**Coriolan Overture, opus 62**  
Ludwig van Beethoven  
(b. 1770, Bonn, Germany; d. 1827, Vienna Austria)

One of Shakespeare's most powerful tragedies is *Coriolanus*, the story (drawn from Plutarch's *Lives*) of a patrician Roman general destroyed by his overweening pride. After a decisive victory over the Volscians, Coriolanus refuses the consulship of Rome because it requires him to humble himself before the plebians or commoners; enraged at his arrogance, the people drive him into exile. But the willful general seeks revenge: he defects to his former enemies, the Volscians, and leads them against Rome. He battles his way to the very gates of Rome, where his compatriots send delegation after delegation asking him to spare his own city. When the stiff-necked warrior remains obdurate, his wife, mother, and son go out to plead with him, and he finally relents. Furious at his betrayal, the Volscians put him to death.

Although Beethoven considered himself a republican and the foe of tyrants, he must have found many points in common between himself and this haughty Roman. He, too, possessed an iron will and, convinced of his genius, would not bend his neck even to princes. And he had practical reasons for creating an overture on this subject. In 1807, the composer was currying favor with the Viennese poet-playwright Heinrich von Collin, who was influential at Vienna's Imperial Theatre and who had written his own version of the Coriolanus tragedy five years earlier. Seeking a steady source of income, Beethoven wanted to secure a contract with the Theatre to write an opera annually for production there; he also hoped Collin would collaborate as his librettist. Though neither of these goals was realized, one of Beethoven's greatest overtures, the tensely dramatic *Coriolan*, was born. It introduced Collin's play at a performance on April 24, 1807.

A taut sonata form, the *Coriolan* Overture musically describes the full tragedy in just eight minutes. It is cast in a significant key for Beethoven: C minor, which Michael Steinberg calls his "clenched-fist" key; it also colored other heroic works, notably his Fifth Symphony. Three massive C's exploding into violent chords open the piece; they are separated by dramatic pauses, which will be an important element throughout. Here is a titanic yet concise portrait of a hero ruled by will and rage. Coriolanus' restless temperament is further delineated by the fitful, ever-modulating principal theme that follows. In utter contrast is the lovely, flowing second theme, representing the feminine pleas of the warrior's wife and mother. When the massive C's return for the third and final time, Beethoven foretells the hero's fate. Coriolanus' music suddenly disintegrates into the silence of death, ending with three almost inaudible plucked C's.

**Introduction and Rondo capriccioso, opus 28**  
Camille Saint-Saëns  
(b. 1835, Paris, France; d. 1921, Algiers, Algeria)

Over the course of his long (he lived to be 86) and prolific life, Camille Saint-Saëns became the dominant figure in French music during the late Romantic age and developed a conservative style and taste that made success harder for his more progressive colleagues. But when he composed his *Introduction and Rondo capriccioso* for violin and orchestra in 1863, he was only 27 and still struggling to win his own place in Parisian
concert life. Interestingly, his friend and fellow striver then was Georges Bizet; the two young composers cheered each other on, and Bizet even made a piano transcription of the *Introduction and Rondo* to sell to non-virtuosos playing at home.

The extraordinary young Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate was another friend of Saint-Saëns, and his special qualities as a virtuoso shaped the way the composer would write for this instrument. Sarasate’s tone was not large, but it was pure and brilliant, and his intonation was unerring. None other than George Bernard Shaw (a music critic in his early career) described him bluntly: “He never interprets anything; he plays it beautifully, and that is all. He is always alert, swift, clear, refined, certain, scrupulously attentive, and quite unaffected.”

Therefore, in composing the *Introduction and Rondo* for him, Saint-Saëns emphasized clarity of sound and de-emphasized the orchestral part to allow the violinist’s smallish tone to dominate. He also concocted melodies and rhythms with a slightly Spanish flavor to salute the violinist’s homeland. Years later as their friendship continued, Saint-Saëns created a full-length concerto for the Spaniard: the sumptuously beautiful Third Violin Concerto.

Not initially a success with French audiences, the *Introduction and Rondo* has now become one of the most beloved of all virtuoso violin showpieces. Scholar Michael Stegemann suggests that it is actually an instrumental adaptation of the standard formula for a French operatic aria in the middle 19th century: a slow-tempo *arioso* or recitative followed by a fast brilliant aria. In a slow introductory section, the violinist unfurls a soulful melody in A minor. Then the music snaps into a lively *Allegro* for the rondo itself. Linked together by the puckish rondo theme that the soloist introduces at the beginning, it boasts a variety of infectiously tuneful episodes, some suggesting Spanish dance, others exploiting the violin’s capacity for tender, heart-on-sleeve singing. The faster closing coda finally carries the music into the brighter key of A major.

**Zigeunerweisen (Gypsy Airs)**
Pablo de Sarasate  
(b. 1844, Pamplona, Spain; d. 1908, Biarritz, France)

The legendary Spanish violin virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate composed *Zigeunerweisen*, one of the most popular of all violin showpieces, to display his own unsurpassed mastery of the instrument. His prodigious talent revealed itself early, and at age 12, he was sent to Paris, with the assistance of Spain's Queen Isabella, to study at the Conservatoire. He became renowned for the elegance of his playing and the beauty of his tone. Violinist Leopold Auer described it as “a tone of supreme singing quality,” while the conductor Hans von Bülow remembered his “seductive speaking on the violin.” His intonation was considered perfect, and his ease in all registers of the violin — but especially in its hazardous upper reaches — miraculous.

