Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 147 - Dimitri Shostakovich

1. Moderato
2. Allegretto
3. Adagio

Shostakovich’s Viola Sonata is notable for being the final composition he completed before his death from cancer in 1975 - slightly over 40 years ago, which in the world of music is considered fairly recently -, and is effectively his final testament to the world. The piece itself is uncompromisingly bleak, and it is nigh impossible to avoid associating it with his torturous existence - he lived in terror of death under Stalin, dealt with frequent illnesses and had a turbulent personal life. The sonata is the culmination of all these experiences, a meditation on futility and mortality.

Across the three movements, Shostakovich seemingly traverses the gamut of emotions associated with death and grief, with the first movement timid and fearful, interspersed with bouts of wild rage. The second movement takes the form of a macabre dance, interrupted by a section of solemnity, as though one were sobering up from the whirlwind dance to reality. The final Adagio is mournful and resigned; the movement lifts its main motif from Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata, recalling the sorrow of the piece and aligning Shostakovich’s struggles with that of Beethoven’s. But for all the forlornness, the final lines of the piece are serene, as though in one’s death throes one has found acceptance of all that has come to past, painful as it may be. Peace and rest, at last.

Viola Sonata in B-flat major, Op. 36 - Henri Vieuxtemps

1. Maestoso - Allegro
2. Barcarolla: Andante con moto
3. Finale Scherzando: Allegretto

In contrast to the weight carried by Shostakovich’s sonata, Vieuxtemps’ is lively and light-footed. Composed in 1860, it is one of few pieces in viola repertoire that was birthed during the Romantic period, and it certainly reflects the trends of that era, with heightened melodrama and rich harmonies. As a Belgian, Vieuxtemps exists in the middle ground between two very different styles of music; the graceful French, and the broader, more masculine German, both of which are seamlessly woven into the Sonata.

The best representation of all these qualities is the first movement, from the deep broad strokes of its opening to the lyrical lines and colourful running passages that weave in and out of the piano, to the burning, intense finale. The second movement is akin to an aria, an evocative, melanchoic, theatrical soliloquy. Its subtitle ‘Barcarolla’ literally translates to ‘boat’ and evokes the constant thump of a gandolier’s stroke and the waves. The rolicking scherzando, the last
movement, alternates between quiet, graceful passages and bursts of intensity - as though expanding and blooming to life - before hurtling to a triumphant ending.