Kaddisch, from Two Hebrew Melodies (1914)

Maurice Ravel was born in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France, on March 7, 1875, and died in Paris, France, on December 28, 1937.

Debussy intended these to be the first in a series of six such compositions. The third Sonata, for Violin and Piano, came two years later. Debussy contemplated a fourth Sonata, for oboe, horn and harpsichord that he never composed. Debussy, who had been suffering the ravages of cancer, died on March 25, 1918, at the age of 55.

I. Prologue. Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto—Debussy’s original title for the Cello Sonata was Pierrot faché avec la lune (Pierrot Angry with the Moon). The Prologue opens with a forceful introduction by the piano, followed by a flowing, wide-ranging cello passage. The cello introduces a sighing, melancholy theme, marked dolce sostenuto. The movement proceeds as a kind of arch, with the music becoming increasingly agitated. Finally, the tension subsides, as the cello’s reprise of the sighing melody resolves to a whispered open fifth, punctuated by a single note in the piano’s lower register.

The final two movements are played without pause.

II. Sérénade. Modérément animé—The second movement is a satirical, caustic Serenade, in which the cello explores an extraordinary range of colors and effects.

III. Finale. Animé. Léger et nerveux—The Finale opens in high spirits, suggesting a positive resolution to the unsettled and conflicted landscape of the first two movements. Suddenly, the mood shifts with a hushed, sepulchral episode (Lento. Molto rubato con morbidezza). A reprise of the opening section is capped by the cello’s forceful descending passage, and the duo’s vehement, fortissimo chords.

Kol Nidre, Opus 47 (1880)

Max Bruch was born in Cologne, Germany, on January 6, 1838, and died in Friedenau, near Berlin, Germany, on October 2, 1920.

German composer Max Bruch’s earliest musical studies were with his mother, a noted singer and teacher. When he was 11, Bruch composed an instrumental combination for Kaddish, from Two Hebrew Melodies composed in 1914 by Maurice Ravel. The French composer wrote these works, originally scored for voice and piano, at the request of Alvina Alvi, a soprano with the St. Petersburg opera. Alvi, with Ravel at the piano, gave the premiere of the songs in June of 1914. Ravel’s rapt and beautiful setting of the Aramaic prayer (“May His great name be exalted and sanctified”) has been arranged for numerous instrumental combinations as well.

Cello Sonata (1915)

Cézard Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-Laye, France, on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris, France, on March 25, 1918.

You know that I have no sang-froid and certainly nothing of the army spirit.

I’ve never had a rifle in my hands. My recollections of 1870 and the anxiety of my wife, whose son and son-in-law are in the army, prevent me from becoming very enthusiastic.

All this makes my life intense and troubled.

I am just a poor little atom crushed in this terrible cataclysm.

Debussy’s rapt and beautiful setting of the Aramaic prayer (“May His great name be exalted and sanctified”) has been arranged for numerous instrumental combinations as well.

Kaddisch (Kaddish) is the first of Two Hebrew Melodies composed in 1914 by Maurice Ravel. The French composer wrote these works, originally scored for voice and piano, at the request of Alvina Alvi, a soprano with the St. Petersburg opera. Alvi, with Ravel at the piano, gave the premiere of the songs in June of 1914. Ravel’s rapt and beautiful setting of the Aramaic prayer (“May His great name be exalted and sanctified”) has been arranged for numerous instrumental combinations as well.
daughter, Wanda. Chopin, who gave Wanda piano lessons, hoped that she include the music as part of her practice. In a letter to his friend Tytus Waycicewohski, Chopin was rather dismissive of the work: “Nothing to it but dazzling, for the salon, for the ladies.”

The following year, Chopin composed the Introduction for the Warsaw cellist Józef Kaczyński. When the work was published as Chopin’s Opus 3, the composer dedicated the Introduction et polonaise brillante to the Austrian cellist Joseph Merk, whom he greatly admired. It is not certain whether Chopin or his Vienna publisher added the “brillante” portion of the title.

The slow-tempo (Lento) Introduction opens with a sprightly flourish by the piano, juxtaposed with the cello’s introspective, lyrical response. The cello then sings a beautiful, flowing melody, delicately accompanied by the piano. A closing flourish leads to the polonaise (Allegro con spirito) a vigorous dance in triple meter. To piano accompaniment, the cello introduces the sparkling central polonaise melody. It returns throughout, juxtaposed with various episodes. As both Chopin’s description and the work’s title suggest, there is ample opportunity for virtuoso display by the duo. Three emphatic chords bring the work to a rousing close.

Introduction et polonaise brillante in C Major, Opus 3 (1829–30)

Frédéric Chopin was born in Żelazowa Wola, Poland, on March 1, 1810, and died in Paris, France, on October 17, 1849. Chopin composed the early Introduction et polonaise brillante during two separate periods. The polonaise came first, in 1829, while Chopin was staying the estate of Prince Antoni Radziwiłł, an amateur composer and cellist. Chopin composed the polonaise for Radziwiłł and his daughter, Wanda. Chopin, who gave Wanda piano lessons, hoped that she include the music as part of her practice. In a letter to his friend Tytus Waycicewohski, Chopin was rather dismissive of the work: “Nothing to it but dazzling, for the salon, for the ladies.”

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Olivier Messiaen was born in Avignon, France, on December 10, 1908, and died in Paris, France, on April 27, 1992.

With the outbreak of World War II, French composer Olivier Messiaen enlisted in the army and served as a hospital attendant. In 1940, he was captured and placed in the Götlinger prisoner camp in Silesia. There, Messiaen completed his Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the End of Time) for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. It was in the Götlinger camp that the Quatuor received its first performance, on January 15, 1941, with an audience comprising Messiaen’s fellow prisoners. The performers were Jean Le Boulair, violin, Étienne Pasquier, cello, Henri Akoka, clarinet, and the composer at the piano.

The Quartet’s title is inspired by a from a passage in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 10:

And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud; and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire...and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth...And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer: But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets.

The composer describes the work’s fifth movement, Louange à l’éternité de Jésus (“Praise to the Eternity of Jesus”):

V. Praise to the Eternity of Jesus. Jesus is here considered as one with the Word. A long phrase, infinitely slow, by the cello, expiates with love and reverence on the everlastingness of the Word. Majestically the melody unfolds itself at a distance both intimate and awesome. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Sonata for Cello (Violin) and Piano in A Major (1886) (arr. Jules Delsart)

César Franck was born in Liège, Belgium, on December 10, 1822, and died in Paris, France, on November 8, 1890.

In the final decade or so of his life, César Franck composed numerous masterpieces, including the Piano Quintet in F minor (1879), the Prélude, Choral, and Fugue for solo piano (1884), the Symphonic Variations (1885), and the Symphony in D minor (1888). Perhaps the most beloved work from that period is the Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major. Franck composed the Sonata as a wedding gift for his friend, the legendary Belgian violinist, Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931). Franck presented the Sonata to Ysaÿe in September of 1886, on the morning of the violinist’s wedding. After a quick rehearsal, Ysaÿe and Franck performed the Sonata for the wedding guests.

Three months later in Brussels, on December 16, 1886, Ysaÿe and pianist Marie-Léontine Bordes-Péne gave the Sonata’s public premiere. To this
day, the Franck Sonata in A remains a favorite of the violin-piano repertoire. This concert features an arrangement for cello and piano by the 19th-century cellist Jules Delsart.

I. Allegretto ben Moderato—After a brief, hushed introduction by the piano, the cello sings the opening movement's principal melody; beguiling, and cast in a flowing 9/8 meter that suggests a barcarolle. The melody serves as the basis for rhapsodic statements by the duo, both solo, and in tandem. A forte statement of the melody resolves to a pianissimo whisper.

II. Allegro—The second movement, in stunning contrast to the first, opens with the piano's fiery, virtuoso episode, with brilliant, agitated writing that would be very much at home in a Chopin Scherzo. The tumultuous, chromatic music alternates with more lyric episodes, including hints of the opening movement. The final measures hurtle to a stirring close.

III. Recitativo—Fantasia. Ben Moderato—The third movement opens with a conversation between the piano and cello, by turns passionate and tender. The sense of rapt, affectionate dialogue continues throughout. As the movement approaches its pianissimo resolution, Franck offers echoes of the first movement, as well as premonitions of the finale.

IV. Allegretto poco mosso—The piano launches the finale's principal melody (dolce cantabile), echoed in canon by the cello. Soon the roles are reversed, and the cello initiates the canonic exchange. The finale's wealth of tender lyricism culminates in a glowing restatement of the Sonata's opening melody, leading to the brilliant final bars.