By Noel Morris ©2026

BACH Chaconne from Partita No. 2, BWV 1004

“The Chaconne is for me one of the most wonderful, incomprehensible pieces of music. On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and the most powerful feelings.”

—Johannes Brahms

Words almost always seem inadequate for the Bach Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin. Serious violin students start making their way through this repertoire, once they’ve mastered some basics. Gradually, they start to tackle the more technically demanding movements, until they’ve gotten all of Bach’s music for unaccompanied violin under their fingers. But take note: that doesn’t mean these works are simple, psychologically speaking — quite the opposite. The greatest violinists return to Bach again and again, like a morning cup of coffee. These works are at once colossal and intimate. As players mature, they find that Bach nudges them to look ever inward. And within that realm, many describe the Chaconne from the Partita No. 2 as the most wondrous and incomprehensible of them all.

More than any other single musical composition, Bach’s 15-minute Chaconne inspires people to make comparisons to the heights of human achievement.

In 1720, Johann Sebastian Bach worked for a music-loving Calvinist, a prince who observed strict prohibitions on music in the church. Without a church choir at the ready, Bach wrote much of his instrumental music, including his works for unaccompanied violin.

That spring, he joined a retinue that followed the boss, Prince Leopold, to the spa town of Carlsbad. Tragically, when Bach returned home, he learned his wife had died, and he found his seven children without a mother. Out of that experience, he wrote his Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin.

The partitas are dance suites, which refashion popular dances into concert works. The Chaconne uses a four-bar theme followed by 64 variations that urge the artist to sculpt a different world for each variation. Technique-wise, the player must create the illusion of seamless polyphony (multiple voices), navigating transitions within the harmonies while shaping the overall arc of the piece to deliver us to the trailhead — the opening music — with our souls filled with wonder.

BEETHOVEN Piano Concerto No. 3

In early 1803, Beethoven's friend Emanuel Schikaneder appointed him composer at the new Theater an der Wien and gave him an apartment on the property. Living rent-free, Beethoven produced reams of music that year. In early 1803, he wrote the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives* and the famous *Kreutzer* Sonata.

In the spring, Ludwig van Beethoven put together a public concert for "his own benefit," assembling a ragtag orchestra and chorus (the city's top musicians were playing another event). Starting at 8:00 AM, Beethoven drilled the musicians for a grueling ten-hour rehearsal that ended just before the doors opened. That night, he presented his Symphony No. 1, plus three world premieres: the Symphony No. 2, the new oratorio, and the Third Piano Concerto. Beethoven himself played the solo piano part during the concerto. His page-turner, one Ignaz von Seyfried, gave an eyewitness account.

"I saw almost nothing but empty leaves," wrote Seyfried, "At the most, on one page or another, a few Egyptian hieroglyphs, wholly unintelligible to me, were scribbled down to serve as clues for him; for he played nearly all of the solo part from memory since, as was so often the case, he had not had time to set it all down on paper. He gave me a secret glance whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages, and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly. And he laughed heartily during the jovial supper which we ate afterward."

PROKOFIEV Symphony No. 4

"In several places in the Symphony, I used music that was included in the ballet *Prodigal Son*," wrote Sergei Prokofiev. "But this does not mean that the Symphony was written from material from *Prodigal Son*, or that *Prodigal Son* was written from material from the Symphony. In the Symphony, I had the opportunity to develop symphonically what the form of a ballet would not permit. You can find precedents for such an approach in Beethoven, in his ballet *Prometheus* and in his Third Symphony. This should be indicated with as much precision as possible in the program, since a lack of caution in the writing of program notes can give rise to various unnecessary judgments in the press after the performance."

Sergei Prokofiev's Fourth Symphony is a rarity in the concert hall. He started it in 1929, as he composed his ballet *The Prodigal Son* for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris. Prokofiev was well into weaving the ballet's ideas into symphonic form when Serge Koussevitzky offered a commission for a new symphony for Boston. The composer balked at the $1000 offer and agreed to give the Boston Symphony the first performance of the Fourth, but withheld credit for the commission. Koussevitzky conducted the premiere in November 1930 to celebrate the orchestra's 50th anniversary. But while *The Prodigal Son* had been a big success, its "half brother," the Fourth Symphony, was not.

Prokofiev was in the midst of a stylistic change — he went from being part of the Russian avant-garde to embracing what he called a “new simplicity.” He would soon write many of his greatest hits. But the Fourth Symphony lingered in his mind as something imperfect and unfinished until 1947, when he rewrote much of the piece.

Originally, he used the same orchestral forces as *The Prodigal Son* (based on the biblical tale). In 1947, he expanded the symphony by another sixteen minutes. He added piano, harp, and a battery of percussion instruments to bring it stylistically in line with his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. Sadly, in early 1948, Soviet propagandists condemned and banned Prokofiev’s music, and the revised Fourth Symphony wasn’t performed in Russia until 1957, four years after the composer’s death.