Musical METAMORPHOSES – home mini concerts with a pinch of history – episode 2.

Welcome to the second episode of the podcast "Musical Metamorphoses – Mini Home Concerts with a Pinch of History." My name is Aleksandra Bobrowska, I'm a pianist, and today I invite you to my virtual music salon, where we'll take a look at two iconic pieces from the classical piano repertoire. These pieces share female names in their titles, but there's much more common to them, as we'll discover in a moment. I invite you to join me on this intriguing journey – let's get started!

The composition that will soon open our concert today features one of the most distinctive and popular musical themes – it often appears as the ringtone on cell phones and can also be heard in some music boxes. Apparently, some garbage trucks in Taiwan use this motif while driving through the streets so that people in nearby homes, hearing the musical signal, know when it's time to get out and throw their trash away. The theme of the song has also appeared in films (including, most recently, the Harry Potter film adaptation), in video games, also McDonald's used it in a rather controversial advertisement for its brand. Fans of British pop singer Tom Odell have heard the composition in question at live concerts as Tom's solo introduction to his famous hit "Another Love." If you're a fan of American rap music listening to me now, you're probably familiar with the musical motif in question from Nasir Jones's "I Can" (2003), as it also appears there! Do you perhaps know which piece I'm talking about?

Yes, it's Ludwig van Beethoven's Bagatelle in A minor, WoO 59, commonly known as "Für Elise." It was composed in 1810 and published only forty years after the composer's death, in 1867. Who was the titular Eliza? Was her name really Eliza at all? It remains unknown to this day, although there are many theories. One of them, and it's also the theory that personally convinces me most, is that the addressee of this musical letter was Therese Malfatti – an eighteen-year-old student of Beethoven's at the time of its composition. Her father organized a party in the spring of 1810, to which he invited numerous musical friends, including our composer; Beethoven composed a short piano piece at this time – Bagatelle WoO 59. According to scholars, he planned to play it for Teresa in front of the guests and propose publicly. Unfortunately, Ludwig developed a taste for the punch served at the party and, having overindulged, was unable to perform the piece, let alone propose to his beloved one. Apparently, the only thing he could do was to put a handwritten dedication on the title page, "For Teresa." Robert Greenberg, an American musicologist, composer, and pianist, claims that Beethoven did this so illegibly that when the manuscript was discovered long after his death, the publisher of the work read the dedication as "For Elise," not "For Teresa." Knowing the composer's handwriting, this theory seems quite possible. While preparing this recording for you, I tried to find a digitized version of the work's manuscript to see if this could be true, but unfortunately, it turns out that the original manuscript disappeared shortly after its discovery. Only Beethoven's original notes dated 1822 have survived, where he slightly modified the original version he wrote down in 1810 – if you are interested in what the composer's ideas sounded like from these slightly later

notes, I encourage you to search online for the version published by British musicologist Barry Cooper, who specializes in Beethoven's life and work – the recording is available on YouTube.

Returning to the fundamental question of who "Eliza" was, and why I think there's a significant likelihood that Beethoven dedicated the work to Teresa Malfatti? This theory is supported by the fact that the manuscript of the work, discovered in 1867 by Ludwig Nohl, a German musicologist, was discovered among Teresa Malfatti's belongings. Does this give us any certainty about the theory presented? Of course not. Some scholars suggest that Eliza may have been a German soprano named Elisabeth Röckel, later wife of another composer, Johann Nepomuk Hummel (incidentally, Antonio Salieri was the best man at their wedding). Joseph August Röckel, Elisa's brother, played Florestan in Beethoven's opera "Fidelio" and subsequently befriended the composer, and many sources indicate that Elisa also frequently met with Beethoven, who fell in love with the young woman and wanted to marry her. There is also a third candidate: another German soprano and Beethoven's friend, Elise Barensfeld. In 2012, musicologist Rita Steblin claimed that Beethoven dedicated "Für Elise" to her. Steblin also believes that Therese Malfatti, our first candidate, may have been Elise Barensfeld's piano teacher and received the piece from Beethoven for teaching purposes and in her classes with Elisa, but it was the young pianist who was the focus of his attention. The truth will likely remain a mystery forever.

As if the endless guessing about Beethoven’s mysterious muse weren’t enough, there’s another twist in the tale of Für Elise - some scholars claim the version we all know might not even be by Beethoven! In 2010, pianist and musicologist Luca Chiantore stirred the waters with his book “Beethoven al piano”, arguing that the piece’s familiar form may not have come directly from the composer’s hand. According to Chiantore, the original signed manuscript that Ludwig Nohl supposedly used for his transcription might never have existed at all. However, not everyone agrees. Back in 1984, Barry Cooper wrote in The Musical Times that one of the two surviving drafts actually matches the published version quite closely - suggesting that Für Elise, as we know it, really is Beethoven’s work after all. And so, like every great musical mystery, the deeper we dig, the more questions we uncover.

You've already heard a lot about the first of our pieces today, so it's time to mention the second. The piano piece "For Alina," which we'll be discussing next, is one of the smallest yet most important works in the entire oeuvre of Arvo Pärt, whom you already met in the previous episode with "Memme Musi." "For Alina" was written in February 1976 and was the first work in many years that brought Pärt out of a prolonged creative crisis. What caused the crisis? The immediate cause was said to be the communist authorities' ban on the performance of Arvo Pärt's Credo, a huge blow to the religious composer. Furthermore, Pärt believed that his avant-garde, dodecaphonic music, which he created in the early period of his career, was rooted in dissonance and unable to express a deeper truth, and only express conflict, which led him to doubt its value. From years of silence and creative incapacity, Pärt's magnificent new compositional style was born: tintinnabuli, and the composition

"För Alina" is historically the first piece written in this style. What does tintinnabuli mean? The word comes from the Latin tintinnabulum (bell) and the verb tintinnāre (to ring), meaning "little bells." It is a technique that helps one focus on sound and, as it were, contemplate it, giving the mind a break from over-analyzing form and all its elements; it fosters meditation and creates space for both the performer and the listener to freely hear their own emotions and thoughts. Looking at the technical aspects, it's worth mentioning that one of the melodic lines of the piece moves along the notes of a scale, while the other is based on a triad. This technique is incredibly simple in its construction, yet incredibly powerful in its expression and power of message. It proves that often less is much more.

The story behind "For Alina" is deeply personal. The piece was named after the daughter of Arvo and Nora Pärt's close friend, whose life was separated from her mother by the Iron Curtain. "For Alina" was intended to bring consolation, especially to a mother missing her child. Over time, it became one of the most popular compositions in Estonia, permanently entering the country's musical canon. In 2026, the piece celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, and to mark the occasion, the Arvo Pärt Centre in Estonia is preparing a special commemorative book in which everyone can add their personal story related to the composition. Many people in Estonia loved this piece so much that it accompanied them through many important moments in their lives, and they share their stories by sending in their numerous contributions.

In a moment you will hear both songs, but before that happens, let me just remind you that the current series of episodes of Musical Metamorphoses is possible thanks to the support of a scholarship from the National Recovery Plan for Culture, which was financed by the European Union.