

FEBRUARY 3, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Violin Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 12 No. 3 **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1798

- I. Allegro con spirito
- II. Adagio con molt' espressione
- III. Rondo. Allegro molto

When Beethoven published his first three violin sonatas as his Opus 12 in 1798, he had already written ten other sonatas: eight for piano and two for cello. The title page of Opus 12 bears a specific description of the sonatas by the composer—"For harpsichord or piano, with violin"—as if the violin were an afterthought, an optional participant in what are essentially keyboard sonatas. Beethoven's description needs to be taken with a grain of salt. The sonatas clearly require a piano rather than a harpsichord, for no harpsichord could meet Beethoven's quite specific dynamic requirements in these works. And the apparent relegation of the violin to a subordinate role is misleading as well, for these are true duo sonatas, sonatas in which both instruments share the musical and harmonic interest.

That said, however, it must be admitted that the Allegro con spirito first movement of the Sonata in E-flat Major is one of those places where the piano gets the lion's share of the music. From the very beginning, the piano has a near-virtuoso role, introducing the main idea and hurtling up and down the keyboard, with the violin often providing no more than unobtrusive chordal accompaniment. The violin introduces the gentle second theme of this sonata-form movement and has a lovely passage at the recapitulation, but most of the show in this first movement belongs to the piano.

The quiet second movement, Adagio con molt' espressione, has justly been praised as one of the finest slow movements from Beethoven's early period. Here the long, singing main theme is shared in turn by both voices, and particularly effective is the middle section where the violin sings gracefully above murmuring piano accompaniment. The final movement—Allegro molto—is a rondo. The piano announces the theme, the violin repeats it, and the two instruments sail through this movement, gracefully taking turns as each has the theme, then accompanies the other.

CONCERT

Piano Trio in G Major, Hob XV:25 **FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN**

Born: 1732

Died: 1809

Composed: 1795

- I. Andante
- II. Poco adagio. Cantabile
- III. Rondo all'Ongarese. Presto

In 1795 Haydn completed the second of his two extended visits to London. After years of obscurity at the Esterhazy palace forty miles outside Vienna, he suddenly found himself—at age 63—the toast of London: his music was wildly acclaimed, his concerts proved a tremendous success financially, and he was feted by royalty and the leading musicians of England. Haydn achieved particular success in London with his symphonies, but during his stay there he returned to the piano trio and wrote a number of them during 1795. Earlier in his career, Haydn had regarded the piano trio as essentially an entertainment form—something intended as amiable background music or as music for amateurs—and the piano had dominated these early trios: Haydn even referred to them as "Sonatas for pianoforte with accompaniment for violin and violoncello." The later trios balance the musical responsibilities a little more evenly: though the piano retains much of the musical interest, the other voices—particularly the violin—are assigned more important roles.

Easily the most famous of Haydn's trios is the Trio in G Major, subtitled "Gypsy Rondo" because of its last movement, which Haydn marked "Rondo all'Ongarese": "Rondo in the Hungarian Style" (which meant "in the gypsy style"). The brief trio has an unusual form: it is in the standard three movements, but none quite conforms to expectations. The opening movement is not the expected sonata-form fast movement, but an Andante that alternates and varies two different themes. The middle movement is the customary slow movement, but what makes this one unusual is that it is derived from the Adagio of Haydn's Symphony No. 102 in B-Flat Major, premiered in London on February 2, 1795; presumably this trio dates from about that same time. The spirited finale has given the trio its nickname. Esterhazy and Eisenstadt, the courts where Haydn spent most of his life, are right on the edge of the Hungarian plain, and Haydn was quite familiar with the folk music

of the region. Like Brahms, he was fond of gypsy music, and he based this rondo-finale on a gypsy theme. The piano introduces that energetic theme immediately, and the exciting finale—marked Presto—jumps constantly between major and minor keys before rushing without pause to the cadence.

Violin Sonata in A minor

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Born: 1872

Died: 1958

Composed: 1952-1954

- I. Fantasia. Allegro giusto
- II. Scherzo. Allegro furioso, ma non troppo
- III. Tema con variazioni. Andante — Allegro

Vaughan Williams wrote very little chamber music. He was drawn more readily to music for orchestra and for voice, and chamber music does not loom large in his catalogue of works. Vaughan Williams began work on his Violin Sonata, his final piece of chamber music, in 1952, when he was 80, and completed it two years later. The sonata was first heard as part of a BBC broadcast concert in October 1954, and the public premiere took place the following year, when Josef Sziget played it in Rochester, New York.

