

***Psalm 13, Op. 24***

**Alexander von Zemlinsky (1871–1942)**

Written: 1935

Movements: One

Style: Late Romantic

Duration: Fifteen minutes

“Alexander von Zemlinsky? Who’s he?” Certainly no longer a famous name among the concert-going public. Yet when he was alive, he was at the very center of musical life in Vienna. He knew and had a strong influence on most of the great musicians of his day. Johannes Brahms was an early champion of his music. Zemlinsky taught counterpoint to Arnold Schoenberg, the man who so profoundly affected music twenty years later by developing the twelve-tone technique. Zemlinsky’s sister Mathilde married Schoenberg. The only contemporary opera that Gustav Mahler presented at the Vienna Opera was Zemlinsky’s “*Es war einmal*” (*Once upon a time*).

The daughter of a famous Viennese painter was at that performance. Her name was Alma. She met Zemlinsky a few weeks later at a dinner party. “[I] had a wonderful time,” she wrote. “He’s dreadfully ugly . . . and yet I found him quite enthralling.” Shortly after that, she became his student; and soon they were in the midst of a tumultuous but troubled affair. The crowning blow came when Alma dumped Zemlinsky for Gustav Mahler.

Zemlinsky directed the Deutsches Landestheater in Prague for sixteen years beginning in 1911. He then moved to Berlin, and in 1933 to Vienna to escape the Nazis (Zemlinsky’s heritage was Catholic, Muslim and Jewish). In 1938 he came to the United States where he died, virtually unknown.

In 1935, Zemlinsky travelled to Prague to conduct his *Sinfonietta*. While there, he filled in on short notice for an ailing conductor. The piece was an orchestral version of Bach’s *Art of*

*Fugue*. It commonly ends with a solo organ rendition of Bach's chorale-prelude *Wenn wir in Höchsten Nöten sein* (*When we are in dire need*). While standing there on the podium, Zemlinsky could contemplate the words in the score "Before Thy Throne, O Lord, I tread/And humbly unto Thee I plead:/Be merciful, turn not Thy face/From me, a sinner in distress." Reviews of the concert confronted Zemlinsky with the xenophobia that was running rampant in Europe. "Have we no conductors of our own?" the Czech press asked.

After his return to Berlin, the dispirited Zemlinsky, inspired by Bach's words, wrote his *Psalm 13* that begins "How long will thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" The work was never performed in his lifetime.

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**Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op. 6  
Nicolò Paganini (1782–1840)**

Written: 1817

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 36 minutes

Writing for the German language *General Music Journal*, the music critic A. B. Marx described Europe's newest musical phenomenon, Nicolò Paganini:

One must await him in an overcrowded opera house among thousands of visitors and hear the strange rumors running from row to row. And now, after a long pause, see the odd, sickly, worn-out man sliding through the orchestra, the face fleshless and bloodless in its entanglement of dark locks and beard, the boldest of noses with an expression of contemptuous scorn, eyes that shine like black jewels out of bluish-white. And now, instantly, the hasty beginning of the [orchestral introduction], and then the tenderest

and boldest song ever heard on the violin.

Another critic wrote, “His playing is truly inconceivable. He performs certain passagework, leaps, and double-stops that have never been heard from any violinist. . . . [He] creates a 'furor' at his concerts.”

Nicolò Paganini was probably the greatest violin virtuoso of the nineteenth century, if not of all time. Yet, incredibly, he only started performing outside of his native Italy when he was 46—a little late to start an international career. He started out as another one of those precocious children pushed and promoted by an overbearing father. He went through a series of teachers and by the time he was eighteen, he gained a considerable amount of fame around the region. Like the teenage rock stars of today, Paganini also developed a reputation for a self-indulgent lifestyle. His first big break came when he was 31 and performed a concert at La Scala in Milan. Finally, in 1828, he embarked on a tour that took him to every major European capital. After six grueling (and dissolute) years, he retired to his native Parma.

In the nineteenth century, it wasn't enough to be a virtuoso: You had to demonstrate your skills as a creative genius as well. Writing your own concerto allowed you to incorporate your own trademark technical gimmicks, and the *First Concerto* has them in spades. (It was even originally in a different key: The orchestra was in E-flat and the violin in D, but tuned a half-step higher in order to sound more brilliant.) The orchestra simply serves as a support team to a musical acrobatic act. As Paganini himself said, “No one ever asks if you have heard Paganini, but if you have seen him.”

