

Celebrating Beethoven- An evening of sonatas for violin and piano

Artists in Residence at Williams College: Violinist Joanna Kurkowicz and pianist Doris Stevenson present a recital of L.van Beethoven Violin and Piano Sonatas celebrating the composer's 250th anniversary.

The featured sonatas allow the violin and piano duo to shine in a truly collaborative spirit. Sonata No.4 in A minor Op.23, written in the classical style of three movements, is a primary example of nearly equal partnership between two instruments. The piece has restless and urgent quality in the fast movements. The second movement is noted as “andante scherzos, piu allegretto”, a notable variation from the usual scherzo or slow movement of the other sonatas. Sonata No.7 in C minor Op.30, a favorite of many, considered one of the most dramatic of the ten sonatas, makes a memorable impression in the style of “Eroica” with its dark, symphonic content.

Program Notes

Ludvig van Beethoven (1770-1827) may have been only a competent violinist, but his understanding of the instrument was profound, as his magnificent Violin Concerto, the string quartets, and his other chamber works make clear. At the center of Beethoven’s chamber music for violin are his ten sonatas. Some of Beethoven’s works (his symphonies, quartets, and piano sonatas) span his career, and we can trace his development as a composer in those forms. But his violin sonatas do not span his career: he had written nine of the ten before he composed the “Eroica,” the work that led the way to what we call his “Heroic Style.” When Beethoven completed the “Kreutzer” Sonata in the spring of 1803, he was only 32 years old: he would live for more than twenty years and would write only one more violin sonata.

One thing becomes clear instantly as we listen to Beethoven’s Violin Sonatas: how well he wrote for both violin and piano. These are duo-sonatas in the best sense of the term—they feature idiomatic writing for both instruments, they are beautifully balanced, and they show us Beethoven beginning to experiment and expand the form, just as he was doing with the symphony and the string quartet.

Eric Bromberger

Sonata no. 4 in A minor, Op. 22

Abram Loft assesses the A-minor sonata in these terms: "In no other Beethoven sonata will the duo find a greater challenge to its sense of drama, of timing, of musical repartee ... It is one of the most exciting pieces that amateur or professional can play."

There is much that is unusual about this sonata. It is one of just two in a minor key (the seventh in C minor is the other) Its relentless first movement is in 6/8 meter, unusual for an opening movement of a sonata, as is the tempo marking of presto. Still another unorthodox point to note is the introduction of a new theme (in F major) within the development section, and still another one (in A minor) at the juncture of the development and recapitulation. The playful second movement is neither a slow movement nor a scherzo, but combines aspects of both and supports three full themes. The rondo finale returns to the driving momentum of the opening movement, its urgent main theme, always initiated by the piano, returning frequently and unvaried while in between statements of this theme are found a wealth of episodes contrasting in mood, texture, key, dynamic level and register.

There are remnants of the salon in the first three sonatas, Op. 12 (dedicated to Salieri), while a new, more intense spirit enters with the Sonata in A minor, Op. 23, dedicated by Beethoven to one of his principal patrons of the time, Count Moritz von Fries. And while even its three predecessors in the canon show a strong tendency toward equality in the distribution of materials, it is with the present work that all thoughts are banished of the description carried in published editions of most Classical-era sonatas: "For the pianoforte with accompaniment of the violin".

In these works, the violin and piano are equal partners. The melody is traded between the two instruments, sometimes so artfully that you forget for a moment which instrument is carrying it. When the violin is not playing melody, it is accompanying the pianist with a number of styles familiar from folk music: a long held double stop, a repeated set of four note figures or a series of little interjections.

Violin sonata no. 7 in C minor, Op. 30, no. 2

Without question, this sonata is one of the grandest in the violinist's repertory. It is a work of drama, passion, power and almost symphonic scope. The key of C minor immediately alerts us to music of serious import. Of Beethoven's ten violin sonatas, this is the "biggest" in feel and scope. It is also one of just three (Nos. 5 and 10 are the others) to boast four movements rather than the standard three.

Sonata Op. 30, No. 2 in C minor, written in 1802, can be considered the first of the monumental works for the violin-piano duo literature. Significantly, of the seven instrumental works that Beethoven was writing during the same period, the Sonata Op. 30, No. 2 and three other compositions, the *Sonate Pathétique*, the String Trio Op. 9, No. 3, and the Piano Concerto No. 3, all shared the key of C minor. The mood represented by this key seems suited to the inner turmoil that Beethoven must have felt as he became increasingly aware of the realities of his impending deafness.

The emotional climate for the entire piece is definitively set in the fateful opening. The impetuous momentum, the sudden turning of corners, and the tragic sonority combine with tuneful, and at times playful, sections, to create not a disarray of differences but a work of epic proportion with great power and cohesiveness.

The sonata begins with rather understated dynamics and mysterious octaves. The transparency of the sound of octaves combined with the silences of the rests only increases the intensity and sense of dread, which is followed by agitated runs and sudden outbursts. This hair-raising beginning soon gives way to a contrasting section where the theme resembles a military march.

The relationship of the two instruments is of a complementary nature, and the collaboration remains strong throughout the work. While the sound palette of the notes themselves is strongly keyboard-inspired, the importance of both parts is laid out quite evenly.

In the slow movement, *Adagio cantabile*, the song-like quality and the warmth of emotion is consistent and compelling. The idyllic theme, first stated by the piano, is presented by both instruments throughout the movement in new and different ways. However, even in this calmest of the sonata's movements, there are two

moments of sudden outbursts, in which ascending scales appear unexpectedly. Before the shock registers, though, the lyricism of the theme returns.

The rhythmic figure in the Scherzo that follows clearly reminds the listener of the military-inspired tune from the first movement. However, here the meter is in three, and particularly in the middle (Trio) section, the feeling of a German country dance dominates. In the outer sections, the placement of the grace notes adds humor, and wit.

In the Finale, the anguish and the fear-imbued atmosphere return. The tempo of this movement is quite fast, causing a breathless quality, and the sudden outbursts and the stops are, for that reason, even more striking. In the Coda (marked Presto), the sentiment is one of fury, and while the Sonata concludes in the tonic chord of C minor, the dominating character of uneasiness and nervousness remain beyond the final notes.

Midori