Johann Sebastian Bach Suite No5 Prelude for cello solo (arr for viola)

In this suite we’re told to retune the cello (called scordatura), specifically, to bring the pitch of our A string (the highest string on the instrument) down one whole step, to a G, giving us these open strings: G-D-G-C. This tuning causes the cello to vibrate and resonate quite differently from the way it does with the normal A-D-G-C setup; one can pretty easily detect the dark pureness this arrangement provides. In general, the scordatura tuning presents significant challenges to the performer – all notes played on the A string must be fingered one step higher than normal. In the score Bach handles this by notating each and every pitch played on the A string– now the “upper” G string - one step higher than the actual pitch, so that, when fingered on the retuned string, we hear the proper pitches. But this can be mighty confusing and disorienting to the performers’ trained ears!

This Prelude is actually a prelude and fugue; the opening prelude is grand and slow, beginning with a deep and rich octave C (which features the low open C string of the cello) and takes us, French overture style (a prolific use of dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythms), on a harmonically rich and tonally resonant journey to a half cadence, leading directly into the fugue. We experience a strong sense of improvisatory writing here – sweeping scale figures lead to rich chords, and dotted rhythms take us through an always interesting array of harmonies.

The fugue – the only one in the cello suites (as opposed to three fugues in Bach’s unaccompanied works for violin, one in each sonata) - is remarkable in that, even though it’s written in multiple voices, it contains very few chords: harmony and multiple voicing is, for the most part, implied, but noticeable just the same due to Bach’s remarkable gift for creating expectation and a certain sense of inevitability in voicing. In other words, he sets up the progression of the music so that our brains capture the sense of the harmony and multiple voicing, even though throughout most of this fugue Bach has written only one musical line at any given time.

Franz Schubert sonata “Arpeggione” (arr for viola)

The, Sonata for Arpeggione and Piano in A major 821, was written by Fran’s Schubert in Vienna in November 1824. The sonata is the only substantial composition for the arpeggione (which was essentially a bowed guitar) which remains extant today. The sonata was composed in November 1824, about a month after he had returned to Vienna from his second stay in Zselis. The piece was probably commissioned by Schubert’s friend Vincenz Schuster, who was a virtuoso of the arpeggione, an instrument which had been invented only the previous year. By the time the sonata was published posthumously in 1871, the enthusiasm for the novelty of the arpeggione had long since vanished, together with the instrument itself. Today, the piece is heard almost exclusively in transcriptions for cello and piano or viola and piano that were arranged after the posthumous publication, although versions that substitute other instruments—including double bass, flute, euphonium and clarinet for the arpeggione, or guitar or harp for the piano part—are also performed. A viola somehow seems to catch the fuzzy, slightly antique quality of the original instrument better. The work consists of three movements. A typical performance takes just over 20 minutes. 1.Allegro moderato 2.Adagio in E major 3.Allegretto in A major