Not content with being a traveling virtuoso, Sarasate also turned his hand to composing. Today he is best known for his *Carmen Fantasy*, based on themes from Bizet's opera, and for *Zigeunerweisen* or "Gypsy Airs" (1878). Unlike the *Carmen Fantasy*, there is nothing Spanish about the gypsy music evoked in *Zigeunerweisen*; rather, as its German title suggests, it celebrates the gypsy-violin tradition of Eastern Europe, in the manner of Liszt's and Brahms Hungarian rhapsodies.
Following a brief introduction, the music unfolds in two contrasting sections. The first is slow and smoldering in temperament. Over a dragging 4/4 beat, the violinist delivers elaborately embellished melodies featuring big melodic skips and many passages at the extreme top of the range to show off Sarasate's own remarkable technique. Finally, these embers blaze forth in a gypsy dance of high-speed pyrotechnics that tests the player's agility and accuracy to the max.

**Symphony No. 7 in A Major, opus 92**
Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is one of the most extraordinary expressions of physical energy and joy in symphonic music. Completed in 1812, the Seventh, in the words of Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon, “transports us into a sphere of laughter, play, and the exuberant release of bound energy.” This is a work without a shadow or a solemn thought or even a true slow movement — its well-loved Allegretto second movement only seems slow in comparison to its hyperkinetic companions. In any other hands, such unrelieved happiness might produce a feeling of triviality or monotony, but Beethoven instead shows us the dynamic variety of joy.

In an oft-quoted aphorism, composer Richard Wagner called the Seventh “the apotheosis of the dance,” a phrase more impressive than illuminating, for no movement here could be construed as a dance, except in the most abstract sense. More accurately, we might call this symphony “the apotheosis of rhythm.” Throughout Beethoven's music, themes are as much characterized by their rhythmic patterns as by their melodic shapes or harmonic coloring. Here rhythm is the prime building block: the first, second, and fourth movements are all generated by one obsessive rhythmic figure announced at the opening; the third-movement scherzo has two such figures. Beethoven wields these rhythms with a display of unbridled energy and exuberance that shocked many of the Seventh's first listeners. Hearing the work at an early performance in conservative Leipzig, Friedrich Wieck, father of Clara Schumann, stated that Beethoven must have written it “in a drunken fury”!

The Seventh was introduced to the world at a spectacular celebrity-studded concert on December 8, 1813 at the University of Vienna that was the most successful of Beethoven's career. Organized by Beethoven's friend Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, the inventor of the metronome, it was a benefit concert to raise money for soldiers wounded at the recent Napoleonic battle of Hanau. Both performers and audience were in high spirits for by this time it was clear that Napoleon's days were numbered. For the occasion, Beethoven had written one of his most notorious compositions, Wellington's Victory: a military extravaganza calling for vast troops of musicians and a huge percussion battery, manned by such luminaries as opera composer Giacomo Meyerbeer and piano virtuoso Ignaz Moscheles. In one of his last appearances as a conductor, Beethoven led the proceedings, but his deafness severely hampered his effectiveness. It is amazing the Seventh Symphony was even noticed in this circus atmosphere, but indeed it was warmly received and the audience demanded an encore of the second movement.

The **first movement** begins with a slow introduction — the biggest Beethoven ever wrote. Its expansive dimensions, accentuated by majestic rising scales, allows for two lyrical interludes — led first by oboes, then by the flute — which carry the music to
keys remote from the A-major home base. It is linked to the main *Vivace* section by the playful evolution of the galloping dotted rhythm that drives the rest of the movement. Late in its course, listen for the remarkable passage in which the low strings mutter a twisting dissonant motive — like an evil worm corrupting the tranquil, sustained harmony above.

Another persistent rhythmic pattern propels the beloved **second movement**: a gentle march beat of long-short-short-long-long. Beethoven lets its wonderful theme gradually unfurl: first the bare-bones tune in low strings, then the stately march melody above, accompanied by graceful countermelodies. The form is one of Beethoven's own devising: part rondo, part theme-and-variations. And in a later return of the march theme, it evolves into a cunning fugue as well.

**Movement three** is Beethoven's most ebullient and propulsive scherzo, powered by the relentless chugging of quarter notes in a frenzied *Presto* tempo. Providing utmost contrast, the trio section, dominated by woodwinds, is smoothly lyrical over a sustained pedal note. In a favorite trick, also used in his Fourth Symphony, Beethoven runs around the scherzo-trio track three times, though as the trio begins its third reprise, it falters harmonically and is roughly dismissed.

The **finale** is a fierce dance of triumph. Again a rhythmic motive starts the action: a cannon-boom followed by a three-note rat-ta-tat rifle response. This wild and surging music has a pronounced military flavor suited to its era. In fact, we hear a theme of swaggering martial gait early on, and in the coda the trumpets carry it to a ringing affirmation. Here, Beethoven joyfully trounces Napoleon and all the enemies of humankind.

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