

CMSFW Ensemble
Saturday, 12 September 2026 — Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2026

Duo Sonata in A Major, D. 574 (“Grand Duo,” Opus Posth. 162)

Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

Does it sound like hyperbole to observe that we forget the magnitude of Schubert’s genius? Consider his pieces for violin and piano: a modest handful of works, most of which were composed when he was in his late teens. Compare that with the contributions of Mozart and Beethoven, two older composers whose music had enormous impact on Schubert. Mozart’s early violin/piano sonatas were written in Mannheim in 1778, when he was 22. Beethoven was older — pushing 30 — when he produced his first Violin Sonatas, Op. 12, in 1797 and 1798. Those comparisons shed some perspective on the Schubert violin sonatas and make us deeply regretful that he only returned to this duo combination twice after August 1817, the year of the Duo Sonata on this afternoon’s program. (The two later compositions are a *Rondo brillant* in B Minor, D. 895 from 1826 and a Fantasy in C Major, D. 934 from 1827.)

This Sonata in A Major was preceded by a group of three Sonatinas, dating from 1816 and also published posthumously, as Op. 137, Nos. 1-3. They were published by Anton Diabelli (the same publisher/composer who wrote the theme on which Beethoven wrote what is surely his greatest set of Piano Variations, the so-called Diabelli Variations) as “Sonatinas” in 1836. That diminutive label does them a disservice. Schubert used the term “Sonata” on his autograph scores, and the three earlier pieces have much to recommend them musically. All the same, the Duo Sonata in A represents a dramatic step forward from the earlier works. First, it is in four movements. Schubert did not compose another standard instrumental composition in four movements between 1818 and 1824. His approach to the violin is more virtuosic than in the Op. 137 pieces. And the interplay between the two players is far more advanced than in the earlier works.

As for the music, it has so much charm and grace that it needs little introduction. An understated piano introduction sets a mood of gentleness that prevails throughout the first movement. Schubert places the scherzo second, an unusual but not unprecedented occurrence. In this case it is likely

explained by the thematic connection between the finale and the scherzo. Schubert's inherent sense of balance told him that the two needed separation. He accommodates with a lovely *Andantino* in C major, a key change that is consistent with other Schubertian modulations throughout this sonata. Even the slow movement has its dramatic moments, hinting at the greatness that would reach such extraordinary height in Schubert's later music.

Quartet for Four Violins

Grażyna Bacewicz (1909-1969)

In her seminal study of musical life in Poland, Lidia Rappoport-Gelfand calls Grażyna Bacewicz “the brightest and most talented representative of neo-classicism in Poland.”

Born in the central Polish city of Łódź, Bacewicz grew up playing violin and piano. She started composing at age thirteen but elected to study philosophy at Warsaw University. Remarkably, she pursued music simultaneously, enrolling in violin and composition classes at the Warsaw Conservatory. In the early 1930s, she continued her musical education in Paris, working with violinist André Touret and, at Fontainebleau, with the legendary composition pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. She also had violin lessons in Paris with the Hungarian-born violin virtuoso Carl Flesch. After returning to Poland, Bacewicz became concertmaster of the Polish Radio Symphony in 1936 and had a burgeoning career as both soloist and composer when Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, catalyzing the Second World War and bringing a screeching halt to Poland's musical life.

Following the war, she joined the faculty of the State Conservatory of Music in Łódź. Her Quartet for Four Violins dates from 1949 and was intended as a teaching piece for her violin students; however, it has musical value beyond a simple pedagogical exercise. The challenge of writing for four violins is that they all have the same range. The composer must “spread out” the writing in order to establish a fabric of upper, middle, and lower voices.

Her opening Allegretto establishes a steady rhythm in octaves in the fourth violin that recurs periodically through the movement, usually with a different player. Changes of mood and tempo are frequent, and melodies migrate among the quartet. The brisk Allegro giocoso section is an *oberek*, the

quickest of Poland's five national dances. The Andante tranquillo opens with a lyrical melody over a drone. As in the first movement, the melodic and harmonic roles are exchanged among the players. Occasional trills and pizzicato vary the texture. The quartet concludes with a lively Molto allegro that alternates multiple-stopped exclamations with rapid-fire declamation that again recalls both Polish folk song and energetic dancing.

Sonata No. 3 in D Minor for Violin and Piano, Op. 108

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Brahms spent three summers on holiday in the Swiss village of Thun from 1886 to 1888. The mountains and stunning natural beauty always inspired him to a high level of productivity. These three vacations were no exception, yielding a number of remarkable compositions ready for publication at the conclusion of each summer. Both the Second Violin Sonata in A Major, Op. 100 and the Third Sonata on this afternoon's program were composed at Thun. Brahms sketched the D minor work during summer 1886 then set it aside for a while. He completed it in summer 1888 and played the first performance on 21 December in Budapest with the Hungarian violinist Jenő Hubay. His publisher Fritz Simrock issued the score the following year. Brahms dedicated the sonata to the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow.