Listeners who come to the Violin Sonata expecting the gentle, the pastoral side of Vaughan Williams are in for a surprise. This can be brilliant music, and it can be tough—it is full of rhythmic and harmonic complexities, and it requires virtuoso performers. The violin part has a concerto-like virtuosity, and at one point the composer even gives the violin a cadenza all its own. And through it all runs an astonishing fund of energy—this may be the work of an octogenarian, but it is an octogenarian capable of powerful expression.

The sonata is in the expected three movements, but that may be the only traditional thing about it. Vaughan Williams opens with a movement he titles Fantasia, and this pitches between a relaxed lyricism and violent eruptions that require complex chording from both performers. A climax marked *Largamente* leads to a *Lento* reprise and a subdued conclusion.

After so thorny an opening, we expect a measure of relief in the central movement—and we don't get it. This is a scherzo, and Vaughan Williams specifies that its performance should be *Allegro furioso*. This can be driving, hard-edged music, interesting for its rhythms and shifting

meters. After all its energy, however, this scherzo comes to a very quiet close.

The sonata concludes with a theme-and-variation movement, and for its theme Vaughan Williams reached back across half a century and borrowed a theme from the finale of his Piano Quintet in C Minor, a work he composed in 1903 and then withdrew. The theme is marked *cantabile* on its opening statement, but the six variations pitch between extremes: some can be serene, while others are thick and uncompromising. The very ending brings yet more surprises. The music slows, and now Vaughan Williams brings back the music from the very opening of the first movement. That might seem a fitting end to the sonata, but instead the violinist takes wing with an unexpected cadenza whose calm calls to mind Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending*, composed thirty years earlier. And then a final surprise: like its two predecessors, this movement ends very quietly, here on a long, calm chord in A major.

Vaughan Williams wrote this sonata for the Canadian violinist Frederick Grinke, who gave both the broadcast and public premieres in England. Vaughan Williams particularly admired Grinke's playing, and at the composer's request Grinke performed at Vaughan Williams' funeral at Westminster Abbey in 1958.

Piano Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Op. 23

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born: 1841

Died: 1904

Composed: 1875

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Andantino (Tema con variazioni)
- III. Finale. Allegretto scherzando

The spring of 1875 found Dvořák extremely busy. He was 33 years old, his first child was on the way, and he was beginning to make his name as a composer. He worked very fast that spring. He completed his Quintet in G Major in March 1875 and the lovely Serenade for Strings on May 4. He began the present Piano Quartet in D Major on May 24 and had it complete only seventeen days later, on June 10; five days after that he began his Fifth Symphony. True fame would not come for Dvořák for another three years, when his Slavonic Dances would be performed around the world, but already the young composer was writing music that continues to be played today.

Dvořák was a very good violist and a competent pianist, so the combination of piano and strings was comfortable for him. In the Piano Quartet in D Major Dvořák is willing to experiment with form, as we shall see in the final movement. The opening movement, though, seems standard enough. It is a sonata-form movement marked *Allegro moderato*, and the stipulation "moderate" might apply to the entire quartet—this is music that develops not through conflict and drama but through its bright spirits and the beauty of its themes. Dvořák builds the first movement on two theme-groups, the first announced by cello and taken up by the violin, while the second is stated by cello and piano. The development grows more active, and that makes the movement's conclusion all the more attractive: the coda builds to a *Grandioso* climax, but the music suddenly turns calm and vanishes on a surprisingly subdued final chord.

The middle movement is in theme-and-variation form. The violin sings the theme, marked both *pianissimo* and *cantabile*, and five variations follow. These variations remain very much within the character of the

gentle principal theme, and once again the end of the movement is quiet.

Dvořák takes an original approach to the structure of the last movement by combining both scherzo and finale in one movement, and he sets each in a different meter. The flowing scherzo sections are in 3/8, the more sharp-edged finale sections are in 4/4, and the music leaps back and forth between the quick-paced scherzo and the more dramatic finale material. The young composer offers one more novelty at the end: in the coda he simultaneously sets the strings in 2/4 and the piano in 6/8, and it is on the superimposition of those two meters that the Quartet in D Major powers its way to its firm concluding chords.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger