Toccata in D Minor, BWV 913 by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

In late 1705, J.S. Bach walked hundreds of miles to Lübeck on foot just to hear the famous Dietrich Buxtehude play the organ. Buxtehude was especially known for his organ preludes, which alternate free improvisation and strict counterpoint. Bach was so inspired that he stayed until the beginning of the next year, earning him a harsh scolding on his return to Arnstadt.

Derived from the Italian word *toccare* (to touch), the toccata is a keyboard genre that has been explored by countless composers throughout musical history. For Bach, his seven toccatas (BWV 910–916) represent some of his earliest works for the keyboard. The exact date of composition is unknown but estimated to be between 1706 and 1715. The D Minor Toccata in particular could be his earliest toccata, composed shortly after his return from Lübeck. Driven and inspired by Buxtehude's improvisatory preludes, Bach explores the limits of contrapuntal music through multiple contrasting sections, alternating between rhapsodic and fugal material.

The D Minor Toccata consists of four distinct "movements"—it starts with a dramatic and virtuosic opening in an improvisatory style, immediately followed by a slower passage filled with ornaments and dissonant suspensions. An agitated *Presto* marks the transition into the next section: a quick dance-like fugue. Here, Bach constantly uses fragments of the main motive in all four voices. In addition, long sequences with endless streams of sixteenth notes make this fugue especially exciting. The third section, a mournful adagio, evokes the imagery of multiple solo instruments supported with orchestral accompaniment. Lastly, a second fast fugue serves as the impressive finale, notably making use of dance rhythms and occasionally imitating the *tutti* and solo passages of a concerto grosso.

Piano Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101 by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Beethoven was going through a dark period in his life surrounding the composition of his Piano Sonata Op. 101, despite his musical success in Vienna. His brother had died in 1814, leading to an intense legal battle for custody of his nephew, Karl. The struggle for guardianship lasted for about five years, and afterwards, he was solely responsible for young Karl's upbringing. Additionally, his deafness had gotten much worse—his last public performance as a pianist was also in 1814. As a result of these ordeals, his compositional output was quite dry during this time.

Written in 1816, Beethoven's Op. 101 Sonata is debatably the first piano sonata composed in his late period. It is dedicated to Baroness Dorothea von Ertmann, one of Beethoven's piano students, and was written towards her personal tastes and pianistic style. Faced with the transition to the Romantic Era, Beethoven decided to transform the existing classical style with the use of radical harmonies and forms, counterpoint, and profound expressivity. This intense musical experimentation is most definitely present in the Op. 101 Sonata.

The first three movements of the sonata are extremely brief and contrasting. They appear to have almost no connection, but the substantial fourth movement ties together the whole work in a triumphant finale. Each of the movements has a lengthy German title, making the sonata feel almost programmatic. To start, the first movement unexpectedly begins in the dominant (E Major) and never seems to come home to the tonic until the very last chord. Titled "Etwas lebhaft, und mit der innigsten Empfindung" (Somewhat lively, and with innermost sensibility), this movement flows freely with a constant siciliano rhythm and feels incredibly intimate. On the other hand, the second movement is a powerful march labeled "Lebhaft, marschmäßig" (Lively, march-like). Beethoven uses heavy chromaticism and goes into distant keys maniacally. The trio middle section is calmer and in canon, using parts of the march as the theme. To end the movement, the trio seamlessly transitions back into the opening march. Next, the profound third movement— "Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll" (Slow and longingly)—serves as an introduction to the fourth. It starts with a vocal melody line supported by deep chords, eventually climaxing with a long chromatic descent in the bass line. A cadenza that rises and falls gracefully precedes the stunning return of the opening theme of the first movement. This quote slowly builds up in volume and speed until transforming into the final victorious movement. Entitled "Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit" (Swifty, but not too fast, and with determination), this overjoyed finale is in sonata form with a massive fugue as the development. The transition into this fugue is sudden and shocking; the subject uses past material in the parallel minor key (A Minor). Bach's influence is clear, as contrapuntal ideas are present even in the exposition and recapitulation. The coda sneaks in and relaxes the atmosphere before finally ending the sonata abruptly with a blast of full chords.

Scherzo No. 4 in E Major, Op. 54 by Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Chopin's four *Scherzi* were some of the first to dramatically expand the possibilities of the musical form. Meaning "joke" in Italian, *Scherzi* were usually lighthearted and comical movements in a sonata. However, Chopin transformed the genre by composing his first three standalone *Scherzi* with demonic drive, intense drama, and an expanded form. The *Scherzo No. 4, Op. 54* is actually the most "scherzo-like" of the four, composed in the key of E Major. Written in 1842 during one of his compositional summers in Nohant, this piece is an example of Chopin's incredible mature style. The *Scherzo* is in a rondo form, with the calm pastoral main theme alternating with agitated and restless passages that are reminiscent of the past *Scherzi*. After a dramatic climax, the slower barcarolle-like middle section suddenly interrupts with a complete change in mood, feeling pensive and somber, yet sometimes hopeful. A magical intensification starting from a whisper finally leads back into the glorious return of the main theme, now decorated with trills and octaves in all registers. After a restatement of the whole A section, the expressive coda gracefully brings the music to a halt before ecstatically building up one last time, ending the masterpiece in brilliant fashion.

Chopin Etude in C Major, Op. 10, No. 7 by Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Along with the *Scherzi*, Chopin also transformed the genre of the *Etude* through his Op. 10 and Op. 25 collections. *Etudes* are normally known as exercises for a specific technique, often having no significant musical content. Contrarily, Chopin composed his *Etudes* with great imagination and artistic extent while still emphasizing a particular technique. His Op. 10 set was composed around 1828 to 1831, while he was traveling throughout Europe, in Warsaw, Vienna, and Paris. The *Etude in C Major No. 7* in particular is an exercise on controlling swift double notes in the upper register, shimmering above a wandering chromatic bass melody. Chopin additionally sometimes puts melodic emphasis on the top of the turbulent right hand. At the conclusion of the piece, a calm moment in diatonic C Major is immediately interrupted by a cascade of wild harmonic changes before brightly ascending into the home key.

Grandes étude de Paganini No. 2 in E-Flat Major, S. 141 by Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

Niccolò Paganini was the most acclaimed virtuoso violinist of his time, a legend that was rumored to have sold his soul to the devil for his supernatural ability. Around 1820, Paganini composed 24 *Caprices* that explored violin technique to an unprecedented level. Taking inspiration from these transcendent pieces, Liszt decided to model his six *Grandes étude de Paganini* after them. This set was revised in 1851, as the earlier version was outrageously difficult. The *Etude No. 2* is based on *Caprice No. 17*, which features elegant rapid scales and violent octaves for the violinist. Liszt transcribes the same techniques for the piano, keeping most of the musical content the same (besides the added coda), but increasing the virtuosity by adding Lisztian octaves, more flashy runs, and filling out harmonies.

The Firebird Suite by Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), arranged for piano by Guido Agosti (1901–1989)

In 1909, Stravinsky was commissioned to write a ballet by impresario Sergei Diaghilev on the exotic Russian folk tale, “The Firebird”. The story follows Prince Ivan as he sets out to defeat the evil king Kastchei with the help of the Firebird. The prince spared the Firebird while hunting and received one of her feathers in gratitude, which is later used to summon the magical being in a crucial battle. After the work was completed in 1910, it was an immediate success, leading to several other Diaghilev commissions and worldwide renown.

The concert pianist Guido Agosti arranged three movements of the orchestral suite version for the piano; the work is dedicated to his teacher Ferruccio Busoni, who was known for his wide range of keyboard transcriptions. The first movement, the *Danse infernale* (Infernal Dance), depicts the Firebird (summoned by Ivan) enchanting Kastchei and his subjects into frenzied dancing. Through syncopated and relentless rhythms, intense chromaticism, and constant motion, the Infernal Dance has unmatched wild energy throughout. The arrival of the Firebird is clearly heard in a section with intertwined singing melodies and shimmering accompaniment before winding up the demonic dance once more. At the climax, the dance quiets down completely as the enemies fall from exhaustion. The following *Berceuse* (Lullaby) features a deep and tranquil theme (originally played by the bassoon) surrounded by endless layers of different textures. Finally, Prince Ivan finds and destroys Kastchei's immortal soul, freeing all under his magical control. The *Finale* emerges with a horn call at the break of dawn—the rest of the movement blossoms around this main theme, ultimately expanding into massive victorious chords spanning the entire keyboard.

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