

SEATTLE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

CONCERT I  
December 6, 2024

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Sonata No. 1 in D Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 12, No. 1  
*Allegro con brio*  
*Tema con Variazioni: Andante con moto*  
*Rondo: Allegro*

Sonata No. 2 in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 12, No. 2  
*Allegro vivace*  
*Andante, più tosto Allegretto*  
*Allegro piacevole*

Sonata No. 3 in E-flat Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 12, No. 3  
*Allegro con spirito*  
*Adagio con molt' espressione*  
*Allegro molto*

Sonata No. 4 in A minor for Violin and Piano, Op. 23  
*Presto*  
*Andante scherzoso, più allegretto*  
*Allegro molto*

Sonata No. 5 in F Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 24, "Spring"  
*Allegro*  
*Adagio molto espressivo*  
*Scherzo: Allegro molto*  
*Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo*

## THE BEETHOVEN VIOLIN SONATAS

Beethoven learned to play the violin as a boy, but the violin was never really “his” instrument. Beethoven was a pianist, and he became one of the greatest in Europe. But in that era it was expected that professional musicians would play both a keyboard and a stringed instrument. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Dvořák, and Richard Strauss all played both the violin and piano, though several of them—including Beethoven—preferred the viola. This sort of musical dexterity has pretty much vanished over the last century or so.

Beethoven 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. These two concerts bring the welcome and unusual opportunity to hear all ten of Beethoven's violin sonatas, performed in chronological order. The first of these recitals includes the three sonatas of his Opus 12, which at moments still trail the eighteenth-century conception of this music as primarily a keyboard sonata with violin accompaniment, as well as the two sharply-contrasted sonatas of Opus 23 and Opus 24. The second program offers the final five violin sonatas. It begins with the three sonatas

of Opus 30, written during the catastrophic summer of 1802 when Beethoven realized he was going deaf. Then we hear a great leap forward with the “*Kreutzer*” *Sonata*. Beethoven knew he was getting into deeper waters with this sonata—he warned violinists that it was “written in a very concertante style, quasi-concerto-like.” And finally, after a pause lasting a decade, Beethoven wrote his last, his strangest, and perhaps his most wonderful violin sonata, the *Tenth*.

If only Beethoven had come back after still another decade and written one more violin sonata! In his final period Beethoven transformed our conception of what the piano sonata might be, and one late violin sonata might have done the same thing for that instrument. But it was not to be, and we’ll have to content ourselves with the ten sonatas we do have. These concerts will let us hear those ten sonatas in all their variety, their growth, their power, and their beauty.

### **Sonata No. 1 in D Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 12, No. 1**

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

At the age of not quite 22, Beethoven arrived in Vienna in November 1792, and he would remain there for the rest of his life. Beethoven quickly made his reputation for his piano-playing, but he wanted to be a composer, and that took time. Mozart appears almost to have been born with an instinctive understanding of sonata form, but it took Beethoven nearly a decade of hard work to master the classical forms Haydn and Mozart had brought to a high level of expression. In his adopted city Beethoven studied with Haydn, Albrechtsberger, and Salieri and began, however tentatively, to compose. He published a set of three piano trios in 1795, followed these with piano sonatas and cello sonatas, and began a set of six string quartets. In 1797-98 he composed three violin sonatas, which Artaria published in 1799 as Beethoven's Opus 12. Beethoven dedicated these sonatas to Antonio Salieri, who was at that time instructing him in writing for the voice.

Beethoven's model in these first efforts was inevitably the violin sonatas of Mozart,

also a pianist and violinist who wrote beautifully for both instruments. Mozart's sonatas—which that composer sometimes titled “keyboard sonatas with the accompaniment of violin”—were then very much part of music life in Vienna, and Beethoven adopted the general form of Mozart's late violin sonatas: a sonata-form first movement, a slow movement that might be in variation form, and a fast finale that was often a rondo.

Two centuries later, Beethoven first violin sonatas do not strike us as unusually distinctive music—they sound like the work of an immensely talented young composer gradually learning to make the form his own. To his contemporaries, however, these sonatas seemed to have come from a different planet. An early reviewer was flattened by them:

After having arduously worked his way through these quite peculiar sonatas, overladen with strange difficulties, he must admit that . . . he felt like a man who had thought he was going to promenade with an ingenious friend through an inviting forest, was detained every moment by hostile entanglements, and finally emerged, weary, exhausted, and without enjoyment. It is undeniable that Herr van *Beethoven* goes his own way. But what a bizarre, laborious way! Studied, studied, and perpetually studied, and no nature, no song. Indeed . . . there is only a mass of learning here, without good method. There is obstinacy for which we feel little interest, a striving for rare modulations . . . a piling on of difficulty upon difficulty, so that one loses all patience and enjoyment.

