

JANUARY 27, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Violin Sonata in A minor, Op. 34

AMY BEACH

Born: 1867

Died: 1896

Composed: 1944

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Scherzo. Molto vivace
- III. Largo con dolore
- IV. Allegro con fuoco

Amy Beach deserves to be remembered as more than just America's first successful woman composer, as she is often categorized. A child prodigy, she appeared as piano soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at 17 and began composing while still a girl. At age 18 she married the Boston surgeon H.H.A. Beach, who—though a cultivated man musically—did not want his wife performing in public. He did, however, encourage her to compose. Beach had no formal training as a composer (which in her day meant European training), and as a composer she was essentially self-taught. Nevertheless, over the next several decades she produced a sequence of successful large-scale works. Her Mass in E-flat (1890) was the first work by a woman composer presented by Boston's Haydn and Handel Society, and her "Gaelic" Symphony (1897) and Piano Concerto (1900) were performed to critical acclaim. Upon the death of her husband in 1910, Beach—then 43—resumed her career as a concert pianist, making a particularly successful series of tours through Europe. She composed prolifically throughout her life: though her list of opus numbers runs to 152, she actually wrote about 300 works. She was still active as pianist and composer at the time of her death in 1944 at 77.

Beach composed her only violin sonata in 1896, when she was 29, and she was the pianist at its premiere the following year. The violinist on that occasion was Franz Kneisel, concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and first violinist of the Kneisel String Quartet, which three years earlier had given the premiere of Dvořák's "American" Quartet. Beach's Violin Sonata emphasizes the lyric and dramatic sides of the violin: quiet passages marked *con molto tenerezza* ("with great tenderness") and *dolce cantabile* alternate with almost violent moments marked *con tutta forza* and

appassionato. Beach often sets the violin very high in its register, giving this music a soaring silvery brilliance unusual in chamber music.

After a subdued beginning, the music takes wing at the *Animato*, soaring high above the piano. The second subject of this sonata-form movement is more lyric, and after an extremely active development the movement closes on the violin's shimmering high A. The *Molto vivace* is a dancing scherzo in 2/4. Piano leads the way into its slow central episode, which gradually accelerates into a return of the opening material and a quick-paced coda. The long slow movement, set in 9/8 and marked *Largo con dolore*, moves into G minor and proceeds along long lyric lines; despite its restrained beginning, this movement drives to a dramatic climax, then concludes quietly. Most dramatic of the movements, the finale is marked *Allegro con fuoco* ("with fire"). In sonata form, its development includes a three-voice fugue before a super-heated coda drives to the powerful concluding measure, marked triple *forte*.

CONCERT

Cello Sonata No. 1 in F Major, Op. 5, No. 1 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1796

- I. Adagio sostenuto — Allegro
- II. Rondo. Allegro vivace

Beethoven wrote the two sonatas of his Opus 5 early in 1796, shortly after his twenty-fifth birthday. These were his first sonatas for an instrument other than solo piano and were in fact the first significant sonatas for cello and keyboard (Vivaldi had written some small-scale sonatas for cello and harpsichord, but neither Haydn nor Mozart wrote cello sonatas). From February through July 1796, Beethoven made a concert tour to Prague, Dresden, Leipzig, and finally Berlin. There he and the court cellist, Jean-Louis Duport, performed these two sonatas before King Friedrich Wilhelm II, himself an amateur cellist. Also performed on this occasion was Beethoven's set of twelve variations on the theme from Handel's "See, the conquering hero comes." The king, who surely understood the compliment implicit in the title, was

delighted with the music and presented Beethoven with a golden snuffbox full of golden louis d'or. Now it was Beethoven's turn to be delighted. He enthused to a friend that this snuffbox was no ordinary one, "but such a one as it might have been customary to give an ambassador."

Beethoven faced some immediate problems as he set out to write a sonata for cello. Here was an instrument that had previously been relegated to providing accompaniments and bass lines; it had been thought awkward and lumbering, unsuited for the prominent melodic role that a sonata demands. Further, Beethoven had to solve the problem of balance, for the piano can easily overpower the cello, particularly when the cello is in its lowest register. Not surprisingly, Beethoven's solution to both these problems is to let the piano, his own instrument, lead much of the time: the piano often has the first statement of a theme, with the cello allowed to take it up only after it has been fully laid out. Beethoven's title for these sonatas makes this priority clear: they are Sonatas for Pianoforte and Cello. The composer compensates to some extent by keeping the cello most of the time in its rich middle range, where the glorious sound of the instrument can register to best effect.

A further problem occupied Beethoven through all his cello sonatas: he was reluctant to write an extended slow movement for this combination of instruments, perhaps doubting the ability of the cello to sustain melodic interest or tonal variety over the span of an extended slow movement. The Sonata in F Major opens with an exceptionally long movement (nearly twenty minutes if the exposition repeat is observed). It begins with a slow introduction marked Adagio sostenuto that gathers energy on its increasingly florid piano part and then flows smoothly into the Allegro, where the piano announces the main idea. Beethoven marks this statement (and its repetition by the cello) dolce, and this generously-proportioned sonata-form movement remains gentle across its long span. Near the end, Beethoven interrupts matters with an Adagio interlude based on material from the introduction; a Presto bridge leads back to a cadence at the main tempo.

