Giovanni Guzzo, violin
Ana-Maria Vera, piano

SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 11 AM
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

NOTES BY KEN MELTZER

EDVARD GRIEG (1843-1907)
Violin Sonata No. 3 in C minor, Opus 45 (1887)
I. Allegro molto ed appassionato
II. Allegretto espressivo alla Romanza
III. Allegro animato

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)
Tzigane, Concert Rhapsody (1924)

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)
Violin Sonata in E-flat Major, Opus 18 (1887-8)
I. Allegro, ma non troppo
II. Improvisation. Andante cantabile
III. Finale. Andante; Allegro
tzige, Concert Rhapsody

Violin Sonata No. 3 in C minor, Opus 45 (1887)

Edvard Grieg was born in Bergen, Norway, on June 15, 1843, and died there on September 4, 1907.

Of the five completed chamber works by Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg, three are sonatas for violin and piano (the remaining two are the 1878 String Quartet, Opus 27, and 1882 Cello Sonata, Opus 36). Grieg composed the first Violin Sonata, in F Major, Opus 8, in 1865. The second, in G Major, Opus 13, followed in 1867. Grieg composed both works in a matter of weeks. Two decades passed before Grieg composed his third, and final, Violin Sonata, Opus 45. In contrast to the speed with which he composed the first two Violin Sonatas, No. 3 occupied Grieg over several months. Perhaps that was due to the ambitions he harbored for the work. In a January 1900 letter to the Norwegian writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Grieg characterized the three Violin Sonatas as: “the first naive, rich in ideas, the second national and the third with a wider horizon.”

Grieg dedicated his Violin Sonata No. 3 to Franz von Lenbach, in gratitude for the German artist’s portraits of Grieg and his wife Nina. The Sonata’s world premiere took place at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, Germany, on December 10, 1887. Grieg was the pianist. The violinist, Adolf Brodsky, had also been the soloist in the December 4, 1881 world premiere in Vienna of the Violin Concerto by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. In gratitude for championing that work, Tchaikovsky dedicated the Concerto to Brodsky.

The Grieg Violin Sonata No. 3 is a work of compelling momentum and expressiveness, couched in a remarkable economy of utterance. Those qualities, coupled with the considerable technical and interpretive challenges for the musicians, have long made the Grieg Violin Sonata No. 3 a favorite among violinists, pianists (among the work’s many recordings is a 1928 RCA release, with Fritz Kreisler and Sergei Rachmaninov), and their appreciative audiences.

I. Allegro molto ed appassionato—The Sonata opens in dramatic fashion, with a bracing exchange between the violin and piano that serves both as the basis for ensuing themes, and the connective tissue between them. The violin introduces a flowing, wide-ranging melody, followed by another, marked cantabile and in E-flat Major. The themes undergo an extensive and wide-ranging development that builds to the powerful start of the recapitulation. A lyrical episode yields to a forceful and brilliant Presto coda.

II. Allegretto espressivo alla Romanza—The piano sings the Romanza’s central melody, in E Major and marked dolce e cantabile. The piano accompanies the violin’s reprise of the melody. The central episode (Allegro molto) is a lively dance in E minor. The flurry of activity abates, leading to a reprise of the opening section (Tempo I) now showcasing the violin’s upper register, culminating in a final breathtaking stratospheric ascent.

III. Allegro animato—The finale is based upon two extended episodes, both of which are repeated in sequence without an intervening development section. In a sense, the finale is a mirror-image of the preceding Romanza. Here, the movement opens with vigorous dance music (Allegro animato, C minor). The lyrical cantabile episode, in A-flat Major, follows. After a varied reprise of the two sections, a breathless Prestissimo coda brings the Sonata to a fiery conclusion.

Tzigane, Concert Rhapsody (1924)

Maurice Ravel was born in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France, on March 7, 1875 and died in Paris, France, on December 28, 1937. The first performance of Tzigane took place at Aeolian Hall in London, England, on April 26, 1924 with Jelly d’Arányi as violin soloist.

Approx. performance time: 10 mins.

SMF performance history: SMF premiere

Maurice Ravel wrote his showpiece, Tzigane, Concert Rhapsody, for the Hungarian-born violinist Jelly d’Arányi (1895-1966), the grandniece of the legendary Austro-Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim. D’Arányi was a famous virtuoso in her own right who inspired works by such composers as Béla Bartók and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Ravel first met d’Arányi in Paris in April of 1922 when she performed one of the compositions written for her, the Bartók First Violin Sonata, accompanied at the piano by the Hungarian composer. Three months later, Ravel encountered d’Arányi once again in London. After playing a concert, d’Arányi bewitched Ravel for several hours with numerous gypsy melodies. This experience provided Ravel with the initial inspiration for Tzigane (i.e., the French word for “Gypsy”).

