Passacaglia
From Harpsichord Suite No. 7 in G Minor
Arr. for violin and viola, or violin and cello, by Johan Halvorsen [1864–1935]
George Frideric Handel [1685–1759]

The exact date of composition is unknown, but the keyboard suite was published in 1720; Halvorsen published his arrangement in 1894.

Renowned throughout Europe as a virtuoso keyboardist (both organ and harpsichord), George Frideric Handel was recognized for his brilliant improvisations. His contemporary composers Thomas Arne and Michael Festing declared that “neither themselves, nor any one else of their acquaintance, had ever before heard such extempore, or such premeditated playing, on that or any other instrument.” And that ubiquitous observer of eighteenth-century European music Charles Burney said that Handel’s performance on the harpsichord was “so smooth, and the tone of the instrument so much cherished, that his fingers seemed to grow to the keys.”

In addition to improvising, Handel also set down in manuscript innumerable works for harpsichord—suites of dances being his particular specialty. All the dance forms of his day are found in these suites, from hornpipes to sarabandes, gigue to minuets. Many of Handel’s suites contain a passacaglia movement—or, as he more commonly titled it, a “chaconne”. He, like many of his contemporaries, tended to use the terms interchangeably, even though technically speaking there are differences between them.

Both the passacaglia and the chaconne are thought to derive from dance forms—the passacaglia probably originated in a Spanish street dance, and the chaconne in a wild Mexican dance brought to Europe by the Spaniards. As used by such composers as Bach, Couperin, Handel, and many others of the Baroque era, the passacaglia and the chaconne feature a repeating theme in continual variations, all proceeding at a moderately slow pace, with a correspondingly static motion of harmonic material.

In the case of Handel’s Suite No. 7 in G Minor, the passacaglia comprises eight chords that he repeats and varies with ingenious resourcefulness. The complexity of the variations contrasts sharply with the simplicity of the melodic kernel.

The Norwegian violinist, conductor, and composer, Johan Halvorsen, was concertmaster of the Bergen, Norway, symphony orchestra. Married to a niece of Edvard Grieg, and influenced by his illustrious in-law, Halvorsen composed three symphonies, orchestral suites on Norwegian themes, and a violin concerto. In 1894, he published his virtuoso arrangement of Handel’s Passacaglia, adapting Handel’s keyboard material to the stringed instruments, and adding material and variations of his own for extra fireworks.
Trio in G Major, Op. 9 No. 1
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)


When Beethoven arrived in Vienna from Bonn in the early 1790s, he possessed youthful energy and vivacity. Known in his first years as a virtuoso pianist with formidable talents for improvising, Beethoven was a sociable young man who got around easily in Vienna’s musical circles. His involvement with Vienna’s finest musicians evolved quickly and naturally.

One of his earliest acquaintances was the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776–1830), with whom he maintained a devoted friendship until Beethoven’s death more than thirty years later. As principal violinist of Count Razumovsky’s house quartet, a member of other ensembles, and as a musical impresario, Schuppanzigh occupied a central position in Vienna’s musical life. As was his habit with close friends, Beethoven took the liberty of choosing affectionate nicknames for Schuppanzigh, addressing the rotund violinist as “Falstaff” and “Sowbelly.”

At this same time, under the influence of his sometime teacher Josef Haydn, Beethoven began his first compositions for string ensemble, producing a string trio and a string quintet, both in E-flat major, and a string trio serenade (Op. 8), which was published in 1797. During the same period Beethoven composed the three string trios of Opus 9, in G major, D major, and C minor. Although he ultimately became noted for his string quartets, Beethoven considered the string trio a demanding and gratifying musical challenge, worthy of publishing as a declaration of his arrival as a composer.

The Opus 9 string trios were first performed by Schuppanzigh along with two other members of the Lichnowsky Quartet at private musicales in Vienna. Later, when he organized public chamber music concerts, Schuppanzigh included the Opus 9 works on those programs.

