



PROGRAM NOTES

James Ehnes, violin, and Andrew Armstrong, piano
Ludwig Van Beethoven: Complete Sonatas for Violin and Piano
January 14, 2020 – 7:30 p.m.
Maltz Performing Arts Center

For Beethoven's 250th birthday, James Ehnes and Andrew Armstrong are giving us the gift of a complete violin-sonata cycle over the course of the season. These ten beloved works are cornerstones of the chamber-music repertoire; they tell the story of Beethoven's unique artistic evolution just as clearly, even if not as spectacularly or dramatically, as the symphonies or the string quartets. Except for the last one, they were all written in the space of six years (1797-1803), but what six years! In the first three sonatas, dedicated to Beethoven's one-time composition teacher Antonio Salieri, Beethoven picked up where Mozart had left off. At the dawn of the new century, Beethoven's mature voice emerged more and more strongly, until he reached the Romantic explosion of the "Kreutzer" in 1803. After a hiatus of a decade, Op. 96 stands as a lonely epilogue, an emotional look back on the long road the composer had travelled.

Sonata No. 5 in F major ("Spring," 1800-01)

The popular "Spring" Sonata did not get its nickname until after Beethoven's death. Yet while not authentic, it is quite appropriate for this sonata, characterized by a special warmth and serenity throughout its four movements. Written during 1800-01 together with the more tempestuous Sonata in A minor, Op. 23, it was published—like its companion piece—with a dedication to one of Beethoven's patrons, Count Moritz von Fries.

The first movement opens with one of Beethoven's most endearing lyrical melodies. Subsequent themes show a little more dynamic energy, but it is more like a gentle breeze rustling the leaves than a strong wind, let alone a storm.

The second-movement Adagio is based on a single melody of rare delicacy, played in turn by both instruments.

Beethoven's shortest sonata movement, the scherzo, grows from a simple rhythmic idea, repeated constantly by the piano, with an off-beat response from the violin. The trio section, which takes only about twenty seconds to play, is a continuous rush up and down the scale in the form of two highly condensed musical phrases.

The final Rondo opens with a melodious theme followed by a slightly more rhythmical first episode. The second episode provides contrast by switching to the minor mode, syncopations in the rhythm, and chromatic half-steps in the melody. However, these tensions prove to be only temporary, and the peaceful rondo theme soon returns, confirming the joyful and sunny atmosphere that has dominated the entire composition.

Sonata No. 6 in A major, Op. 30, No. 1 (1802)

In 1802, the young Russian Czar Alexander I, crowned just a year earlier, came to Vienna on his first Imperial visit. It was on this occasion that Beethoven dedicated three violin sonatas to him. Sandwiched between the “Spring” and the “Kreutzer,” these sonatas are transitional works in which Beethoven bids farewell to his early period and (especially in the second and third sonatas) makes some bold moves into the future.

The first sonata of the set is an eminently lyrical work that avoids intense dramatic conflicts. A perfect sense of equilibrium pervades the entire composition, yet the sonata is anything but uneventful. The

first movement contains plenty of rhythmic diversity, a contrapuntal episode and ends with an especially delicate coda. One of Beethoven's most heartfelt slow movements follows, a gem of an Adagio that charms with its very simplicity.

Beethoven originally wrote a whirlwind Presto as the last movement of this sonata, which eventually ended up as the third movement of the “Kreutzer.” He then wrote a new finale for the present work, a straightforward theme-and-variations that nevertheless reserves a few surprises along the way.

Sonata No. 9 in A major, Op. 47 (“Kreutzer,” 1803)

The French writer and philosopher Bernard de Fontenelle (1657-1757) uttered a *bon mot*, repeated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Dictionary of Music*. Fontenelle, who was apparently an opera fan and had little patience for instrumental music, asked: “Sonate, que me veux-tu?” (“Sonata, what do you want of me?”), dismissing the genre as a rather superficial way of musical entertainment devoid of any real substance.

If Fontenelle was unduly harsh even with the sonatas of his own day, Beethoven dealt his theory—if it can be called that—a fatal blow. Nobody could possibly say “Sonata, what do you want of me?” to the “Kreutzer” Sonata, a work whose every measure reaches out to listeners and envelops them with an insistent force totally unprecedented in the history of music. (That force was not lost on Leo Tolstoy, in whose short novel *Kreutzer Sonata* listening to it can incite a person to murder. Granted, in this case the sonata is performed by the protagonist's wife and her lover, but *what* they are playing is not coincidental. Tolstoy perceived the music's impact on the human psyche as truly extreme even if, pessimistically, he saw that impact as an entirely negative one.)

The “Kreutzer” was written, according to Beethoven, “in a very concertante style.” It is certainly the most technically challenging of all the violin sonatas. It dates from the spring of 1803, when Beethoven gave a concert with the mulatto violinist George Bridgetower (?1779-1860). The concert was prepared in such haste that there was no time to copy out the violin part for Bridgetower, who had to read from Beethoven's manuscript. Upon publication, the work was dedicated to the French violinist and composer Rodolphe Kreutzer (1766-1831), whom Beethoven admired but who probably never played the sonata.

The “Kreutzer” is in three movements, of which the first opens with a slow introduction—the only one of Beethoven's ten violin sonatas to start this way. After the ensuing passionate Presto, the second-movement “Andante con variazioni” brings much-needed relief. The theme is supremely beautiful in its simplicity, and the variations, four in number, combine virtuosic brilliance with a depth of expression that only Beethoven could attain.

The last movement was originally written for the earlier A-major sonata we just

heard, but there is no question that it fits the “Kreutzer” better. It is another Presto, matching the first one in dynamic energy. The first-movement’s agitated minor-key music is

replaced here by the sunnier key of A major; the rhythm of the Italian tarantella dance provides additional momentum.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society’s program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.