However, two years would pass before the work came to fruition. Ravel had promised d’Arányi that he would compose a violin sonata for her to perform in London in April of 1924. After failing to make adequate progress, Ravel informed d’Arányi: “I am writing (Tzigane) especially for you, which will be dedicated to you and which will replace in the London programme the sonata which I have temporarily abandoned.”

In preparation for Tzigane, Ravel asked his publisher to send him the scores of the Franz Liszt Hungarian Rhapsodies. The composer also invited his friend, violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, to his home: “Come quickly with your violin and the twenty-four Caprices by Paganini.” The Twenty-Four Caprices, Opus 1 (ca. 1805), by the Italian virtuoso Niccolò Paganini, have long been considered among the most technically demanding of all works for solo violin.

Jourdan-Morhange recalled that Ravel “thought Paganini might be able to suggest to him some unsuspected obstacles, but I can say Ravel was the more devilish of the two!”

Ravel completed Tzigane only two days before the work’s premiere. Despite the almost impossibly brief preparation time for a work
Violin Sonata in E-flat Major, Opus 18 (1887-8)

Richard Strauss was born in Munich, Germany, on June 11, 1864 and died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, on September 8, 1949.

Richard Strauss composed his Sonata for Violin and Piano in E-flat Major, Opus 18, during the years 1887-8. It was a significant and pivotal time in the young composer/conductor’s life and musical journey. Strauss was then an assistant conductor at the Munich Opera, a position that brought him at least as much frustration as fulfillment. On the other hand, it was during this period that Strauss met and fell in love with soprano Pauline de Ahna (1863-1950). The two wed on September 10, 1894. During their courtship and marriage, Pauline was an inspiration for many of Richard Strauss’s finest compositions. Richard and Pauline Strauss remained married until the composer’s death, which occurred two days before the couple’s 55th wedding anniversary. Pauline died eight months later.

Strauss was a prolific composer in his early years. During that time, he explored genres that had been embraced by such late-Classical and Romantic-era predecessors as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms. These included numerous chamber works, concertos, and symphonies. But as the 1880s drew to a close, Strauss found himself ever more drawn to forms of musical expression that embraced a specific narrative. On August 24, 1888, Strauss wrote to his mentor, the conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow:

If one wishes to create a work of art consistent in mood and structure, if such a work is to give the listener a plastic impression, then what the author wanted to say must have been formed plastically in his own mind. That is only possible through the fructification by a poetic idea, whether or not the program is furnished along with the composition.

A year earlier, Strauss’s orchestral tone poem, Aus Italien, Opus 16 (1886), a reflection of the composer’s travels to Italy, had an unsuccessful premiere in Munich. But on November 11, 1889, Strauss’s tone poem Don Juan received its triumphant first performance in Weimar, conducted by the composer. From then on, Strauss became recognized and celebrated as a master of narrative works, including orchestral tone poems, operas, and songs (Strauss had composed many songs during his early years as well).

The Violin Sonata received its premiere in Elberfeld, Germany, on October 3, 1888, performed by violinist Robert Heckmann and Julius Buths, pianist. Unlike such programmatic works as Don Juan, the Violin Sonata does not embrace and advance a narrative. And, it incorporates musical structures familiar to Strauss’s predecessors. But the voice of the Strauss Violin Sonata is clearly that of the composer who would soon dazzle the world as one of the greatest musical storytellers.

I. Allegro, ma non troppo—The piano’s bold introduction provides the motivic foundation for the violin’s extended presentation of the Sonata’s first principal theme. A lyrical theme, marked espressivo, and a stratospheric appassionato episode in 3/4 time, conclude the presentation of the movement’s central thematic material. An extended and varied development of the themes ensues. The violin’s recapitulation of the opening theme is (unlike its initial appearance) now subdued. The remaining themes follow, leading to the closing measures predominated by the opening melody, and capped by a pair of emphatic chords.

II. Improvisation. Andante cantabile—Strauss completed the Sonata’s slow-tempo movement last. It was also published as a separate work.

Entitled an Improvisation, the movement is, in truth, cast in traditional A—B—A structure. The violin immediately sings the beautiful principal melody, very much in the tradition of Felix Mendelssohn’s Songs Without Words. The Improvisation’s “B” section, marked appassionato, provides dramatic contrast, as the piano recreates the stormy nocturnal ride depicted in Franz Schubert’s 1815 song, Erlkönig. A wistful reprise of the opening section brings the Improvisation to a delicate close.

III. Finale. Andante; Allegro—The third movement opens with a hushed, slow-tempo introduction (Andante), in C minor. Suddenly, the piano introduces the vaulting, energico principal theme, in E-flat Major, and very much in the spirit of such works as Don Juan, and the opera Der Rosenkavalier (1911). As in the opening movement, contrasting themes soon follow, along with the traditional development and recapitulation. A Finale notable for its high spirits and virtuoso writing for both instruments sprints to the joyous final bars.