ROBERT SCHUMANN
(born 1810 in Zwickau; died 1856 in Bonn)
Sonata in A Minor, Op. 105 (1851)

1. Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck
2. Allegretto
3. Lebhaft

Schumann described Mendelssohn as "a God among men" and called Brahms "a genius." Schumann's love for great music was as profound as his respect for colleagues and for the great masters, both among his contemporaries and of the past. Schumann himself was no lesser a composer than the greatest masters in the history of Western music; he is, indeed, in a class of his own.

Tortured throughout his adult life by demons within, Schumann was in the last period of his creativity when he wrote his four substantial violin works: the two sonatas, Op.105 in A minor, and Op.121 in D minor, both written in 1851, and the Fantasie for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 131, and the without-opus Violin Concerto, both from 1853. By the following year Schumann had been institutionalized. He died in a mental asylum two years later.

The Sonata in A Minor, Op. 105 written in Dusseldorf, where Schumann had held the post of Director for Orchestra and Chorus from 1850, reaches the core of the true Romantic that was Schumann. His compositions were guided by subjective reflection and intense introspection; one constantly hears his severe self-examination and the resulting turmoil. To hear the music of Schumann is to experience all his experiences magnified twice over. His musical persona as a composer gave definition and long-standing credibility to the term 'Romanticist.'

By the time of his Op. 105, mental illness was beginning to control him, and he was exhibiting alarming mood swings which, of course, took their toll on him, his family and friends. He reported being given orders from Heaven to write down certain melodies, and, too, being threatened by devils. To the rest of the world these were defined as hallucinations; to him these disturbances led to a loss of dignity, and in a few years' time, a loss of life. One can hear his torments in Op. 105-at times tragic, at others restless and condemning-throughout. Occasional moments of relief and warmth are brief and in the distance.

The first movement, marked Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck (with passionate expression) opens with a rich melody in the home key of A minor played on the G-string of the violin, while the piano adds texture with accompanying figures of 16th-notes. By the sixth bar, when the violin line has not even completed its thought, the piano starts with the same tune but starting 6 pitches higher and for a brief moment in D minor, which in turn is taken back by the violin, this time in F Major. These frequent modulations from the very start, usually a trait of the middle (development) section, immediately create a disturbed, restless quality. As in the opening section, the transitions into new material, or returning to old, are seamless and this remains a characteristic throughout the movement. In the coda, the violin has 16th-notes, and the

piano has a succession of chords interspersed with the melodic octave lines, leading to the relentless ending.

The second movement, Intermezzo, which is in F Major, starts off with two poignant but fragmentary tunes. They are both inconclusive, followed by two short folk-dance-like sequences, returning immediately to the fragmentary opening material. This format is repeated twice. The end of the movement is graced by soft chords on the piano and gentle pizzicatos on the violin.

The turbulent last movement is almost entirely in 16th notes for both instruments. However, the ambience is not that of brilliant virtuosity but of painful restlessness and agitation. The suppressed anxiety is relieved only at a few points through the 5 minute movement by the hint of a heavenly hymn-like theme. This tranquility is short-lived, however, as we are quickly returned to the discord of successive 16th-notes. Preceding the coda, a fragment of the opening melody of the entire work is heard, an eerie echo of the beginning. Then, with a sudden doubling of the 16th-note pace in the violin, the work comes quickly to a tragic end.

Referential sources available on request.

ALFRED SCHNITTKE
(born 1934 in Engels, Latvia; died 1998 in Hamburg)
Sonata No. 1 (1963)

1. Andante
2. Allegretto
3. Largo
4. Allegretto – Allegro – largo

Alfred Schnittke's First Violin Sonata was composed in 1963 and premiered the following year in Moscow by his champion, the late Mark Lubotsky. In the 1960s, Schnittke composed mostly chamber works, many of them with a prominent violin part. He was an exception in favoring the violin among his avant-garde colleagues at the Moscow Conservatory. Schnittke saw music as a chronicling of human life and of the history that shaped it, and the tone quality of the violin enabled him to express himself most personally because it resembled the human voice.

Born to non-Russian parents–his father Jewish and his mother of German descent–in Engels (in present-day Latvia) in 1934, Schnittke claimed no single strong heritage. He grew up speaking German as a Jew in Russia, without any ties to the Jewish culture or religion and also spent a part of his formative years in Vienna. In the last two decades of his life, Schnittke became a baptized Catholic and lived in Germany as a Russian citizen. Perhaps it is because of his diverse contact with a variety of cultural influences that his compositional language is poly-stylistic.

Many of Schnittke's violin works, including the First Violin Sonata, were strongly influenced by the music of Dmitri Shostakovich. It was the First Violin Concerto of Shostakovich that made a strong impact on the youthful Schnittke. Composed in 1948 but held back by the composer until its premiere in 1955 by David Oistrakh, it was greatly admired by Schnittke for its dramatic and contrasting moods between movements and between instruments as well as for the conflict felt between the solo violin and the orchestra.

Schnittke's First Violin Sonata opens with a lonesome short soliloquy on the violin, which is constructed on the 12-tone row. Then, the piano enters with staccato notes, again using the 12-tone row, adding to the eeriness of the atmosphere. The climax of the movement is the tone row in reverse, and it is unrelenting and severe, played with held double notes in a high register of E-flat and C. The dynamic intensity is quickly relieved but the uneasy atmosphere remains.

In the next movement, sarcasm and irony prevail. The two instruments continuously tag along at each other's heels, never meeting to consummate the partnership. Leading to a climax, the piano solo starts quietly but with nervous energy, repetitively reinforcing the initial theme of the movement. When the climax is finally reached, the violin enters and has an entire measure alone, with shrieking force. The piano only follows in canon but at twice the speed, again making it impossible for the two instruments to meet. The end of the movement is without finality, going in attacca (without any break) to the third movement. It is only here, at the beginning C major chord of the movement, that there is any sense of arrival.

The third movement has a solemn quality as well as being the most tuneful and melodious, and here, Schnittke pays tribute to the great composer Bach. As the violin holds the note G (the lowest possible pitch to be played by the instrument), the upper line of the piano plays the notes C-B-D-C#. When the notes B-A-C-H (according to the German pronunciation of the pitches) are raised by a whole-step, they become C-B-D-C#.

As Schnittke introduces the melodious tune after the repetitive Gs, he calls for a non-vibrato. Such treatment of a pretty melody makes the character of the movement more surreal, only to be heightened further by the use of continuous harmonics at the end of the movement, imitating the sound of a Baroque flute. Again, the movement feels inconclusive.

The final movement resembles a burlesque and is a combination of serialism, with the two instruments mock-imitating each other, with themes satirizing the second and third movements. Towards the end, the opening theme of the entire sonata appears as if in a cryptic message, which is followed by the four chords on the piano, of which the upper line is the transposed B-A-C-H. The violin then plays three times, in pizzicato, a fragment from the beginning theme of the last movement, only leaving a sense of mysteriousness and continuity.

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Referential sources available on request.