Like so many of the later Brahms works, Op. 108 transcends the specifics of circumstance and envelops us in its grandeur and warmth. "There is a romantic melancholy about the *Allegro* of the D minor Sonata," biographer Peter Latham has written.

It starts with a great sigh and ends with an even greater one. In between there is considerable variety of mood, but the brooding element predominates, especially in the ruminating development.

Foregoing the customary repeat of the exposition, Brahms focuses attention on this extraordinary development. Rather than exploring a number of distant key centers in expounding on the expository material, the music holds fiercely to a dominant pedal — for an astonishing forty-five measures! Shifting the formal organization of the sonata form in this manner requires balance elsewhere. Brahms makes his adjustment by providing unexpected harmonic exploration in the recapitulation. By means of an extended coda, he resolves the pedal point of the development.

Tender and intimate, the slow movement is the closest Brahms came to composing a Mendelssohnian “Song Without Words.” Only in this *Adagio* does he relinquish the fiery, stoic approach that characterizes the outer movements. For much of this *Adagio*, the violin plays largely in its lowest register, evoking a darker sound and a warmth more generally associated with viola.

Un poco presto e con sentimento, though not specifically marked a scherzo, has the same eerie character as the scherzo movements of the two mature piano trios, Op.87 in C major and Op.101 in C minor. Hovering between the whimsical and the spooky, the third movement is a foil of restraint, sometimes delicate, other times passionate. Brahms thus makes an effective transition from the profoundly human slow movement to the agitation of his finale.

Full of broad gestures and sweeping melodies, the last movement links the sonata more closely with the Second Cello Sonata, Op. 99 than with its companion piece, the A major Violin Sonata, Op. 100. No wasted breath extends this compact movement, which is a masterpiece of economy. Bold harmonic exploration and insistent syncopations endow it with musical and rhythmic energy that carry it to its dramatic close. As biographer Karl Geiringer has so eloquently written:

The impetuous Finale, with its fiery brilliance, borne onward by intense emotion, is so richly endowed with structural and intellectual values that it is able to hold its own with the first movement, and indeed almost to surpass it. Perfect as each movement of the three violin sonatas is, they seem, in this last movement, to have reached their culminating point.

Navarra, Op. 33 for Two Violins and Piano

Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908)

Boris Schwarz, in his entertaining and landmark study *Great Masters of the Violin*, calls Pablo de Sarasate [pronounced Sah-rah-SAH-tay] “the last of the great nineteenth-century virtuosos: suave, elegant, brilliant in a very personal way, idolized by the public in both hemispheres.” Because Sarasate lived into the early years of the twentieth century, some of his recordings have been preserved, and a number of contemporary descriptions of his playing also survive. He was a technically precise player with an elegant style and a piercing, sweet tone. A child prodigy, Sarasate earned a scholarship at the age of eight to study at the Madrid Conservatory. When he was ten, the Spanish Queen Isabella gave

him a Stradivarius violin. Two years later he was sent to Paris to study with Alard at the Paris Conservatoire. Within a year he had won first prize there and completed his formal study at age fifteen.

Perhaps because of his Spanish temperament, Sarasate had little sympathy for the large-scale Germanic works. His interpretations of the concerti by Brahms and Beethoven lacked conviction and a sense of architecture. For flashier, virtuosic pieces, however, he had no peer, and an astonishing number of romantic works were written for and dedicated to him. These include Bruch's Second Concerto and *Scottish Fantasy*, Saint-Saëns's First and Third Concerti plus the ever popular *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, Lalo's First Concerto and *Symphonie espagnole*, and Wieniawski's Second Concerto.

Like many virtuoso performers of his day, Sarasate also composed a considerable amount of music for his instrument. His best known works are the *Carmen Fantasy* and the popular *Zigeunerweisen*. *Navarra* is a salute to his native province (Sarasate was born in Pamplona, the provincial capital of Navarre), employing characteristic Spanish dances like the *jota*. The work is in three sections, but you probably won't pay much attention to them because the excitement in *Navarra* is the pyrotechnics and razor-precise ensemble required of the three players, particularly the two violinists. Sarasate demands dazzling fiddle technique, including left-hand pizzicato, false harmonics, and a Pandora's box of other difficulties. In the grand scheme, Sarasate may not have had great depth, but he made up for it in panache and sheer fun. There are times when glitz is an asset. *Navarro* will make you want to return to Spain, which means that Sarasate succeeded in what he set out to do.