbet, a type of gallows), and "Scarbo (a demonic dwarf).

Each of these segments evokes different piano colors. In "Ondine," Ravel, like Debussy, is consumed by the piano's ability to evoke images of water and the creatures therein. In "Le gibet," the constant sepulchral tolling of a church bell counterpoints the musical painting of a lifeless body, hanging from the gibbet and glowing red in the sunset. In "Scarbo," a will-of-the-wisp dwarf moves effortlessly about, awaking sleepers by his frightening laughs. One commentator stated that any pianist who attempts "Scarbo" faces "a kitchen sink of repeated notes, tremolandos, leaps and crossed hand pyrotechnics executed at breakneck speed."

Borealis Wind Quintet with Leon Bates, piano November 9, 2003

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) La Valse

La Valse brought Maurice Ravel's lifelong interest in the waltz to its highest point. Though the work was completed in 1920, as early as 1906 Ravel wrote to a friend: "What I'm undertaking at the moment is not subtle: a grand waltz, a sort of homage to the memory of the great Strauss—not Richard, the other one, Johann." His intent was clear for the original title of the piece was "Wien" (Vienna). But the work had a long gestation period, being delayed by "The Great War," during which Ravel served as an ambulance driver and saw the horrors of the battlefield at first hand. What had started as a positive, romantic work honoring Viennese three-quarter time instead turned into the ironic La Valse. Ravel composed the work for orchestra, originally for a ballet that never came to pass. Later he transcribed it for piano.

From the ghostly beginning sounds of La Valse, a waltz emerges. (Some commentators have suggested a musical development as if Edgar Allen Poe was the composer.) A slow transformation brings the full waltz melody into creation with a pulsating rhythm. A series of waltzes follow, with alternating loud and soft sequences. Ravel expected the listener to be transported back to ages past for he himself wrote that "through breaks in the swirling crowds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed." With mounting force, the waltz reaches an "apotheosis," and the melody is torn apart in a cataclysmic conclusion. Can we not assume it was Ravel's way of noting that the beauty, the elegance, the nobility of "old Vienna" now had vanished into shadowy memories? ***Xiayin Wang, piano April 10, 2016***

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) Ma Mere L'Oye (Mother Goose) Suite

"Ravel…used to tell me marvelous stories…Invariably he would begin 'Once upon a time…'" So wrote Mimi Gobedski in 1937 as she reflected on the piano suite the composer had written for her and her brother Jean 30 years earlier. Ravel, a family friend and forever bachelor, loved the children and hoped that his "Mother Goose Suite" would encourage them to practice and ultimately perform it. Alas, they never got to that level. Years later Ravel orchestrated the suite.

No, the stories are not from the Mother Goose we know, but from the 17th century French fairy tale writer Charles Perrault, including Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, and Tom Thumb. Ravel was a master of orchestration, and appears to have loved giving woodwind players special opportunities. In "Beauty and the Beast" the conversation of Beauty (a clarinet) with that terrible Beast (a contrabassoon) seems reasonable enough. Then through the magic of a harp glissando the Beast is transformed into a handsome prince. In "Laideronette" a princess, transformed into a small ogress, goes to the land of the "Pagodas," porcelain creatures no larger than her. The oriental atmosphere is quickly established with sounds of tinkling crystal. In the finale, Sleeping Beauty is rescued by the prince in the fairy garden, and the work ends with a long crescendo of Ravelian beauty. Are there wedding bells heard in the distance?

Camerata New York October 12, 2008

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936) Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 1

Nationalism in music hit its stride in the late 19th Century, led by Russian composers who brought Russian history into music, particularly in operas by Mussorgsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. That Ottorino Respighi in his early studies would spend several years studying in Moscow with Rimsky-Korsakov suggests a reason why Respighi would become Italy's most nationalistic composer. For his tone poems, he found inspiration in Rome's pine trees and fountains, church windows, and even paintings by Botticelli. These works brought him great fame, but he also cherished Italy's musical past and looked to music composed centuries before for the lute, arranging his choices into three beautiful suites of *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

In Suite No 1, each of the four movements quickly paints pictures of dancers. In the first movement the dancers are elegant; in the second, they are involved in a lively galliard, a 16th century dance. (One of the melodies chosen by Respighi for this movement was composed by Vincenzo Galilei, the father of Galileo, the "father of modern science.") In the third movement with oboe and harp, a solo dancer provides reflective time. Finally the whole company, with brass flourishes, brings the curtain down.

Camerata New York October 12, 2008

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) **Capriccio Espagnol (adapted)**

If this writer should ever be called upon to teach a course in music appreciation, the first music he would play for students would be Capriccio Espagnol, in the glory of its masterful full orchestration. How could anyone not be immediately caught up in the energy and enthusiasm of the music? Rimsky-Korsakov begins with an "Alborada," literally a "song at dawn," but it's a mighty tempestuous dawn. The variations that follow give some reflective time before the "Alborada" returns. The final two sections, a gypsy song and fandango, meld together as the Spanish dance rhythm propels the music to a crashing conclusion.