The concluding Allegro vivace is a rondo that dances along smoothly on its 6/8 meter. Once again, the piano leads the way, announcing most of the episodes before they are taken up by the cello. And—once again—there is an Adagio interlude based on a variant of the opening idea before the concluding rush to the close.

String Quartet No. 1, Lyric GEORGE WALKER

Born: 1922

Died: 2018

Composed: 1946

I. Allegro

II. Molto adagio

III. Allegro con fuoco

George Walker learned to play the piano as a boy and quickly developed into a virtuoso. At age 14 he entered the Oberlin Conservatory, and while there he served as the organist of the School of Theology. Walker continued his studies at the Curtis Institute, where he was a piano student of Rudolf Serkin, and in 1945 he performed Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, becoming the first African-American to appear as soloist with that orchestra. Walker taught at a number of American universities, including Rutgers, where he was on the faculty from 1969 until 1992. A composition student of Rosario Scalero and Nadia Boulanger, he composed orchestral, chamber, keyboard, and vocal music, and much of this has been recorded. In 1996 Walker became the first African-American composer to win a Pulitzer Prize for music when he received that award for his *Lilacs for Voice and Orchestra*, premiered by Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Walker composed his String Quartet No. 1 in 1946, shortly after the 24-year-old composer graduated from Curtis. The quartet is in three movements in a fast-slow-fast sequence. The opening Allegro bursts to life with a fierce gesture that sets the dramatic mood of the movement, though more relaxed secondary material arrives quickly, and this sonata-form movement develops both these ideas. Walker's harmonic language is fundamentally tonal, but it can turn acerbic at moments, then relax just as quickly into consonant resolutions. The active development rises to a full-throated climax, then breaks off suddenly for the movement's unexpectedly quiet conclusion.

As the young composer began the second movement of this quartet, he learned that his grandmother had died, and this Molto adagio was written in her memory. The movement may be thought of as a lament, but this is a loving rather than a grieving lament, and it is exceptionally beautiful music. After the quartet was complete, Walker arranged this movement for string orchestra, adding a part for doublebasses, and under the title *Lyric for Strings*, it has become his most frequently

performed works (it is, in fact, one of the most frequently performed works by any American composer). The quartet concludes with a high-energy Allegro con fuoco. This rondo-like structure alternates lyric episodes with more strident material, and near the end Walker brings back its principal theme at a much slower tempo—this becomes a moment of calm reflection before the sudden rush to the firm concluding chords.

Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84

EDWARD ELGAR

Born: 1857

Died: 1934

Composed: 1918

I. Moderato — Allegro

II. Adagio

III. Andante — Allegro

Elgar wrote little chamber music. He appears to have been more comfortable with the resources of the symphony orchestra and the human voice, and he wrote most often for orchestra and for chorus. In fact, after writing some brief pieces for violin and piano early in his career, Elgar turned away from chamber music almost permanently.

But during the summer of 1918, at the very end of his creative career, the 61-year-old composer suddenly produced three substantial pieces of chamber music. There was no readily apparent reason for him to turn to a type of music he had neglected for so long. But during that summer England was nearing the end of a horrifying war, Elgar was facing the deteriorating health of his wife, and he may well have been confronting his own waning powers as a composer (he wrote only one more major work, the Cello Concerto of 1919). Perhaps all these had an influence on his decision to turn to so personal a form as chamber music. Perhaps none of them did—we can only guess. But in quick succession (he worked on all three simultaneously) he produced a violin sonata, a string quartet, and a piano quintet.

The Piano Quintet is remarkable for the range and sharp contrast of its moods, and nowhere is this more evident than in its opening Moderato. This movement is based on a wealth of ideas, all presented in the first few moments. The very beginning is particularly impressive: the piano quietly announces the movement's main theme, while in the background the strings sound the three-note figure that will echo like faint drum-taps throughout the movement. A few moments later the upper strings in

exotic harmony (English commentators invariably refer to this as "the Spanish theme") give way to a yearning cello figure, to be quickly followed by an Allegro that sounds as if it should be scored for full orchestra. The movement pitches between these extremes: at moments it can sound confident and full, almost like salon music in its smoothness. And at others, it sounds spare and hard and haunting. The bleak ending, where fragments of the beginning break down and collapse, is especially effective.

The Adagio is one of Elgar's most successful slow movements. Its glowing beginning, with a ravishing theme for viola, sounds very much like the kind of music Brahms was writing thirty years earlier. Elgar's development is extended, and an animated middle section leads to a quiet close. The final movement returns to the mood and manner of the first—Elgar even uses some of the same themes, as the slow introduction gives way to a confident Allegro (Elgar marks this *con dignita, cantabile*). This movement is very much in the grand manner: its gestures are dramatic, its themes full of sweep, its sonorities at times almost orchestral. The ending, marked *Grandioso*, is opulent in its rich sound and confidence. But just before the coda comes an extraordinary moment: the music grows quiet, and Elgar brings back the haunting and quiet music of the first movement, even with the ghostly drum-taps in the background. This note of stinging, quiet beauty in the midst of such splendor and energy is typical of the Quintet's sharply-ranging moods.

For all the surface confidence, for all its grand gestures, the Quintet is tense music in the best meaning of that term. Throughout, one feels that this is many-faceted music, that those faces are often at odds emotionally with each other, and that from their collision comes some very moving music.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger