

Program Notes

Sonata for Viola da Gamba in G minor, BWV 1029

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Born: 1685

Died: 1750

Composed: 1741

- I. Vivace
- II. Adagio
- III. Allegro

A viola da gamba was—and still is, for that matter—a viol held between the legs when it is played. It is the counterpart of the viola da braccia, which was held beneath the chin or against the chest. Eventually the viola da braccia grew somewhat smaller and became the modern viola (its original name survives in the German word for viola: Bratsche). As a performing instrument, the viola da gamba essentially disappeared, to be kept alive only by enthusiasts for performances on original instruments, and most modern performances of Bach's three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord are given by either viola or cello with piano accompaniment.

It has been difficult to date the three sonatas Bach wrote for this combination of instruments. Are they from his years as Kapellmeister at the court of Anhalt-Cöthen (1717–1723), when he wrote the greater part of his secular music and served a prince who played the viola da gamba? Or do they come from his tenure as cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig? No one is sure. Perhaps sensibly, the editors of The New Grove Dictionary throw up their hands and play it safe, noting that these sonatas were written sometime between 1720 and 1739. These sonatas are notable for the liberation of the keyboard part: no longer is it relegated to providing a simple bass line beneath the melodic instrument, and here the two instruments become equal partners in the musical enterprise.

In the first two sonatas, Bach adopted the sequence of movements of the Italian sonata di chiesa, or church sonata: slow-fast-slow-fast. But the Sonata in G minor is the only one without an opening slow movement: Bach opts for a three-movement form opening with a vigorous Vivace—the firmly-accented main theme here is somewhat reminiscent of the opening of his Brandenburg Concerto No. 3. The other two sonatas have an Andante slow movement, but here Bach sets the middle movement at a slower tempo: this Adagio attains a sort of nobility on its long-spanned melodic lines and the steady accompaniment in the piano. The concluding Allegro seems at first to promise a fugue, but this is in fact very accomplished imitative writing, with the melodic line slipping smoothly between the stringed instrument and keyboard as each has the principal part, then steps back to echo the other.

Viola Sonata, Op. 11, No. 4

PAUL HINDEMITH

Born: 1895

Died: 1963

Composed: 1919

- I. Fantasie. Ruhig
- II. Thema mit Variationen. Ruhig und einfach wie ein Volkslied
- III. Finale (mit Variationen). Sehr lebhaft

Hindemith was drafted into the German army during World War I, though he was able to spend his service playing violin in a string quartet formed of fellow soldiers (Hindemith's father was killed in fighting on the western front). Hindemith returned home early in 1919 and resumed his place as concertmaster of the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra, but he was intent on making his career as a composer. While still in the army, the young composer (then aged 22) planned a group of six sonatas for different stringed instruments and piano. To a friend he wrote, "I want to compose a whole series of such sonatinas—or rather small sonatas, since they are too expansive for sonatinas. Each of them is to be completely

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different from the preceding ones, also in form. I want to see whether I can't, in a whole series of such pieces, increase the expressive possibilities [...] and extend the horizon. It will take me quite a number of years to finish the job, if I ever do, but I feel it's an interesting task."

In the event, Hindemith completed only five sonatas, and they were published as his Opus 11. The composer himself gave the premiere of the fourth in the series, the Viola Sonata in F Major, in Frankfurt in June 1919. This sonata, the earliest of Hindemith's five sonatas for viola, is an interesting work. It is in three movements (the second in theme-and-variation form), played without pause, and the score is copiously annotated with detailed performance instructions—the young composer knew exactly how he wanted this music to sound.

The first movement is quite free in tempo. Hindemith calls it *Fantasie* and marks it "Calm," but quickly the opening mood is dissipated in a great swirling cadenza for the viola and by huge eruptions of sound before the music falls back and proceeds quietly into the second movement. The viola states the theme that will yield a series of variations, and Hindemith marks its first appearance "Calm and simple, like a folksong." The unusual metric indication here (2/4 3/4) lets players know that this music will move between those meters without warning. The theme sings gracefully—and at some length—and then the variations begin, becoming faster and faster (the second is marked "A little capricious"). The fourth, marked triple forte and accompanied by thundering octaves in the piano, leads directly into the last movement. Hindemith instructs the performers to make the transition sound so smooth that listeners do not detect the change and think that they are hearing only a continuation of the variations, and in fact the numbered variations continue here. The sixth is a fugato on the original theme, marked "happening with a strange heaviness" (in Hindemith's wonderful German: *mit bizarrer Plumpheit vorzutragen*). The seventh variation functions as the coda, which drives on increasingly agitated waves of sound to one final restatement of the theme, now stamped out "with all strength" by the two instruments in unison.

