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Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Danse Nègre from African Suite, op. 35 (1898)

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born in London in 1875, the result of an affair between Alice Martin, a 19-year-old English girl, and Daniel Taylor, a surgeon from Sierra Leone who had come to London seeking a position. The affair was short-lived; Taylor found no employers willing to open their doors to an African doctor, and he returned to Sierra Leone without knowing that Alice was pregnant.

Alice named her son after the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, simply inverting the last two names. Originally there was no hyphen. That came later as the result of a printer's error, and Coleridge-Taylor decided to keep it. To his family and friends, however, he was always addressed as Coleridge.

Alice's family included numerous amateur musicians. His grandfather began teaching him the violin when he was five years old. That young Coleridge had a startling natural aptitude for the violin soon after became obvious, and the extended family chipped in to pay for violin lessons. At fifteen he was admitted to the Royal College of Music as a violin student, but within a year decided to change his focus to composition. He began studying with the eminent composer Charles Villiers Stanford, who would later recall him as one of the most gifted students he ever had.

Coleridge-Taylor's reputation exploded with the first performance of his cantata *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, a setting for tenor, chorus, and orchestra based on a section of *The Song Of Hiawatha* by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The work became so popular that for a time it eclipsed Handel's *Messiah* in the number of English performances. It was equally well received in the United States, which led to invitations to appear in America. In all, he made three American tours, in 1904, 1906, and 1910, conducting *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* and other works, and meeting leading African American artists and musicians.

He had already met the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and set several of his poems to music. Dunbar encouraged Coleridge-Taylor to explore his Sierra Leonian roots in his music. Following Dunbar's suggestion, Coleridge-Taylor began several pieces inspired by African themes, including the *African Suite* of 1898. Originally for piano, the suite consists of four movements, the last of which, *Danse Nègre*, soon appeared in an orchestral version.

In the *African Suite* and other pieces, Coleridge-Taylor sought to capture some of the spirit of traditional African music in a work that is otherwise squarely in the European classical realm. In this he places himself alongside Liszt and Brahms, who took the same approach with Hungarian music, or Dvořák with Bohemian music. Beginning with two emphatic chords, the dance begins with a pair of lively, rhythmic themes, developed at length in properly symphonic fashion. A

middle section provides contrast with a richly orchestrated lyrical melody. Finally, the lively themes return and the dance ends much as it began.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Concerto in D for Violin and Orchestra, op. 77 (1878)

The Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim (1831-1907) was one of the most important violinists of the 19th century, and for a time, a close friend of Brahms. Joachim's impact as a performer and a teacher was immense, and began as early as his London debut in 1844, where, not yet 13 years old, he gave the London premiere of the Beethoven violin concerto, with his mentor Mendelssohn conducting. Until Joachim's performance, the Beethoven concerto was scarcely known, treated as a relatively minor work from the master's pen. Within a few years of Joachim's performance, it was in the repertory of every major violinist in Europe.

Brahms first met Joachim in 1853, when Brahms was barely 20 years old and still a complete unknown. It was Joachim who arranged to introduce Brahms to Schumann, a meeting that would set Brahms' feet on the path to fame. In addition, Joachim was to conduct the premieres of Brahms' early orchestral works, including the London premiere of his First Symphony.

It was natural that Brahms would wish to honor their friendship with a Violin Concerto, but it would take 25 years before one would materialize. In 1878, Brahms spent his second summer in the mountain resort of Pörtschach am See, where he had composed his Second Symphony during the previous year. Here, as before, Brahms found the tranquil surroundings inspiring, and work proceeded quickly.

Still, the process was not entirely smooth. Brahms, composing a virtuoso work for an instrument he did not himself play, found himself uncertain about the playability of his work, and felt the need to consult Joachim. Correspondence flowed between the two of them, with Brahms copying passages from the work in progress and asking for suggestions. As it turned out, Joachim found few suggestions to make, and most of these Brahms simply ignored.

As a rule, Brahms made no effort to preserve sketches or early drafts of his works—indeed, he was methodical in destroying them—so our knowledge of the concerto's progress is limited. From his letters, though, we know that Brahms had originally planned a concerto in *four* movements, rather than the more usual three. As Joachim was pressuring Brahms to complete the concerto in time for a proposed premiere date, Brahms wrote that the four-movement idea was proving cumbersome. "The middle movements are bust—naturally they were the best ones! I am writing a wretched *Adagio* instead." One of the two discarded movements would turn up in the Second Piano Concerto, completed three years later.

Joachim premiered the Violin Concerto in Leipzig on New Year's Day, 1879, with Brahms conducting. As often happens, the concerto was not well received initially. The public found the concerto's unusual length and complexity baffling. One critic famously remarked that it sounded more like "a concerto *against* the violin." Pablo de Sarasate explained why he did not

perform it: “Does anyone imagine that I’m going to stand on stage, violin in hand, and listen to the oboe play the only good tune in the piece?” But of course, the virtues of the work became apparent as time passed, and by the turn of the century, the concerto had become one of the most beloved violin concertos ever written.

The first movement begins with a double exposition, with the entrance of the violin delayed until the orchestra has given a preview of the main themes by itself. This was standard practice in Mozart’s and Beethoven’s day, but was well on the way to obsolescence by 1878, which may have contributed to the work’s initial cool reception. The cadenza was another throwback to earlier practice; in the previous century it was normal for composers to allow soloists free rein to display their virtuosity by improvising or composing their own cadenza. Beethoven abandoned this practice in the “Emperor” Concerto in 1809, and by 1878 it was well and truly old hat. Brahms’ decision to revive the idea may have had something to do with his own uncertainty about composing for violin. Besides, Joachim was also a composer who had already written several cadenzas for concertos by Beethoven and Mozart, among others. Joachim did in fact write a brilliant cadenza for Brahms’ concerto, and while other cadenzas are available, it is Joachim’s that has become the de facto standard.

The “wretched Adagio” which follows is actually one of Brahms’ most sublime movements. As before, the violin enters only after the oboe introduces the long main theme (the passage that Sarasate found so annoying).

Joachim’s Hungarian background undoubtedly made Brahms think of gypsy music, for which he had developed a liking as a young man, and inspired several earlier works such as the Hungarian Dances and the finale of the first Piano Quartet. The final movement of the Violin Concerto begins in fine, if somewhat classically restrained, Gypsy mode, and despite several changes of theme and tempo, the boisterous mood never really goes away.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)
Symphony No. 4 in F minor, op. 36 (1878)

Besides being the year of his unfortunate marriage, 1877 was to be significant in Tchaikovsky’s life for another, more beneficial reason. Early that year his association with Nadezhda von Meck began. Mme. von Meck was a wealthy woman who had fallen under the spell of Tchaikovsky’s music and arranged to support him financially. At first, she offered commissions for various pieces, but then offered him a yearly stipend, which would continue until 1890. Mme. von Meck—perhaps wisely—imposed the condition that the two of them should never meet face to face. Despite this, or because of it, a voluminous correspondence began between them, in which Tchaikovsky revealed more of himself, his private demons, and his working methods, than he was to reveal to anyone else. It was to her—“my dearest friend”—that the Fourth Symphony was dedicated.

Composition of the symphony took place against the backdrop of his tumultuous marriage. An early draft of the symphony was complete by May 1877, the time of his engagement to Antonina. Revision and orchestration of the first movement took place during August and September. By this time he had already fled from his wife once, but was in the midst of an uneasy attempt to take up some sort of life

together. The attempt failed spectacularly, and Tchaikovsky, in a state of extreme agitation, broke with his wife for what would turn out to be the last time (though they would never officially divorce). The remaining movements were completed during Tchaikovsky's convalescence in Switzerland, during which he also composed the Violin Concerto.

Tchaikovsky was not present at the premiere, which took place in Moscow in February 1878, and was only moderately well received. However, at the second performance in St. Petersburg that November, the symphony was recognized as a masterpiece.

The composer admitted that his symphony had a program but declared it impossible to put into words. But in a letter to Mme. von Meck, he articulated a very detailed program, which he requested she keep in confidence.

The first movement begins with a stentorian figure in the horns, which Tchaikovsky identifies as representing "Fate, the fatal power which hinders one in the pursuit of happiness from gaining the goal." This leads to the main body of the movement, with a melancholy but lilting theme associated with "depression and loneliness." This theme becomes increasingly agitated over time, but abruptly the tempo slows and the mood becomes calmer. "Oh joy!" writes Tchaikovsky, "a sweet and tender dream enfolds me...All that was dark and joyless is forgotten." This mood is shattered by the return of the Fate motive, ushering in the development section of the movement. "Roughly we are awakened by Fate. Thus, we see that life is only an everlasting alternation of somber reality and fugitive dreams of happiness."

"The second movement," in the composer's program, "shows another panes of sadness...How sad it is that so much has already been and gone...One would fain rest awhile, recalling happy hours when young blood pulsed warm through our veins and life brought satisfaction...It is sad, yet sweet, to lose oneself in the past."

The third movement is a surprise, a light, balletic scherzo featuring the string orchestra playing pizzicato throughout. Tchaikovsky wrote, "there is no determined feeling, no exact expression in the third movement. Here are capricious arabesques, vague figure which slip into the imagination when one has taken wine and is slightly intoxicated...These are disconnected pictures which come and go...They have nothing to do with reality; they are unintelligible, bizarre, out at the elbows."

The finale begins with a splash of brilliant color. All thought of sadness seems forgotten. "The picture of a folk holiday. Hardly have we had time to forget ourselves in the happiness of others when indefatigable Fate reminds us once more of its presence...The other children of men are not concerned with us...How merry and glad they all are...Ad do you still say that all the world is immersed in sorrow? There still is happiness, simple, naïve happiness. Rejoice in the happiness of others—and you can still live."