At the time of publication, in 1798, Beethoven inscribed the title page with an elaborate dedication to one of his principal patrons, Count Johann Georg von Browne-Camus (1767–1827). Beethoven’s flowery French phrases translates as: “Sir: The author, filled with gratitude for your generosity, as tactful as it is magnanimous, is glad to be able to express his gratitude in public by dedicating this work to you. Even if the works of art which enjoy the honor of your understanding patronage were less the product of the inspiration of genius than the composer’s intention to give of his best, he would still have the greatest satisfaction in offering the best of his works to the first patron of his muse.” The Count, of Irish heritage and with a high-ranking commission in the Russian army, lived a lavish life in Vienna, where he and his wife patronized the musical arts and particularly favored Beethoven. Browne was known to be quite eccentric. Beethoven nonetheless dedicated to Browne, and to Browne’s wife, Countess Anna Margareta von Browne, several of his piano and chamber music works.

The stately Adagio provides a prelude not only to the opening movement of the G-major trio, but also to the entire set of three. After the raising of the curtain, the brisk Allegro sets off with carefree good humor. By contrast, the Adagio sets a mood of tender contemplation. The light and witty Scherzo includes a trio that flirts with several quick changes of key before returning to its bright C-major conclusion. The trio ends with a vivacious Presto in rondo form.
Piano Quartet in G Minor, Op. 25
Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Composed between 1855–61 and published in 1863. Clara Schumann gave the first performance in November 1861; the official premiere took place in Vienna on November 16, 1862, in a performance by Brahms and the Hellmesberger Quartet.

Brahms began work on two piano quartets, along with the Handel Variations for Piano (which he would dedicate to Clara Schumann), during an 1861 summer stay near his home city of Hamburg. As he did so frequently, he sought Clara’s reaction to the quartets by sending her parts of both. Although she at first expressed puzzlement about its structure, she gladly gave the first public performance of the G-minor quartet that fall in a concert in Hamburg.

The work served Brahms as a musical calling card in Vienna in November 1862. In spite of vicious stage fright that always seized him in public concerts, Brahms scheduled himself to play the piano part with members of the Hellmesberger Quartet, Vienna’s most eminent chamber ensemble. Its leader, Josef Hellmesberger, had the arrogant air of a man who knew his place: concertmaster of the city’s Philharmonic Orchestra, son of a famous violinist father (who had taught Joachim), and center of Vienna’s unofficial music power structure. Following the first rehearsal with Hellmesberger’s musicians, the violinist excitedly proclaimed Brahms the true “heir to Beethoven.”

The official premiere took place at the Vereinsaal of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, no less. Drawn by the advance praise that Robert Schumann had lavished upon Brahms in his famous essay "Neue Bahnen" [New Roads] nine years earlier, music lovers filled the prestigious hall, curious no doubt finally to see this god-like creature. Brahms surely felt enormous pressure. To his relief, enthusiastic audience response to the quartet erupted at the conclusion of the finale, when the Rondo alla Zingarese lifted them, cheering, from their seats.

The G-minor quartet opens with an “unorthodox” Allegro movement—unorthodox, that is, for people like Clara Schumann who expected a plain vanilla sonata form. In it Brahms introduces two very different subjects—the first a wandering legato melody in G minor, and the second some sweetly voiced major chords in the piano treble—both of which he manipulates in a balanced development of the intertwined materials throughout an expansive and dramatic first movement.

In what he originally called a Scherzo, Brahms created a gently lilting Intermezzo. Muted strings introduce the opening section and accompany the piano’s entrance. The dancing second theme enlivens the pace and affords some drama. The central Trio, with rhythmic remnants of the Intermezzo’s first part, sparkles briefly before its return to the opening material and the lilting theme. The Intermezzo concludes with a short, florid piano coda.

The lyrical persuasion of the third movement, with its regal bearing, is interrupted by a delicate little “march”—or so it seems, with its dotted rhythms—in 3/4 time that briefly loses its delicacy in a ff outburst. The movement concludes with a resumption of the grand lyricism of the opening and a quiet benediction.

The Rondo in Gypsy Style uses four separate themes, all integrated into swirls of the Hungarian dance spirit that Brahms knew so well. Except for the melancholy fourth theme, which recalls the soulful gypsy fiddling that Brahms especially admired, the movement flashes by, accelerating to Molto presto at its brilliant conclusion.