But there is so much more to the composition. On closer inspection, one finds it the perfect guide to the effective use of almost every instrument of the orchestra. Rimsky-Korsakov, in his Autobiography, made emphasized this: "Melodic designs and figuration patterns, exactly suiting each instrument, brief virtuoso cadenzas for instrument solo, the rhythm of the percussion instruments, etc., constitute here the very essence of the composition and not its garb or orchestration." Perhaps that is why the composer/pianist Easley Blackwood, who has taught for over forty years at the University of Chicago, chose to arrange this "Caprice on Spanish Themes" for a chamber ensemble. It is this version that is heard at this concert, clarifying even further the individual instrument's importance.

The New York Chamber Ensemble April 6, 2002

Albert Roussel (1869-1937) **Serenade for Flute, String Trio, and Harp, Op. 30**

Albert Roussel, like Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, had his first career as a naval officer. For both of them, the sense of the exotic places they traveled entered into their music in later years. Not until he was 25 did Roussel begin the study of musical composition in Paris, a late starter for whom the composing of symphonies and ballets would take up most of his attention. This Serenade, composed in 1925, is considered among his most imaginative and original compositions, illustrating what one critic wrote about Roussel's music: "There is hardly an important work of his in which tenseness and ease, restlessness and serenity, do not alternate, cooperating to make a whole, which, however indefinable it may be, is characteristically Roussel." Certainly this three-movement work fits this description. The beat ebbs and flows in the first movement's joviality, but always with a sense of acceleration, until the final unexpected chord. In the Andante, first a flute floats above strings, a harp takes over to lead to a cello melody, then a bucolic coalescing ends the movement. In the Presto finale, it appears that a little of "Le Jazz Hot," which permeated 1925 Paris, has seeped in, with even the flute at times seeming to be a bit "blue." But the strings persist insistently, driving on to a final emphatic chord.

America's Dream Chamber Artists May 17, 2008

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868) Overture. La Scala di Seta.

By 1812, twenty-year old Gioacchino Rossini, composer of eight operas, was already being hailed as the best Italian opera composer of his day. One of those eight operas was the one-act farce La Scala di Seta (The Silken Ladder), an opera rarely performed today, but whose overture remains a joyful musical lark. The overture begins with the musical equivalent of a dust devil, strings swirling downward to introduce the principal theme in the woodwinds. The strings return with an energetic Rossini allegro. Soon the strings and woodwinds (with horn) join in a rousing ensemble with effective and comedic instrumental touches, not the least of which is a woodwind chattering of bird calls. The silk ladder, this tends to suggest, was the roosting place for more than a forgettable plot. ***I Soloisti New York May 21, 1995***

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) Sarabande and Rigaudon, Op. 93

Saint-Saëns, an exceptional organist and pianist, brought French romantic lyricism to a high point in the late 19th century. He had sufficient talent to do as did Mozart, his hero -- provide excellent works in every musical form: symphonies (especially the great "Organ" symphony), concertos (both piano and violin), operas (*Samson et Delila*), piano, organ and chamber music. He also loved to look back at the music of ages past. So when a new version of the 17th century Moliere comedy *La Malade imaginaire* was planned for 1892, Saint-Saëns agreed to write several dance segments for it in the style of the period. Both the sarabande and rigaudon were 17th century dances, the former being statelier, while the latter had the folk sense of peasant jollity. So successful were the two works that the composer published them separately for string orchestra.

French Chamber Orchestra October 28, 2007

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) Sonata No. 1 in D minor, op. 75

Saint-Saëns was a child prodigy who, at age four and a half, appeared as pianist in a Beethoven violin sonata. By twenty-one, he held the post of organist at a major Parisian church and began years as a successful composer. In later life, he brought French music an international reputation touring as pianist and organist at the start of the twentieth century. He played in the United States twice, with an honored presence at the Pan-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1916. Throughout his compositional life, he provided elegant examples of music in all its forms.

He himself wrote: "The artist who does not feel completely satisfied by elegant lines, by harmonious colors, and by a beautiful succession of chords does not understand the art of music." His Sonata No. 1 surely exemplifies the essence of his words. But how to define "elegance"? Just listen to the piano and its often-rippling undercurrent to the long violin melodic line. This is elegance.