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Op. 110

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1821

- I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
- II. Allegro molto
- III. Adagio ma non troppo — Fuga

The years 1813 through 1820 were exceptionally difficult for Beethoven, who virtually stopped composing in these years. There were several reasons for this: his deafness was now nearly complete, he suffered periods of poor health, and much of his energy was consumed with his struggle for legal custody of his nephew Karl. And—perhaps most important—he had reached a creative impasse brought on by the exhaustion of his Heroic Style. Where the previous two decades had seen a great outpouring of music, now his creative powers flickered and were nearly extinguished. Not until 1820 was he able to put his troubles, both personal and creative, behind him and marshal his energy as a composer. At the end of May 1820 he committed himself to writing three piano sonatas for the Berlin publisher Adolph Martin Schlesinger; these would be Beethoven's final sonatas. Although he claimed he wrote them "in one breath," their composition was actually spread out over a longer period than he expected when he agreed to write them.

The Sonata in A-flat Major, completed in December 1821, shows some of the most original touches in a group of sonatas that are all distinguished for their originality. The first movement, *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*, is remarkable for its lovely and continuous lyricism. Beethoven notes that the opening is to be played *con amabilità*, and that spirit hovers over the entire movement. The essentially lyric quality of this movement is underlined by the fact that the second theme grows immediately out of the first: the opening idea has barely been

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stated when the second seems to rise directly out of it. By contrast, the bluff Allegro molto is rough and ready: it is a scherzo with a brief trio section full of energy and rhythmic surprises.

The long final movement is of complex structure: it performs the function of both adagio and finale, yet even these elements are intermixed with great originality. The main theme of the Adagio, marked *Arioso dolente*, arches painfully over a steady chordal accompaniment before Beethoven introduces a fugue marked Allegro, *ma non troppo*. After a brief working-out, the fugue comes to a halt and the Arioso theme returns. This time, however, Beethoven has marked it *Ermattet, klagend* (exhausted, grieving), and here the music seems almost choked and struggling to move. Yet gradually the music gathers strength and the fugue returns, but this time Beethoven has inverted the theme and builds the fugue on this inversion. The sonata ends with a great rush upward across five octaves to the triumphant final chord.

Viola Sonata

REBECCA CLARKE

Born: 1886

Died: 1979

Composed: 1919

- I. Impetuoso
- II. Vivace
- III. Adagio — Agitato

Rebecca Clarke, who died in New York City in 1979 at the age of 93, was both English and American. Born in a suburb of London to an American father and a German mother, Clarke studied composition with Charles Stanford and the viola with Lionel Tertis at the Royal College of Music. She became one of the first women members of a professional orchestra in London when she joined the Queen's Hall Orchestra in 1912, and she also composed. Clarke spent much of her career in the United States, where her brothers lived; she was in this country when World War II broke out in 1939, and she decided

to stay. In 1944 Clarke married James Friskin, the distinguished piano pedagogue who taught for many years at Juilliard, and she lived in New York City for the rest of her long life. Most of Clarke's own music comes from early in her career, and much of this—largely chamber and vocal works—remains unpublished.

The Viola Sonata is Clarke's best-known and most frequently recorded composition. Information in the review of its first performance suggests that she began work on it in Hawaii in 1916 while on an international tour and completed it in 1919 in Detroit. Clarke entered this sonata in a competition sponsored by the distinguished American patron of the arts Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge for a work for viola and piano. There were 72 entries, and the six-member panel (which judged the works anonymously) split its vote evenly between Clarke's Sonata and Ernst Bloch's Suite. Coolidge, who was a close friend of Clarke, broke the tie by voting for the Bloch, specifically to avoid the appearance of favoritism. Nevertheless, the Clarke Sonata was warmly acclaimed at its premiere at the Berkshire Festival in Pittsfield on September 25, 1919.

Clarke heads the published sonata with a quotation from the French poet Alfred de Musset that translates roughly: "Poet, take up your lute; the wine of youth ferments this night in the veins of God." The sonata is in the expected three movements, with two big-boned outer movements framing a brief scherzo. Clarke's Sonata combines a sort of bardic violence with moments of rhapsodic contemplation, and that proves an impressive mix. The sonata virtually explodes to life (Clarke marks the beginning *Impetuoso*), but within moments this energy has subsided into a dreamy pastoralism that we might associate with Ralph Vaughan Williams (who was in fact a champion of Clarke's music). Piano alone has the second subject, marked *languoroso*, and the movement unfolds across a long span. Along the way, listeners may sense another influence: the wistful, haunting melodies and wide harmonies frequently recall the late

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music of Claude Debussy (who completed his final work, the Violin Sonata, and died while Clarke was writing this sonata). After an active development and many mercurial changes of mood, Clarke brings the movement to a shimmering, soft close.

The scherzo, in which the viola is muted throughout, also recalls Debussy, specifically the scherzo of his String Quartet. Clarke's movement, with its dancing harmonics and pizzicatos, is almost elfin in its quickness and charm. The very ending, where the music seems to disappear in front of us, is particularly effective. The last movement seems at first to return to the dreamy side of the first movement, and in fact Clarke recalls themes from that movement. The finale once again alternates episodes of quite different character, and in its center comes a remarkable passage in which the piano sings gently over

a sustained ponticello tremolo from the viola. Gradually the movement gathers strength on a recollection of the sonata's opening theme and drives to a dramatic close on a resounding E from both viola and piano.

Program Notes written by Eric Bromberger