



PROGRAM NOTES

James Ehnes, violin, and Andrew Armstrong, piano
Ludwig Van Beethoven: Complete Sonatas for Violin and Piano
April 21, 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. 8 in G major, Op. 30, No. 3
Sonata No. 7 in C minor, Op. 30, No. 2 (1802)

The three sonatas that form Op. 30 were written in 1802 and published the following year with a dedication to Czar Alexander I of Russia. These were very important years in Beethoven's life both artistically and personally. They mark the emergence of what has been called his "middle period" or his "heroic style." On a personal level, these are the years when Beethoven's hearing began seriously to deteriorate. In October 1802, he wrote the dramatic Heiligenstadt Testament in which he confessed his feelings of despair over his condition, about his suicidal thoughts and about art as his only source of comfort. The C-minor sonata, written in Beethoven's "tragic key," seems to be directly related to this crisis. The other two works are more cheerful in their tone, yet stylistically, they, too, represent a considerable advance over the early works.

Central European musicians at one time dubbed the **G-major** work the "Champagne Sonata" because of the way its first theme explodes, spurting up like sparkling wine when the bottle is opened. One can even hear the popping of the cork, represented by an unaccompanied high *sforzato* (accented) note on the violin. Of course, the name, which has reached this writer through oral tradition, is entirely apocryphal; yet it expresses something of the cheerful mood of the whole sonata.

Both the first and the last movements are characterized by a relentless, buoyant vitality. The themes in the opening "Allegro assai" receive an extra sense of urgency from the frequent *sforzatos* (stressed notes), many of which fall on what would normally be the unstressed part of the measure. The central development section takes the main melody as

far from the main key as the classical tonal system allows (from G major all the way to C-sharp minor).

The hyper-active pace of the sonata did not leave room for a full-fledged slow movement. Instead, Beethoven inserted a gentle and graceful minuet, with a slight touch of nostalgia for the 18th century which has just come to an end.

The sonata ends with a veritable *perpetuum mobile*, a vigorous contradance with a drone that seems to evoke a folk bagpipe. Unlike its two companions from Op. 30, the intensely dramatic **C-minor** sonata is in four movements. It opens with a mysteriously soft unison melody that soon erupts in some powerful fortissimo chords that in turn segue into a whimsical march tune. Contrary to the norm, Beethoven does not repeat the exposition but goes directly into the development section, expanding upon both the mysterious and the

Sonata No. 10 in G major, Op. 96 (1812)

In 1812, Beethoven went through a great deal of personal turmoil once again. This was the year when he wrote his famous letter to the Immortal Beloved, and also the year of a serious conflict with his younger brother Johann. In part as a result of these preoccupations, Beethoven entered a deep artistic crisis and wrote almost nothing until 1816. The Violin Sonata Op. 96—his first violin sonata since the “Kreutzer” almost a decade earlier—was one of the last works he completed before these years of silence. It is a piece of parting: it marks the end of what is now habitually called Beethoven’s “middle period.” And nothing at that point could have led one to predict that years later Beethoven would start composing again in the entirely new style of the last sonatas and quartets, the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa Solemnis*. The sonata is full of a resignation and nostalgia not often found in his other works.

As the great violinist Joseph Szigeti noted in his book *The Ten Beethoven Sonatas*: “The last sonata Op. 96 is the only one of the

martial motifs. In the recapitulation, the same materials sound even fiercer than the first time.

An intimate and heartfelt Adagio follows, whose hymn-like melody remains unchanged while the accompaniment becomes more and more elaborate.

The easy-going scherzo contains a trio (middle section) in which the violin and the left hand of the piano proceed in canonic imitation. The finale, then, returns to the turbulence of the first movement, with its harsh downbeats and rushing melodies. Beethoven dispensed with the final switch to the major mode which, in some of his other C-minor works (including the Third Piano Concerto and the Fifth Symphony) ease the tensions at the end. This time, there is no relief from the tragic minor mode; after a breathless Presto coda, the work closes with a pair of heavy chords that come down like hammer blows.

ten that states its theme unaccompanied, unharmonized,... giving the bare essence only of the germinal idea.” That theme, one might add, is only four notes long. Szigeti also drew attention to “a certain indecision in formulating answers” and to instances where “the motion of the...voices almost seems suspended in mid-air.” One such moment comes shortly before the end of the first movement where the piano is left alone to play some very special harmonies with a truly mystical effect, introducing the final appearance of the four-note theme with which the movement closes.

The second-movement *Adagio espressivo* has the same hymn-like rhythm as the slow movement of the “Emperor” Concerto, written three years earlier. Beethoven chose a relatively distant key relationship for the key of the slow movement, just as he had done in the concerto. The main melody of the sonata movement is repeated in its entirety after some intervening ornamental passages and, again as in the concerto, the movement is connected to the next one without a break.

The melody of the Scherzo (in G minor) is characterized by those off-beat accents of which Beethoven was so fond. After a trio that revisits the key of the Adagio, the Scherzo returns, its ending brightens from G minor to G major, in anticipation of the last movement—a serene theme with seven variations.

The variations are extremely diverse and innovative; the changes undergone by the melody are much more substantial than in earlier variation sets, and point the way to the monumental *Diabelli Variations* for piano (1819-1823). In addition to the traditional strategies of ornamenting and enriching the melody, the variations include the opposite procedure, which consist in reducing that melody to simple chords. Of particular beauty is the Adagio variation (No. 5), which includes two short cadenzas for the piano. It is followed by a deceptive return of the melody in its original form—deceptive first because it is not in the home key of G but in E flat (the key of both the slow movement and the Trio section of the scherzo), and second because it is soon interrupted by the boisterous sixth variation. Variation No. 7 is a mysterious-sounding

contrapuntal piece in G minor. It leads into the “real” return of the original theme (now in the home key, and in a complete form) and then to the coda, with the typical Beethovenian slowdown at the next-to-the-last moment.

Op. 96 was written for one of the most famous violinists of Beethoven’s time, the French Pierre Rode (1774-1830), who gave the premiere with Beethoven’s pupil, the Archduke Rudolph at Prince Lobkowitz’s palace on December 29, 1812. It seems that composer and violinist didn’t see entirely eye to eye. As Beethoven wrote to the Archduke, “I did not make great haste in the last movement...because I had, in writing it, to consider the playing of Rode. In our finales we like rushing and resounding passages, but this does not please R and—this hindered me somewhat.” For once, Beethoven appears to have allowed himself to be influenced by the demands and sensibilities of the performer he more often disdained; but posterity is only the richer for it, as we now have a perhaps atypical, yet singularly expressive and beautiful, work to end Beethoven’s output for solo violin.

-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.