

**TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS**  
**Yevgeny Kutik, violin and Anna Polonsky, piano**  
**29 November 2022 at UVA's Old Cabell Hall**  
**Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2022**

**Sonata No. 2 in A major for Piano and Violin, Op.100**  
**Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**

Brahms's habit was to escape Vienna, his adopted home, during the summers. He favored Austria's beautiful alpine countryside. He was particularly fond of secluded villages tucked into the mountains, and returned for subsequent holidays to those he found most pleasant. The Swiss town of Thun drew him for three consecutive summers, from 1885 through 1887. During the second, he composed a stream of chamber music in a mere six weeks: his Second Cello Sonata (Op.99), Third Piano Trio in C minor, Op.101, and the Second Violin Sonata that opens this program.

All three works reflect a preoccupation with sonata form and an increased concern with compressing ideas. But how different they are from one another! The A-major violin sonata is the most tender and intimate of the three, calling to mind the lyrical side of Brahms's character so expressively evidenced by the early Serenades and string sextets. It shares the spacious introspection of the middle-period Horn Trio, Op. 40. Brahms scholar Edward T. Canby compares the two works:

[They] share between them that heavenly relaxation and good feeling, the rich, prolific melody, the ingenious informal structure, that always marked this aspect of the composer's complex personality. These are the "unbuttoned" pieces, in contrast to those thought of as his "great" pieces -- according to the ideal of Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn -- because he worked so much harder towards taut concentration and rigorous logic.

Brahms composed the lovely Op.100 sonata with his old friend Joseph Joachim in mind. Upon Joachim's separation and subsequent divorce from his wife, he and Brahms had experienced a serious rift. This Sonata was something of a peace offering, which may have influenced its overall character. In any case, with it Brahms produced one of the most flawless scores of his mature years, at once varied in texture and unified in spirit.

Although his integration of the two instruments is among the most successful in the entire literature, the piano has a slight edge in terms of the weight of its material in the first movement, while the violin maintains hegemony in the radiant finale. That stated, the slow movement — which is not really slow, and compresses slow movement and scherzo into one with its twice-recurring *Vivace* section — is an astonishing marriage of the two instruments: sublime in its relaxed A-section, dizzying in the fleet quasi-scherzo that interrupts.

Despite the overall amiable quality of the entire work, Brahms is expert at achieving a dramatic and convincing close to each of the three movements.

***Le boeuf sur le toit* [The Ox on the Roof], Op. 58b (1919)  
Darius Milhaud (1892-1974)**

**Travels in South America**

When the dramatist, poet, and diplomat Paul Claudel was appointed French minister to Brazil in December 1916, he took along his young friend Darius Milhaud as personal secretary. The 24-year-old composer spent the last twenty months of World War I as part of Claudel's entourage. Milhaud was entranced by Rio de Janeiro and the exotic instruments and rhythms of Brazilian musical culture. They left a strong imprint on his music, including *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, which he composed immediately upon his return to Paris. In his autobiography, he recounted:

Still haunted by my memories of Brazil, I assembled a few popular melodies, tangos, *maxixes* [an urban Brazilian dance music related to polka], sambas, and even a Portuguese *fado*, and transcribed them with a rondo-like theme recurring between each two of them. I called this fantasia *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, the title of a Brazilian popular song. I thought that the character of this music might make it suitable for an accompaniment to one of Charlie Chaplin's films.

He called it a *cinéma-symphonie*.

**Challenging the establishment: postwar political incorrectness**

Jean Cocteau, the *avant-garde* writer and film-maker who served as spokesperson for Milhaud and his composer cohorts "Les Six," had other ideas. Cocteau persuaded Milhaud that the new work should be staged, with acrobats and clowns. He devised a pantomime set in an American bar during Prohibition. The characters included a bartender, a policeman, a Black boxer, a billiard player, and

several women with generous bosoms – presumably depicting prostitutes, but played by men in drag. Milhaud thought of it as a dream sequence.

His score, which preceded Cocteau's scenario, is a raucous romp with one foot planted in the streets of Rio and the other in a Parisian music hall. The rondo refrain recurs fifteen times and traverses twelve different key centers. Milhaud was fascinated by polytonality – music in more than one key at the same time –and loved the delicious cacophony that resulted. *Le boeuf sur le toit* was greeted as an amusing piece tossed off in a hurry, but Milhaud's vibrant music has stood the test of time and is one of his most popular works.

Milhaud's original score was for chamber orchestra; however, he subsequently arranged it for violin and orchestra, for two pianos, and for violin and piano, as we hear it.

## A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

*Program Annotator Laurie Shulman asked Yevgeny Kutik about the Milhaud he plays this evening. He replied with this wonderful reminiscence.*

I first encountered Milhaud's *Le boeuf sur le toit* in high school during my studies with Roman Totenberg. I had spent several weeks working on the Brahms Concerto with Mr. Totenberg in painstaking detail, and he could sense I was in desperate need of a "fun" distraction. He suggested the music of Milhaud, with whom Mr. Totenberg had had a particularly close working relationship, even touring South America as a violin/piano duo. I went home and listened to a recording of *Le boeuf* and broke out in laughter at the often hilarious musical antics. The tunes were so catchy, the extensive bitonal passages and numerous dissonant notes all so blatantly "wrong" sounding--I had never encountered a piece quite like this. It's extremely difficult for both piano and violin, and I realize now that it provided me the perfect opportunity to continue my growth as a violinist and artist against the backdrop of a light-hearted work. Mr. Totenberg and I grew closer by working on this piece. It was as though he was sharing an inside joke with me. To this day, this piece for me is synonymous with Roman Totenberg.

– Yevgeny Kutik

*Mr. Kutik's former teacher, the late Roman Totenberg, was the father of NPR*

*Legal Affairs Correspondent Nina Totenberg. – L.S.*

**Sonata in E-flat for Violin and Piano, Op. 18**  
**Richard Strauss (1864-1949)**

Richard Strauss's orchestral tone poems and stage works operas are staples of the concert hall and opera house. His early works, however, are curiosities that get revived only occasionally. The loss is ours as chamber music lovers, for as a brash young man Richard Strauss composed almost exclusively for modest forces, enriching the *Lieder* and chamber literature.

The Violin Sonata in E-flat, Op. 18, was his only large-scale work for violin and piano (Very late in life, in 1948, he wrote an *Allegretto* for the combination.) The sonata is a signal work, for it falls on the cusp of Strauss's early and middle periods, heralding the rich symphonic vocabulary of the tone poems. The Sonata's outer movements date from 1887. By the time Strauss completed the slow movement in autumn 1888, he was also at work on *Don Juan*, his first orchestral masterpiece. It is clear from the extravagant textures and generous scale of the sonata that he was already thinking in orchestral terms. Large orchestral canvases and the grander world of opera would dominate his career for the next fifty years.

Strauss undertook the sonata at the behest of Alexander Ritter, a violinist and passionate proponent of Wagner who played in the Meiningen orchestra. While Strauss was certainly acquainted with Wagner's music and shared Ritter's enthusiasm for the composer of the *Ring*, other composers wielded a more powerful influence on him in his instrumental compositions from the 1880s. Schumann comes to mind in the Violin Sonata, probably because of the total abandon with which Strauss tosses off his musical gestures. Other Schumannesque touches are the insistence of the opening motive — a chordal dotted rhythm followed by a triplet — and the demanding piano figuration.

Dense textures seem to strain the medium of violin and piano. In size and sheer physical volume, the piano has the potential to overpower the violin. Strauss solves this risk of imbalance by writing a brilliant and virtuosic violin part. In the third movement especially, he places demands on the violinist greater than those in many a concerto finale.

Strauss's slow movement, subtitled *Improvisation*, bears the tempo marking *Andante cantabile*, singing in the manner of a Mendelssohn *Song Without Words*. Cast in placid A-flat major, the melody and texture take a bow to Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata slow movement. A turbulent middle section, rumbling with repeated triplets, clearly borrows from the piano part to Schubert's *Erlkönig*. And the sharp-eared will detect a quotation from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in the finale.

Despite these tributes to his predecessors and older contemporaries, Strauss had come to believe that traditional forms such as symphony and sonata had exhausted their possibilities for new music, effectively rendering themselves obsolete. In this sonata, his last piece of conventional chamber music, we feel him chafing within the confines of a Procrustean bed. Because he already hints at the orchestral sweep of *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, one senses that the ecstatic musical climaxes of his operas cannot be far off.

### ***Tzigane*, Concert Rhapsody for Violin and Piano Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

During the 1920s, Maurice Ravel was a frequent visitor to England, where he regularly attended musical events of all types. According to his biographer Arbie Orenstein, *Tzigane* had its origins in, of all the unlikely locations, a private British musicale during a 1922 visit. On the evening in question, the Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arányi (coincidentally, a grand-niece of the great nineteenth-century violinist Joseph Joachim) performed Ravel's violin/cello sonata with Hans Kindler. Taken with her playing, the composer asked d'Arányi to perform some Gypsy melodies. She complied, and Ravel grew increasingly absorbed in the unfamiliar scale patterns and compelling rhythms of the eastern European tradition. Fascinated by what he heard, he encouraged her to continue until the wee hours of the morning. By then, he had resolved to compose a violin work especially for her.

Fully two years later, the piece took final shape. Ravel only completed it days before d'Arányi premiered it on April 26, 1924. In the interim, he had drawn further inspiration from the virtuoso music of Paganini and Liszt. *Tzigane*, his synthesis of Gypsy flavor with nineteenth-century virtuoso technique, is a landmark in the violin literature. This work admirably demonstrates his uncanny

ability to assimilate and process the musical style of another country, as he had already done so successfully with Spanish music.

*Tzigane* opens with an extended, dramatic introduction. Ravel's structure is episodic, as the subtitle "Concert Rhapsody" implies. Despite its dazzling difficulty, the piece is remarkably well written for violin, presenting formidable challenges with pizzicati, quadruple stops, virtuoso figuration, and a concluding perpetual motion clearly related to the finale of Ravel's Violin Sonata (1923-1927).

Ravel orchestrated *Tzigane* several months after he completed the original version for violin and piano. In that form, it is the closest he came to composing a violin concerto. He also arranged *Tzigane* in a fascinating third version employing an early type of prepared piano using an attachment called *luthéal*, which was intended to make the piano approximate the sound of the cimbalom [a large hammer dulcimer used in Hungarian Gypsy and popular music].