Written in four movements, Sonata No. 1 appears to be in two parts because Saint-Saëns links the first two movements, pauses, then joins the allegretto with the finale. Perhaps the word "caressing" bests describes the instruments in their quieter moments, a word not unrelated to the Saint-Saëns' world of romanticism. Midway in the final movement, the music erupts with energy and impetus. "The brilliance of the finale compensates for the pale coloring of the other movements," wrote one critic. The contrast is almost startling, but consistent with a man whose training as an organist knew the value of a radiant ending.

***Ayako Yoshida, violin, Andrew Armstrong, piano May 19,* 2001**

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) Four sonatas

In an interesting coincidence, Domenico Scarlatti was born the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach would remain throughout his life in Germany, with its heavier atmosphere of both weather and religion, whereas throughout Scarlatti's life he relished in the sunshine of Italy and the Iberian Peninsula. In today's world, Bach is proclaimed one of the "greats" in music with masterpieces in instrumental and choral works, while Scarlatti is remembered now for just one achievement: 550 sonatas. O.K., each sonata is only a few minutes long, yet with bursts of clever, joyful music, a distillation of the friendlier skies of southern Europe.

Domenico was born in Naples at the time when the Kingdom of Naples consisted of the entire bottom half of Italy. His father, Alessandro Scarlatti, then the most famous of Italian composers, had become the darling of the Naples court and resident composer of operas. Domenico showed exceptional musical abilities especially as a harpsichordist, but he had to follow his father, a difficult and demanding

individual. While in Naples, Domenico composed several operas that were produced, but ever in the shadow of his father. The son would follow his father to new court and/or church appointments from Venice to Rome. (While in Venice Domenico struck up a friendship with another composer born in 1685: George Frederic Handel.) Only at the age of 32 did Domenico gain legal separation from his father's musical demands and strike out on his own.

In 1719, he gained the appointment as composer and teacher to the Portuguese court. Among his most talented students was Maria Barbara, the daughter of the king. It is likely that the numerous sonatas he would write came about to energize and satisfy this lady's musical demands. When she married into the Spanish court, Domenico followed her and stayed the remainder of his life in Spain. (One finds in so many cases of composers that one or more of their students challenged them to greater heights of composition.)

After hearing today's four Scarlatti sonatas, you will likely agree with one critic who stated that Scarlatti "must rank as one of the most original creative minds in the history of music."

Fine Arts Quartet with pianist Alon Goldstein Sunday, May 21, 2017

Fantasia in C Major, D. 760 ("Wanderer") Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

The Fantasia in C Major was written in 1822 just after the "Unfinished Symphony". (The name "Wanderer" was given to the composition after Schubert's death based on his use of the melody of his song "The Wanderer" in the adagio portion of the Fantasia.) It was a composition ahead of its time, utilizing a "motto" theme to link the separate movements, a concept which would influence both Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner. The Fantasia theme, introduced in hammer-like method at the beginning---tum, ta-ta tum---summons immediate attention. From the initial martial quality, through the "Wanderer" theme adagio, to the scherzo with its two trio-like waltzes, to the fugal ending, the listener hears some of Schubert's most imaginative and brilliant variations. The work "wanders" through key changes to the fugal conclusion, "a free and highly virtuosic peroration on the Wanderer tune."

Pamela Pia Paul, piano May 25, 1996

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Two Impromptus, Op. 90
No. 2 in E flat major
No. 4 in A flat major

The name "impromptu," to the 19th century composer, was just a name for a short piano piece. Among Franz Schubert's greatest piano works are his eight Impromptus and the Moments Musical, all being short pieces. Schubert completed the Impromptus in 1827, not long after the death of Beethoven and only a year before his own death. Short pieces; short life. In the impromptus Schubert coalesced the essences of joy and sadness that buffeted his Vienna life. This bespectacled former teacher-turned-composer, then Bohemian, had the genius to bring all of life's experiences into his music. Partly, this was due to his compositional ability to shift from major to minor keys multiple times with such fluidity that the listener ends up being moved about emotionally without realizing it.

Impromptus No. 2 and No. 4 have structural similarities: quiet passages are tucked in between lengthy episodes of frenetic sprints by the right hand up and down the treble notes. No. 2 begins by Schubert utilizing almost every note above middle C in scales, which are sometimes chromatic. Then in dramatic fashion, he introduces a punctuating central melody, followed again by the incessant ups-and-downs of the right hand. Impromptu No. 4, almost twice the length of

No. 2, supplies two of Schubert's most beautiful melodies, surrounded by episodes of rolling arpeggios and chordal passages. All this flows seamlessly toward the conclusion: two of the grandest triumphant chords in piano literature.

Borealis Wind Quintet and Leon Bates, Pianist October 24, 2010

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Impromptu no. 3 in B-flat Major, D. 935

One music commentator proposed this comparison: impromptus are to sonatas as short stories are to novels. Arguably, Schubert's eight impromptus (D. 899 and D. 935) are the most famous of this short musical form, and he composed them with not much time to spare; all were written in the last year of his short life. Schubert's capacity for beautiful melodies led him to be a major connective force from classicism to romanticism, but music publishers didn't have the prescience to know this. In fact, the four impromptus of
D. 935 were not published until forty years after Schubert died. None of the great composers ever were so underappreciated in their life as was Franz Schubert.

Robert Schumann, who loved Schubert's works, welcomed the late publication of the four impromptus, yet didn't find the B-Flat Major impromptu to his liking: *"I would have hardly taken it to be one of Schubert's efforts,* "Schumann wrote, *"except, perhaps a youthful one; it is a set of by-and-large undistinguished variations on an equally undistinguished theme."*

"Undistinguished theme" or not, this impromptu is among the most beloved and performed of Schubert's piano works. The theme was originally used in an entr'acte for the 1823 Viennese production of the play Rosamunde; with a run of two nights, Rosamunde was a resounding failure. In fact, immediately after the closing, Schubert's music was packaged and set aside in a warehouse, not to be discovered until fifty years later.

Impromptu No. 3 is an appealing work of joyful contrasts in its five variations. Two emphasize the left hand, one is in minor key and the final variation explodes with racing chromatics and scales in both hands, only to calm down and conclude toward silence in a simple chordal progression.

When the British pianist Imogen Cooper, noted for her Schubert interpretations, was asked about her love of the composer's music, she replied: "*What attracts me to his music? I think a part of that is the sheer humanity of it. What he can express between the dark and the light is just so extraordinarily profound. The way that he swings you from one to another with really no warning."*

Michael Brown, piano November 16, 2013

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Piano Quintet in A Major, "The Trout"

In the classical and romantic eras, music for a string quartet—two violins, a viola, and a cello---was hardly difficult to find. Mozart wrote twenty-three string quartets, Beethoven sixteen, Mendelssohn six, Brahms three. However, the piano quintet literature of those times is low in numbers. Schubert's "Trout" quintet is one of the few to be heard often. In the summer of 1819, Schubert spent days on a walking tour of upper Austria with his longtime friend, the singer Johann Vogl. In Vogl's hometown of Steyr, much music making took place and a cellist friend of Vogl's asked Schubert to compose a piano quintet along the lines of the then very popular one by Johann Nepomuk Hummel. Hummel's was unusual in using a double bass in place of the traditional second violin. Schubert adopted this instrumentation and took the cellist's advice: he added a fifth movement to the usual four---variations on his "trout" song "Die Forelle." As one writer put it, the quintet is "clearly holiday music for talented vacationers."

The result is one of the most loved of all chamber music compositions, one with a particularly majestic and orchestral sound due to the "heaviness" given by double bass and cello.

Schubert wrote the piano part with strong treble activity to balance that heaviness. Each of the five movements represents Schubert at his most melodious. The ebb and flow of all the melodies, and the ease of shifting in and out of different keys for variety, make this—his first mature chamber work---a total delight. No need to listen closely for composer intent, as in the Bartok. Schubert's melodic heart is on his musical sleeve.

Of course, the jewel in the quintet crown is the fourth movement—variations on the Schubert song about a trout who in clear water manages to avoid the fisherman's hook, but in muddy water gives himself up to the frying pan. The strings first play the tune, but without the aqueous rippling piano effects that Schubert uses in the song's piano accompaniment. After the five variations, the theme is presented again, and this time the water's ripple---but by now it is "Auf wiedersehen, forelle."

Alianza String Quartet November 16, 2008

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Symphony No. 5 in B major, D 485

Sometimes referred to as the symphony "without trumpets or drums," Schubert's Fifth Symphony is the product of an 18-year old whose unabashed love of Mozart and Haydn explodes in the symphony's form and style. By this age he had composed many songs and five symphonies, but always lived in near-poverty. Having been a student, chorister and neophyte composer at Vienna's Imperial Chapel, whose director was Antonio Salieri (of "Did he or didn't he poison Mozart?" fame), when Schubert's voice broke at 15-years of age, he was dispatched from the choir. He became a teacher in his father's school. Now he had time to expand his life as composer as well. In his 18th year, this man, "to whom melody came more easily than speech," composed his 4th and 5th symphonies, some 100 songs. Among them is the famed 'Der Erlkönig" (The Erl King), the magnificent depiction of the struggle of life with death.

Schubert heard few of his orchestral compositions during his short life, but he did hear the 5th Symphony as performed by a group of his amateur musician friends. Some fifty years after his death, when many of his symphonies were rediscovered in Vienna by George Grove (of the *Grove Dictionary of Music*) and Sir Arthur Sullivan, this work was heard for the second time, but in England!

Nothing makes this symphony more unusual than "four delicious bars of introduction." Instead of a pompous, or otherwise lengthy introduction, Schubert sets the first theme flowing in seconds, preparing the listener for what the famed scholar/critic Donald Tovey called "this very perfect little work." The longest movement, the second, is full of Schubertian tenderness, while the sprightly third movement shows an obeisance to the same movement in Mozart's 40th symphony. With the finale, the circle is complete; we are back to the beginning's essence of buoyant joy. ***A Far Cry May 7, 2011***

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Carnaval, Op. 9

What other composer could provide twenty short pieces so different, yet each so appealing all in one suite? Schumann, as "romantic" a person as ever existed, had the gift for the short melodic gem. In his early twenties, taken up with love for music, women, and all things literary, he initiated Neue Zeitschift für Musik, a music journal that would have immense influence. At the same time, he completed Carnaval, a "masquerade" of people and ideas.

Each of the twenty pieces in the suite provides a musical picture of persons (real or fictional) or of a sentiment. The first and last pieces, "Preambule" and "Marche," are heroically elegant and act as bookends to the others. The fictional creatures honored are the essential "commedia dell' arte" French pantomime characters "Pierrot," "Arlequin," and "Pantalon et Colombine." The first real person in the suite is Schumann himself as both "Eusebius" and "Florestan," two pseudonyms he used in his journal writing, emphasizing distinctive sides of his personality. He names other males outright, "Chopin" and "Paganini," but masks his two females: an early sweetheart, Ernestine von Fricken, ("Estrella"), and his future wife, Clara Wieck, ("Chiarina"). That Schumann places his two alter egos, Florestan and Eusebius, musically distant from the two women, but instead have them flanking Chopin --- well, this might provide a 19th century National Enquirer with front-page speculation. Immediately after the Chopin trio comes "Reconnaissance," this writer's favorite, a melody and accompaniment that seems to be the very essence of a hurdy-gurdy, a carousel, the joy inherent in all of Carnaval.

Santiago Rodriguez, piano October 15, 2000

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Manfred Overture and Suite

In Europe, during much of the 19th century, the world of romanticism paraded emotions over intellect. Lord Byron in literature and Robert Schumann in music epitomized the romantic spirit. Manfred, the tormented hero of the Byron poem, found a place in Schumann's own harried musical soul. A friend of Schumann's recalled hearing the composer read from Byron's *Manfred*: "His voice suddenly failed him, tears started from his eyes, and he was so overcome that he could read no further."

This was the emotion with which Schumann in 1849 composed incidental music for a theatrical production of *Manfred.* Many critics concur that the *Manfred Overture* is Schumann at his symphonic best. The dramatic three chords that open the overture lead directly into music of great passion-- dark, turbulent music that has a sense of urgency, but which ultimately fades away into quietude at the end, the oblivion that the hero Manfred ultimately sought.

In the famed 1943 Carnegie Hall New York Philharmonic concert where Leonard Bernstein, a neophyte conductor, substituted for the ailing Bruno Walter at "the last minute," the first number on the program was the *Manfred Overture*. He later admitted that as he walked onstage, he feared the tricky rhythm of those first three chords because if he and the orchestra didn't get them right, he was doomed. He got them right----and the rest is history.

Camerata New York October 12, 2008

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Piano Quintet in E-flat major, Op. 44

After years of writing only for the piano, the often introspective Schumann turned to writing a symphony in 1840. The same year he married Clara Wieck, after lengthy emotional battles with her father to gain her hand. In 1842, he took a year to concentrate on composing chamber works only, among which was the piano quintet, which brought more fame to him than anything he had done before. Mendelssohn extolled it as a masterpiece and Berlioz, hearing it in Leipzig, returned to Paris raving about the work. Clara, then among the most gifted of pianists, participated at the premiere. (Her fame was so great in Europe that at times Schumann was referred to as "Clara Schumann's husband.") The quintet achieves great balance between piano and strings from its brash opening melody to the final movement's onward thrust. In one sense, the two inner movements display the topsy-turvy psychological world of Schumann, whose last years were spent in an asylum. The second movement has the sense of a funeral march to it,

while the third movement scherzo could not be more exhilarating with its sense of "raggin' the scales." The final movement is infectious in its drive, leading to a concluding fugue using the principal melody of the first movement—an exceptional manner to bring the quintet full cycle. No wonder that choreographer Mark Morris used this final movement to fashion a ballet for four premier male dancers. Excuse the updating, but this music really "swings."

America's Dream Chamber Artists May 17, 2008

Scriabin, Alexander (1872-1915) Prelude, Op. 9, No. 1; Nocturne, Op. 9, No. 2

As a shy youngster with smallish hands (it is said he could hardly grasp a ninth), Scriabin's studies at the Moscow Conservatory resulted in his emergence as an excellent pianist. That his hands were opposite in size to that of his classmate Rachmaninov (whose hands could span a thirteenth) suggests a reason why Scriabin over-practiced at one point and sustained temporary injury to his right hand. Composer that he also was, at the time of his injury he wrote two works for left hand only, his Op. 9. These melodic pieces have a certain Chopinesque feeling because young Scriabin was deeply influenced at the time by the Polish composer. Scriabin certainly put a challenge on any future pianist; particularly in the more dramatic Nocturne, could you believe all those notes are from southpawing only?

The Lark Quintet with Gary Graffman, piano November 12, 2011

Scriabin, Alexander (1872-1915) Two Poemes, Op. 32, Waltz, Op. 38, Vers la Flamme Op. 72

Alexander Scriabin, along with Sergei Rachmaninoff, provided more works for piano than other Russian composers. At one point they were students together at the Moscow Conservatory where Scriabin as a composer in his teens, developed a great love for the music of Chopin even to the point, it is said, that he slept with a book of Chopin's compositions under his pillow. As famous as Scriabin would become in Russia and Europe, it was late in the 20th century before he came into prominence in this country, helped by Vladimir Horowitz, who included Scriabin's works in his concerts. Scriabin lived two different compositional lives: the first under the Chopin shadow and the second in a life of mystical influence, having succumbed to influences from Nietsche to Hinduism. These two lives appear in today's programs; the Poemes and Waltz from the first life where the Chopin influence is clear and "Vers la Flamme" (one of his last piano works) from his mystical world. According to Horowitz, who knew Scriabin "Vers la Flamme" depicts earth's succumbing to ever increasing heat in the atmosphere. How topical is that?

Xiayin Wang, piano November 8, 2009

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53 (1907)

Though in later years, he would be known as "Scriabin the Mystic," he first studied piano together with Rachmaninov in his birthplace of Moscow. He gained European fame as a pianist performing his Chopin-influenced early compositions—etudes, preludes, nocturnes. His ten piano sonatas, written throughout his composing life, evidence his change from tonal Romanticism to atonal Modernism. Sonata No. 5 (from 1907) is one of the transitional compositions and emerged concurrently to his major orchestral work, "The Poem of Ecstasy." (Scriabin in life had been obsessed with issues of eternity, divinity and destiny.) An epigraph of mystical meaning prefaces the manuscript of this fifth sonata: "I summon you to life, hidden longings…Embryos of life, I bring you boldness." Indeed, the sonata demands bold pianism. (Sviatoslov Richter, a Scriabin champion, described it as one of the two most difficult pieces in

the entire piano repertory.) The relatively short sonata begins its fascinating life with a startling massive bass tremolo and then rockets up to the highest registers. Throughout, there are changes from moments of quiet reflection to those of energetic joy. It is a work that Chopin might have written if he had lived to be 100. Now how's that for something mystical.

Joel Fan, piano September 18, 2011

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) Chamber Symphony, Opus 110a

1. Largo 2. Allegro molto 3. Allegretto 4. Largo

Dmitri Shostakovich, educated to the piano at home by his mother, suffered through the early years of the Russian Revolution, studied under Glazanouv at the Leningrad Conservatory, and often found poverty staring him in the face. His symphonies and operas ran a roller-coaster of approval and disapproval from Stalin and his newspaper mouthpiece, Pravda. That Shostakovich loved Mother Russia, there can be no doubt, but he suffered for his genius. In 1960, he wrote his String Quartet No. 8; his heart and soul filled this musical autobiography.

Shostakovich knew the violist Rudolph Barshai as a member of the famed Borodin String Quartet in Moscow. According to Erik Smith: "The Borodin Quartet played this work (String Quartet #8) to the composer at his Moscow home, hoping for his criticisms. But Shostakovich, overwhelmed by this beautiful realization of his most personal feelings, buried his head in his hands and wept. When they had finished playing, the four musicians quietly packed up their instruments and stole out of the room." Barshai, when he founded the now-famed Moscow Chamber Orchestra, faced the problem of a meager modern repertoire for chamber orchestras. Deciding to help his own cause, he gained the blessing of Shostakovich to arrange the String Quartet No. 8 into a chamber symphony. The Quartet is Opus 110; The Chamber Symphony is Opus 110a.

As life is an unbroken tapestry from birth to death, so is Shostakovich's autobiographical composition seamless; no separation occurs between the movements. The personal building blocks are many. The first movement and portions throughout are constructed on Shostakovich's musical four note signature: D, E flat, C, B natural. In Russian and German "E Flat" is "Es" (pronounced "S") and "B Natural" is "H" in German musical notation. The four notes thus are DSCH, four key letters of his name when spelled in the traditional manner with a "c": Schostakovich. From the somber beginnings of the four-note theme in the first movement, Shostakovich moves directly and brashly into the second movement with a pulsating theme of a Jewish folk-song from his piano trio. (In his memoirs Testimony, Shostakovich details his kinship with the seemingly eternal difficulties of the Jewish people.) A satirical waltz pervades the third movement in harsh, gypsy-like fashion. The graphic fourth movement, the longest of the quartet, begins with what has been described as the drone of airplanes and the sharp crackling of gunfire. (Shostakovich composed the quartet in 1960 in Dresden, a city singularly destroyed in World War II from the air.) Between the staccato repetitions of gunfire, Shostakovich introduces themes from past compositions, none more meaningfully than the cello's soulful tune from Lady MacBeth of Mtsensk. This opera first gained wide Russian acceptance when written in 1934, but then in 1936 the Stalinist press launched an attack upon him for his "Chaos instead of Music" especially reacting to Lady MacBeth. The choice of this theme clearly epitomizes the "slings and arrows of outrageous [political] fortune" he suffered. After the final burst of warfare, the quartet

in its final movement returns to the theme of Shostakovich's musical signature and ends on a sigh of resignation. ***The International Sejong Soloists Oc tober 3, 1999***

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 67

Dmitri Shostakovich suffered through the early years of the Russian Revolution, studied at the Leningrad Conservatory, and often found poverty staring him in the face. His symphonies and operas ran a roller-coaster of approval and disapproval from Stalin and his newspaper mouthpiece, *Pravda*. In other words, his life was no fun.

Written in 1944, this piano trio was the Russian composer's second and last piano trio. (The first had been a one-movement student work 21 years before.) The dreadful Russian losses suffered during the war with Germany had lain heavily on the composer's psyche. That Shostakovich loved Mother Russia, there can be no doubt. So it isn't unexpected to find in this piano trio an inherent sadness, an elegy for the millions lost in the war. But on top of this, he had a personal tragedy: one of his closest friends, Ivan Sollertinsky, a brilliant musicologist, had died at age 41; it was Sollertinsky who had brought to Shostakovich his knowledge of Jewish music and traditions, something that would intrigue the composer. And it was a time also that the composer began to learn of the Holocaust. Put these all together in the mind of this musical genius and one can better understand the emotions and the seemingly "stylistic inconsistencies" within the trio. For the Russian soul is a mix of peasant and warrior.

The very first sounds of the Shostakovich trio could not be more ghostly---a cello sounding in its eeriest highest register. A dolorous fugue follows quickly only to be soon replaced by an accelerating sense of impending tragedy.
In the scherzo movement, Shostakovich is at his brisk, frenetic best. Jovial in a folk music sense at times, it's constant forward plunge seemingly verges toward a musical cliff.
The essence of the third movement is an elegy built on piano chords that, like tombstones, are covered over by the dirge-like melodies of the violin and cello.
And in the final movement, a "dance of death" is constructed through Yiddish tunes, commented upon by a fiddler, who is not on the roof, but in the depths of graves. Shostakovich, hearing of Jews being forced to dance before their deaths in concentration camps, chose this macabre approach to music. Before the movement's end, he brings back previous themes, especially the dramatic chords of the previous movement. The journey comes to an end in a whispered whimper. ***Weiss-Kaplan-Newman Trio October 20, 2013***

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) "Spanish Dance"
Dmitri Shostakovich, educated to the piano at home by his mother, suffered through the early years of the Russian Revolution, studied under Glazanouv at the Leningrad Conservatory, and often found poverty staring him in the face. When he was sixteen, his father died of pneumonia and young Dmitri found work playing piano to accompany silent films. His relationship with films would lead to a role as composer of film scores, first for silent films, then for sound films. But this was a sideline for his work writing symphonies and operas, which often ran a roller-coaster of approval and disapproval from Stalin and his newspaper mouthpiece, Pravda. But with Stalin's death in 1955, the "thaw" relaxed pressure on the composer and he gained increased approval in Russia, helped by the film score he composed for the extremely popular movie, *The Gadfly*, released in 1955.

The movie was based on a novel of that name about revolution and revolutionaries in Italy during the 1800s, a time known as the Risorgimento, when the various Italian kingdoms started the ultimate unification. The novel had great success in Russia, a real "best seller," so the movie had a pre-set audience. Shostakovich's music for the film was transformed by another composer, Levon Atovmian, into a popular 12-movement suite for full orchestra. The "People's Holiday" segment from the *Gadfly Suite* was especially festive, and when later arranged for string orchestra, the name changed to "Spanish Dance." Although this writer finds it no more Spanish than Italian in its rhythms, you can't deny its buoyancy.

The String Orchestra of New York City May 2, 2015

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) Impromptu for Strings Romance, Op. 42

The fame of Jean Sibelius rests upon his orchestral works, especially his seven symphonies and a variety of incidental works on Finnish themes. Trained as a violinist, as a budding composer he tried his hands at a variety of musical forms. In 1893, he composed six impromptus for piano (Opus 5) and a year later he arranged two of the impromptus for string orchestra. From the very first notes, the Sibelius "touch" is evident in a theme that suggests the beautiful gloom of a Finnish winter, the loneliness, the isolation. But wait! A brisk waltz releases a folk-song of happiness. Yet, the sense of loneliness is not to be denied as the music fades away in sadness. (Yes, there is a sense of his famed *Valse Triste* in this work's structure.)

The Sibelius *Romance* was written directly for string orchestra and completed a year before his violin concerto. The term "romance" implies a lyrical flow of simplicity. Here Sibelius's mastery of writing is clearly evident in the melodic flow from beginning to end. Never one to overstay his welcome, Sibelius nonetheless leaves behind a unique sense of uncluttered beauty.

The String Orchestra of New York City May 2, 2015

Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884) Four Czech Dances

"Using Czech folk songs and dances as 'materials,'
Smetana constructed a new form of 'high' art music"
Erin Bennett in Czech Nationalism in Music (2009).

Few, if any, nationalist composers ever honored their homeland more than Bedrich Smetana. His compositions, including a half-dozen operas, focused on the traditions and rhythms of his native Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. Smetana's love of the history of his land is found in the librettos of the half-dozen operas he wrote (The Bartered Bride is particularly popular), and his six-part tone poem Ma Vlast ("My Fatherland") is an orchestral masterwork that musically describes the countryside, history and legends of his beloved Bohemia.

Like Bartok, he was an excellent pianist. He composed piano works full of the spirit of his country especially evident in his Czech Dances. Composed in 1877, Book 1 of the Dances consist of four polkas. The ten dances of Book 2, written two years later, had inspiration from the Slavonic Dances of another Czech composer, Antonin Dvorak. But Smetana wanted his dances to be more specifically Czech, utilizing authentic tunes where possible, and varied dance rhythms of the people. The four dances chosen for today's program clearly illustrate the Bohemian character:

Slepicka (Little Hen)--A frisky, pulsating polka, with typical Czech changes of rhythm; the lengthy staccato segments suggest the pecking of the "little hen.";

Medved (Bear Dance)--Initial heavy treads of the bear lead to a gentle Slavic melody with a

bagpipe-like drone underpinning, “a pastoral moment of calm in the midst of a rather bombastic, robust dance”;
Hulan (A Lancer)--A woman dances, reflecting on her departed soldier lover, a lancer; essentially a theme and variations on a Czech folk song, completely captivating;
Skocna (Leaping Dance)--Smetana builds his own melody into a Czech dance that consists of whirling, stamping movements, with wide leaps of notes and an ingratiating lively tempo.

Roman Rabinovich, piano October 19, 2014

Antonio Soler (1729-1783) **Sonata in C-sharp Minor, R. 21**
Sonata in D-flat Major, R. 88

For many listeners, the word “sonata” conjures up the romantic world of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” sonata, or the Chopin “Funeral March” sonata, lengthy three-movement works. So one may be surprised to learn that these sonatas by Padre Antonio Soler on today’s program last only a few minutes. They are of a different time, the baroque world of the harpsichord when the “binary sonata” often explored only one musical rhythm, usually in one movement. The shortness of these sonatas helps explain how Soler, a priest in a monastic order, could have composed over 100 sonatas during his years when the 20-hour day began with pre-dawn morning prayers, then a day of many religious functions and teaching, ending with midnight prayers. As a youth, Soler, considered Spain’s most important composer of the late 18th century, had studied music and the organ before becoming a priest/monk. After his religious decision, in 1752 he was chosen by Spain’s king to become the *maestro de capella* in Madrid’s Escorial royal palace. There he had to compose music for church services (some 200 works, including masses, psalms, and magnificats are known) as well as teach music to Infante Don Gabriel, the son of King Carlos III, and a talented student, for whom he would compose many of these sonatas.

Not until the early 20th century were the Soler sonatas catalogued; a Spanish priest, Fr. Samuel Rubio, performed that “labor of love,” resulting in each sonata number being preceded by an appropriate “R.”
Sonatas R. 21 and R. 88 nicely provide illustrations of Soler’s demand on the keyboard technique of the performer. In R. 21, special interest lies in the interactions of the bass and treble. There is a kind of competition, and a fullness of sound, more so than in R. 88, where immediately you get the sense of the singularity of the treble line, with notes racing up and down in scales. Also, in R. 88, one finds evident one of Soler’s favorites activities: rapidly repeated notes. These sonatas are little jewels of the keyboard.

Llewellyn Sanchez-Werner, piano November 13, 2016