About the Music.

Between 1816 and 1826, a decade of originality, invention, and expressiveness unparalleled in the career of any other composer, **Ludwig van Beethoven** wrote a series of unmatchable masterpieces: five piano sonatas, the "Diabelli Variations," five string quartets, the *Missa Solemnis,* and the Ninth Symphony.

During the period just before these compositions began to appear, his output had been slim: the works of his middle years had exhausted the possibilities of the forms he had inherited from Haydn and Mozart. Now, more withdrawn and separated from much of the rest of the musical world by his deafness, Beethoven conceived and wrote a body of musical literature without equal and, it sometimes seems, even without roots in history and tradition; a new music of his own invention. The compositions of this period have such rich content, such simple grandeur, and, at the same time, such originality that many observers wondered how he could have conceived and completed them all in that time. Now we can understand his deafness as a kind of cruel liberation from concerns for common practicalities, one that freed his imagination for higher flight into a new expressive world.

Beethoven composed the **Piano Sonata No. 30, in E Major, Op. 109,** in 1820 and published it in 1821, with a dedication to nineteen-year-old Maximiliane Brentano, daughter of his friends Franz and Antonie Brentano. "Maxe," as Beethoven called her, was a gifted young girl for whom he had composed a trio (WoO 39) when she was only ten. In a letter accompanying an inscribed copy of the sonata he wrote to her, "A dedication!!! [in] the spirit that binds good people together on this earth and that time cannot destroy. This is what I send you now, recalling your childhood and your beloved parents. Remember me often and well."

The first two movements of this sonata have original, brief structures derived from the sonata-form principle of dualism. In the first, the materials are in two tempi: a quick and smooth *Vivace, ma non troppo* alternating with a slow and rhapsodic *Adagio espressivo.* The latter fades into the rapid *Prestissimo* second movement, which opens with its two themes presented simultaneously, one in the right hand, the other in the left. In recapitulation, their positions are inverted. The climax of the sonata is reached in the finale, a movement so great it makes the first two seem like an extended introduction to it. It consists of a theme, *Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo,* and six variations, which seem to reduce the theme down to its essence. Finally, the theme itself returns at the end.

In **Johannes Brahms**'s sixtieth year, he published twenty short, intimate piano pieces probably based on musical ideas he had been accumulating for a protracted period of time. These four varied sets, Opp. 116 to 119, were the last works he was to write for the piano. He sent them to Clara Schumann, his close friend, as a peace-offering after a long quarrel

they had had about the preparation of the collected edition of the works of her late husband, Robert. From her letters to Brahms, there is evidence that the pieces were not in the order in which they were later published, and some were even in different keys from those in which they are now known.

The pieces are personal statements, eloquent soliloquies, like songs without words, more like his songs of the 1880s than like his earlier piano music. Nothing binds together the pieces within each opus; the reasons for the final groupings are not known. Only **Three Intermezzi for Piano, Op. 117,** the second of the sets, consists of uniformly titled pieces, all *Intermezzi,* and all at tempi that are variants of *andante.*

No. 1 in E-Flat Major, *andante moderato,* with its half-buried melody, Brahms referred to as "the lullaby of my sorrows." At the head of the music, he wrote a pair of lines from an old Scottish folk ballad (which he knew in translation by Johann G. Herder):

Lullaby, my babe, lie still and sleep.
It grieves me sore to see thee weep.

He gave no hint of the background of the other two: **No. 2 in B-Flat Minor,** *andante non troppo e con molto espressione,* and **No. 3 in C-Sharp Minor,** *andante con moto,* both of which are melancholy instrumental songs that may well have sprung from some literary association never revealed.

Brahms performed in the premiere of the ***Fantasias,* Op. 116,** on September 19, 1879, in the Russian island port city of Kronstadt. Hans von Bülow played the whole set on October 29 in Berlin. Grouping the entire set under the collective title *Fantasias,* Op. 116, has an integrity or unity that seems to have been an issue of importance to Brahms. Until a month before publication in 1892, the set consisted of only five rather than seven pieces. At the last moment, Brahms added two more pieces and issued the set in two volumes, but critics agree that, despite its two-part format, Op. 116 has the strongest claim among Brahms' late piano collections to be considered as a coherent whole. The title does not have any programmatic or affective connotation; it is a neutral, generalized designation.

Technically not as demanding as some of his earlier piano pieces, the works still demand a high level of musicianship. Clara Schumann pointed this out in her diary: "As far as demands on the agility of fingers, the Brahms pieces are, except in a few places, not difficult. But the spiritual technique therein demands a delicate understanding. One must entrust oneself completely to Brahms in order to render these pieces in the way he has imagined them."

The **Intermezzi** display moderation, sensitivity, and grace while the **Capriccios** are more active and vigorous. The individual works have a network of interconnections and display the qualities of eccentricity, the unusual, and humor. They are bonded by motivic connections and tonal architecture as well as concentrated refinement of their keyboard style. No. 1, Capriccio in

D Minor, *presto energico*, and No. 7, Capriccio in D Minor, *allegro agitato*, are the the most rounded and elaborate. In ternary (ABA) form are No. 2, Intermezzo in A Minor, *andante*, No. 3, Capriccio in G Minor, *allegro passionato*, and No. 6, Intermezzo in E Major, *andantino teneramente*. No. 4, Intermezzo in E Major, *adagio*, is more harmonically grounded than No. 5, Intermezzo in E Minor, *andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento*, which uses fragmentation to create both subtle humor and strong dissonance. Often the B sections create a transformation of the main (A) theme, retaining the basic profile and rhythm of the original motive but changing mood, tempo, or tonality enough for the listener to hear a contrast in theme. Brahms sometimes uses binary form. But No. 1, the Capriccio in D Minor, and No. 4, the Intermezzo in E Major, have a freer sectional plan that does not follow any recognized scheme.

In none of the pieces in the grouping does Brahms use bravura display or ornamentation for its own sake. His tendency instead is toward moderation, with a strong density of texture, which makes **No. 4, *Intermezzo* in E Major,** *adagio,* the central work of the grouping and a piece that originally bore the title *Notturno,* stand out unusually. It is both intimate and subdued, and begins slowly with a five-note motif with a dark and tentative theme; the contrasting second theme, a gentle, tender melody, falls mostly in the upper register. In the middle of the piece, Brahms introduces another theme, both fluid and intimate, with gentleness and warmth. Soon, however, the original theme returns to intrude before the gentle theme returns to conclude the piece.

In the Intermezzi No. 3, 5, and 7, the melodies have a chordal form stated in thirds, sixths, and octaves, both arpeggiated and moving in thirds. In **No. 1, Capriccio in D Minor,** *presto energico,* the upper voice also spells out descending thirds. A high degree of harmonic and rhythmic elaboration generally exists in these works, as well as much thematic variation and an unusual use of counterpoint. **No. 2, *Intermezzo* in A Minor,** *andante,* has a central section created out of unusual five-, ten-, and fiteen-measure-long phrases, and has been called an example of Brahms' "autumnal" style; it also is recognized as one of the composer's most radical experiments in upsetting our notions of meter. The piece's outer sections have a sedate triple meter, while the center section displays a song-like feel with much rubato and irregular phrase lengths.

According to the historian F.E. Kirby, "It seems as if Brahms were looking backward, avoiding both the literary connections and the brilliance that had been exploited by Liszt and others and instead returning to something more disciplined and sober." Regardless, Brahms certainly explores rhythmic displacement and ambiguity in general and tends to blend the concept of melody and harmony.

While composer and music director to Prince Leopold at Cöthen, **Johann Sebastian Bach** wrote three suites

of dances called *partitas* for violin without accompaniment. The **Violin Partita No. 2 in D Minor** consists of only the four dances that were almost obligatory in his suites — plus a Chaconne added as a massive appendix, longer than the other four movements combined. Since there were indications that Bach saw it as a self-contained piece in its own right, historically the Chaconne has frequently been performed on its own.

The *chaconne* was originally a dance, probably originating in Mexico and brought to Europe by Spanish voyagers to the New World. Early on, it was described as wild and lascivious, but by the time Northern European composers used it, its motion had become slow and dignified. Its structural idea is simple, a set of continuous variations over a repeated harmonic progression, but Bach's realization of the idea is complex. The motion from the minor key to the major and back makes for three large sections, with other subdivisions resulting from the occasional recurrence of the opening theme.

There are some thirty variations in a subtle and seamless sequence. These parts become increasingly shorter in length; and as the variations go on, progressively, the musical intensification occurs ever more quickly, creating the impression of an overarching progression. Within each section, Bach uses different techniques to build up energy and momentum. His depth of imagination and creative force in building so great a structure from so modest a subject still holds listeners in awe today.

This work makes huge demands on both the technical skill and the artistic insights of the performer. The basic subject, heard at the start, is a fragment that is made to grow into a piece of musical architecture both vast and concentrated. The effectiveness of the Chaconne is not only in its structural details, but also in its enduring emotional impact. The piece begins and ends with powerful affirmations of the theme, yet within the total, the music includes a large spectrum of emotion.

Ferruccio Busoni, who made this piano version of the Chaconne in 1907, was important in his time as an influential teacher, inventive theorist, magnificent pianist, and fertile composer who just missed greatness. At twenty-two, he began a series of editions and arrangements of Bach's music that occupied him throughout his life. Some are little more than standard texts annotated for pedagogical purposes, while others are new compositions derived from Bach's music in various ways. His version of the Chaconne is somewhere in between, and is perhaps best heard as a translation from one language to another.

— Susan Halpern