***Suite from the “The Firebird” (1919 version)***

**Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)**

Written: 1909–10

Movements: Twelve

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 30 minutes

A quick series of events led to the rapid rise of Igor Stravinsky from unknown composer to the *enfant terrible* of the musical world. In 1908, Stravinsky wrote a short piece (*Fireworks*) to celebrate the wedding of the daughter of his beloved teacher, Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov. A few months later, Stravinsky gained a new champion when the great ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev heard a performance of *Fireworks*.

Because of that hearing, Diaghilev asked Stravinsky to arrange a few pieces by other composers (Chopin and Grieg) for the opening season of the *Ballets Russes* in Paris. The success of those pieces didn't immediately help Stravinsky. Diaghilev and the choreographer Michel Fokine asked another Russian composer, Anatol Liadov, to write the music for a new ballet based on the story of *The Firebird*. Liadov was something of a procrastinator and, needing music *soon*, Diaghilev turned to the young Stravinsky. He started work on *The Firebird* in November 1909, and had the completed score ready for Diaghilev by April 1910. “Mark him well,” Diaghilev said to the prima ballerina during a rehearsal. “He is a man on the eve of celebrity.” Indeed he was. Between 1910 and 1913, Stravinsky wrote three ballets for the *Ballet Russes*: *The Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. The success of those ballets put Stravinsky at the head of the *avant-garde*, and forever changed “classical” music.

Stravinsky wrote for a huge ballet orchestra. Later, he extracted three separate suites. The one on tonight's performance comes from 1919 and uses a smaller orchestra than the

other two. The ballet tells the story of Prince Ivan who captures a magical bird. One of her feathers allows the Prince to defeat the evil King Katschei who has imprisoned the Prince's future bride. In the first movement of the suite, we hear Prince Ivan as he is wandering around at night. A sudden shimmering announces the magical Firebird and the second movement, her solo dance. The third movement is the dance of beautiful princesses who are captives of the evil King Kastchei. The fourth movement is the frenetic dance—caused by the Firebird's magic—of the king and his entourage. The final movement is the Firebird's song that lulls all the monsters to sleep. It leads directly to the brilliant and majestic ending of the ballet.

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***Variations on a Theme of Haydn, Op. 56a***

**Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)**

Written: 1873

Style: Romantic

Duration: 17 minutes

When Johannes Brahms met Robert Schumann, he was just twenty years old.

One of the most influential German musicians alive, Schumann was always on the lookout for that one composer who could be the next Beethoven. After his meeting with the young Brahms, he wrote of him in almost messianic terms:

He is come, a young blood by whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch. He is called Johannes Brahms. . . . He bore all the outward signs that proclaim to us, 'This is one of the elect.'

By casting the mantle of Beethoven on Brahms's shoulder, Schumann nearly paralyzed him. It would take Brahms over twenty years to produce his first symphony. During that time, he wrote only one large-scale symphonic work (his *First Piano Concerto*) and only a few smaller works (two serenades for orchestra and the *Haydn Variations*).

After Brahms settled in Vienna in 1863, the librarian of the Vienna Philharmonic Society showed him a number of manuscripts by Franz Joseph Haydn. The slow movement of a *divertimento*—a piece for wind band that was meant to be played outside—intrigued Brahms, so he wrote it down for later use. Ten years later, while vacationing at a resort in Bavaria, Brahms took up the tune for a set of variations for two pianos. By the time he finished it, he decided to recast it for orchestra. In his majestic biography of Brahms, Jan Swafford points out that the *Haydn Variations* turned out to be the last large keyboard work of Brahms's life, his first purely orchestral work since 1858, and his final orchestral study before finally completing his *First Symphony*. It was also “the first freestanding orchestral variations in history.”

Brahms scored the theme for the *Haydn Variations* for almost the same group of instruments that Haydn used. The eight variations that follow use the full orchestra and keep the same phrase structure and essentially the same harmonies as the theme. Meanwhile, the melody becomes less recognizable. For the finale, Brahms uses a snippet of the theme as a constantly repeating bass line—an *ostinato*—for seventeen more short little variations. Eventually the latter half of the theme arises out of the orchestral texture for a triumphant closing.