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Debut Atlantic 2026 Program Notes

Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata in C-sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2 (“Moonlight”)

Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in C-sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2 is among the most recognizable works in the piano repertoire. Universally known as the “Moonlight” sonata, this title was not Beethoven’s own; it originated several years after the composer’s death when the German poet and critic Ludwig Rellstab compared the opening movement to moonlight reflected on a lake.

Beethoven subtitled the work *Sonata quasi una fantasia* (“sonata in the manner of a fantasy”), signaling his departure from conventional Classical forms. Rather than opening with a fast movement, the sonata begins *Adagio sostenuto*, creating a mysterious atmosphere with a haunting melody over a gentle triplet accompaniment. The brief second movement serves as an interlude, as Beethoven described it as a flower between two abysses. The sonata culminates in the turbulent *Presto agitato*, a finale full of frenzy and tempestuousness.

Robert Schumann - Fantasiestücke, Op. 12

The eight *Fantasiestücke* (“Fantasy Pieces”) were composed in 1837 during a period marked by both artistic inspiration and personal turmoil. Schumann was in love with Clara Wieck, but her father forbade them to marry for many years, so Robert’s compositions were one means of expressing his emotions for her.

The title was inspired by the writings of the German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose imaginative stories and fantasies fascinated Schumann. Throughout the set, Schumann’s distinctive musical personalities—his impetuous alter ego Florestan and the reflective Eusebius—seem to converse with one another. Like literary character sketches, the eight pieces present a succession of contrasting moods, ranging from dreamlike states to passionate outbursts. The setting of these pieces revolve around the night, such as the tranquil opening *Des Abends* (Evening), the contemplative *Warum?* (Why?), the fervent *In Der Nacht* (In the night), and the capricious *Traumes Wirren* (Dream’s confusion).

Although each movement can stand independently, the *Fantasiestücke* form a carefully crafted narrative full of emotional intensity, fantasy, intimate lyricism, and humour. Clara often performed the *Fantasiestücke* in her recitals.

Schubert-Liszt - Erlkönig (5:00)

Erlkönig (The Elf King) was composed when Schubert was only 17 and published as his Op. 1. Schubert took the epic German poem by Goethe, derived from a night ride undertaken by Goethe himself in 1779, and set this to music. The energy of the ride is conveyed in the battery of octaves that pulse throughout. This acts as a dramatic foil to the four distinct voices heard within the poem: the narrator, the boy, the father, and the voice of the Elf King himself.

By adapting Schubert's vocal music for piano, Liszt created new techniques and gave pianists and audiences a transformative experience, building on their knowledge of the original song. Liszt does not copy the exact source note-for-note, but in this case instead takes the spirit of the melody and accompaniment in its original form before building upon it. He heightens the emotional and dramatic nature of the piece especially at the end, the pace 'il piu presto possibile' (as fast as possible) – marked 'sempre tumultuoso' (continuously tumultuous) – at the deafening level of triple forte.

The characterisations of the Erlkönig as alluring and dangerous, and the wasting away of the ill-fated child, are highlights of Schubert's setting; Liszt takes these images and renders them in even more colourful, dramatic terms in his own transcription.

Marc-André Hamelin - Étude No. 8 in B-flat minor 'Erlkönig, after Goethe' (4:30) *

"It should be said straight away that this etude has nothing to do musically with the Schubert song of the same name. However, they have a common source, which happens to be one of the most masterful poems in the entire German literature. My piece is basically a faithful setting of it, adhering as closely to the poem as any vocal setting would, the only difference being that I repeated the first four lines for musical reasons.

As novel as the idea might seem to most, this is not the first time that Goethe's poem has been given a non-vocal setting. As far as I know, that distinction belongs to Alexis Hollaender who, sometime during the first decade of the 20th century, fashioned a piece for left hand alone that also adheres to the text. It was Hollaender's piece that started me thinking along the lines of using the poem for an etude, though the seed may have been planted many, many years earlier when, while still at school, I came across a quotation of Johann Friedrich Reichardt's vocal setting in Donald Jay Grout's *A History of Western Music*; I remember then being struck by how strikingly different an approach Reichardt had adopted from the one all of us are now used to. Other settings from the same period include those of Loewe, Spohr, and Zelter."

-Marc-André Hamelin

Johannes Brahms - Piano Sonata No.3 in F minor, Op.5 (35:00)

Brahms was only 20 years old in 1853 when he completed the Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, the largest and most ambitious of his three piano sonatas. Written shortly before his celebrated introduction to Robert and Clara Schumann, this work was pivotal in establishing Brahms as a major emerging voice in German music. Spanning five movements and nearly forty minutes, the sonata combines youthful tenacity together with remarkable compositional mastery for the young composer. This kind of work is what set him apart from his contemporaries: critics and other musicians in his day recognized something very special in young Brahms, evident in this momentous piece.

The opening movement unfolds on a symphonic scale, balancing dramatic power with lyrical warmth over an underlying Beethovenian-like fate motif. A tender second movement bears an

inscription adapted from a poem by Otto Julius Inkermann: “The evening falls, the moonlight shines; two hearts united in love embrace each other in bliss.” Fans of Felix Mendelssohn might recognize that the energetic third movement Scherzo shares a similar tune as the finale of Mendelssohn’s Piano Trio No.2 in C minor. The mysterious fate motif returns in the Intermezzo along with dark and moody sounds that could anticipate the harmonic soundworld of Debussy. The sonata concludes with a sweeping Finale, a triumphant and compelling ending for what will be his final piano sonata.