



PROGRAM NOTES

James Ehnes, violin, and Andrew Armstrong, piano
Ludwig Van Beethoven: Complete Sonatas for Violin and Piano
September 17, 2019 – 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.

Three Sonatas, Op. 12 (1797-98)

No. 1 in D major

No. 2 in A major

No. 3 in E-flat major

Mozart had developed the genre of the violin sonata from a keyboard piece with an almost negligible violin part to a duo for two completely equal partners. For Beethoven, that equality was a given from the start, as were the sonata, variation, and rondo structures that Mozart had employed in his sonatas. Yet Beethoven greatly increased the level of contrast between the themes, and extended the range of modulations far beyond anything found in Mozart.

To 21st-century ears, these three sonatas may indeed sound like "early Beethoven," and we like to think about them in terms of their proximity to Mozart. Yet that is not necessarily how the contemporaries heard it, and a review published in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* in 1799 shows that the more radical middle-period works were not the first ones to raise the eyebrows of a conservative

critic. This anonymous reviewer was confused and deeply disturbed by the unusual modulations in Op. 12 which he found "bizarre and painful," hearing only "scholarship and again scholarship, but no nature, no real singing." Even if his assessment sounds surprisingly harsh today, one must give the critic credit for taking such a close look at the works under review, subjecting them to such a thorough analysis. And one must acknowledge the extent to which Beethoven was already rocking the boat in these seemingly innocuous pieces of *Hausmusik*.

Sonata, variation, and rondo, respectively, are the forms of the three movements of the **D-major sonata**. In realizing these forms, Beethoven's personal fingerprints are present at every turn, from sudden dynamic changes, accents on the "wrong" parts of the measure, virtuosic runs and trills and

much more. Perhaps the most forward-looking moment in the sonata is the conclusion of the last movement, with a last-minute modulation to a distant tonality and the ingenious return to the home key, followed by a brief moment of suspense and an abrupt ending.

The second sonata, in **A major**, opens with a playful, even downright humorous “Allegro vivace,” which makes a great deal out of a simple, two-note melodic figure. The second movement is more serious in tone, although it is not exactly slow (“Andante, più tosto Allegretto,” “Andante, or rather Allegretto”). Its wistful main theme, in the key of A minor, is temporarily relieved by a gentler, imitative exchange between the two instruments. The last movement (“Allegro piacevole,” “Pleasant Allegro”), combines the characters of minuet, scherzo, and rondo in a unique and extremely “pleasant” amalgam, with a final humorous touch at the end.

The third sonata, in **E-flat major**, has one of the most virtuosic piano parts in all the sonatas (except, maybe, the “Kreutzer”), and much of the spectacular passagework is matched by the violin. The first movement is characterized by an overabundance of melodic ideas: there are many more themes than the ordinary sonata scheme would require. Some of these themes undergo exciting

transformations in the dramatic development section, where minor keys are explored and typical Beethovenian *sforzando* effects (strong accents on individual notes) frequently used. One of the great moments occurs at the end of the development, where both instruments suddenly grow quiet and the violin, doubled by the piano right hand, plays a haunting melody in the distant key of C-flat major against the mystical tremolos in the piano left hand. This leads immediately to the return of the first theme.

The second-movement *Adagio con molt'espressione* is, without a doubt, one of Beethoven's most touching slow movements. Its beautiful melody—with its singular off-beat accompaniment—creates a unique atmosphere of tenderness and intimacy. After a second theme, the first melody is repeated, followed by a coda, complete with sudden rests, an unexpected *fortissimo* outburst, and a favorite device of Beethoven's, consisting in a last-minute modulation away from the home key, which is immediately restored.

After this profound and serious slow movement, the final Rondo provides much-needed relief and good humor. Even though there are some fleeting episodes with dramatic accents and incursions into minor keys, nothing can fundamentally alter the general mood of happiness that prevails to the end.

Sonata for Violin and Piano in A minor, Op. 23 (1800)

The A-minor sonata, dedicated to Beethoven's friend and patron, the Count Moritz von Fries, is one of the pivotal works that herald the arrival of a new Beethoven. Originally intended as part of a two-sonata set whose other half was the popular “Spring” Sonata (Op. 24), the A-minor work represents the other side of the coin. Whereas the “Spring” is gentle, lyrical and traditionally “classical” in many ways, Op. 23 bursts with a new energy that can only be described as “romantic.” It must be seen as a direct precursor of the “Kreutzer” Sonata, which followed only three years later.

The A-minor sonata has an exceptionally fast opening movement: the “Presto” tempo marking, which Beethoven did not use very frequently in first movements, also appears in the “Kreutzer” (which, however, opens with a slow introduction). The relentless rhythmic drive, the strong accents and the insistent minor-mode melody

set the tone for high drama and irresistible passion.

Many of Beethoven's slow movements fall into one of two categories: expansive Adagios with singing melodies and great emotional depth, and brisker Andantes that are lighter in mood (as we have already seen in Op. 12, No. 2). The second movement of the A-minor sonata belongs to the second type. The tempo marking “Andante scherzoso, più Allegretto” even suggests that this may not be a “slow” movement at all, but rather some kind of cross between a slow movement and a scherzo. The opening idea, a simple tune constantly interrupted by rests, has a playful nature. The second theme, developed contrapuntally, is more serious, but the dance-like third motif is again closer to a scherzo character.

In the “Allegro molto” finale, the “storm and stress” of the first movement returns. The dark and agitated rondo theme (A minor) alternates with

two main episodes (each heard more than once in the course of the movement). One consists of groups of repeated notes playfully tossed back and forth between the violin and the piano (A major); the other is a long lyrical phrase first presented in

simple harmony and then in elaborate counterpoint (F major). Yet the last word belongs to the dark minor mode, as the agitated rondo theme is repeated once again and used to fashion the surprising conclusion of the sonata.

-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.