It is easy to smile at such reactions, but listening to the very beginning of Beethoven's *Sonata in D Major*, one can understand that reviewer's concerns: far from offering us “nature” or “song,” the opening of this sonata seems to explode in a shower of rockets going off in every direction. The first movement is marked *Allegro con brio*, with the emphasis on the *con brio*: this is spirited music, full of busy energy and explosive chords. A flowing second subject seems to promise relief, but the principal impression here is of energy boiling up off the page and unexpected modulations: Beethoven sets the development in F major and changes the key signature to be sure that we don't miss that. After a busy development full of rapid exchanges between the instruments, the movement returns to D major and rushes

to its conclusion on the same massive chord with which it began.

The second movement, marked *Andante con moto* and set in A major, is in variation form, and after the hyperactive first movement it brings a measure of calm. At least at first. The piano introduces the gentle eight-measure theme, which is then repeated by the violin. Four variations follow: the first is for piano accompanied by violin, the second for violin with a complex piano accompaniment, the third moves into A minor and turns tempestuous, and the fourth is built on quiet syncopations. A delicate coda draws the movement to its close. The energetic finale, marked simply *Allegro*, is a rondo in 6/8 whose central theme is energized by off-the-beat accents. This is buoyant music, full of subordinate episodes and piquant pauses. Beethoven teases the audience nicely just before the end.

### **Sonata No. 2 in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 12, No. 2**

The *Sonata in A Major*, the best-known of the set, opens with an *Allegro vivace* that presents its performers with a number of problems. From the first measure the violin plays a quiet but incessant “oom-pah-pah” figure that recurs through the movement (in both violin and piano) with almost metronomic regularity; it is the job of the performers to breathe vitality into what—in a careless performance—might become repetitive and dull. This sonata-form movement is built on a wealth of ideas: the two-note figure that accompanies the “oom-pah-pah” rhythm, a graceful 6/8 theme that blossoms out as a blast of sixteenth-notes, and—in somber contrast—a slow melody that foreshadows later Beethoven. The movement taps itself out with a comic dialogue between piano and violin on the two-note figure.

In complete contrast, the *Andante, più tosto Allegretto* wears its heart on its sleeve. Lacking the intensity of Beethoven's later slow movements, this one strikes an almost self-consciously serious pose with the heavily-dotted theme of the opening setting its tone. The final movement, *Allegro piacevole*, skips along happily on its opening melody (*piacevole* means “agreeable”). A lyric episode in D major is in much the same spirit as the opening, and the movement concludes with an energetic shower of A-major arpeggios from the piano.

### **Sonata No. 3 in E-flat Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 12, No. 3**

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.

### **Sonata No. 4 in A minor for Violin and Piano, Op. 23**

In 1800-01, shortly after completing his *First Symphony*, Beethoven composed two

violin sonatas, and evidence suggests that he intended them as a pair: not only were they composed and published together, but he apparently intended that they should be performed together. The second of these, in F major, acquired the nickname "*Spring*" and went on to well-deserved fame. Its companion, a spicy and explosive (and comic) sonata in A minor, has always languished a little in the shade of the "*Spring*" Sonata, which is too bad—this is a terrific piece of music. One of the most striking characteristics of this work is the power of its outer movements. Where the gentle "*Spring*" Sonata spins long melodies, the *Sonata in A Minor* spits out and develops short phrases full of energy. Yet—curiously—all three movements of this animated sonata end quietly. It is a shame that these two sonatas are not performed together more often—what a piquant contrast they make!

The *Presto* explodes into being on the motto-like opening subject, with the piano lashing the music forward. Beethoven makes sharp dynamic contrasts here, and the 6/8 meter—which gallops so furiously at the opening—also yields the graceful second theme. There are repeats of both exposition and development, and the end of the movement comes suddenly: massed chords suddenly collapse into a *pianissimo* close.

By contrast, the *Andante scherzoso, piu Allegretto* sings playfully, as if Beethoven is content to have fun with the listener (and the performers) after the fury of the opening. The instruments comment, answer, and imitate each other, and throughout the movement runs an ornate little theme that Beethoven treats fugally. After much pleasant interchange, the movement closes very quietly. The *Allegro molto* begins quietly as well, but here the music surges ahead continuously. The piano has the steady opening idea, while the violin's line is simplicity itself, built of repeated notes. Some of the imitation-and-answer of the middle movement recurs in the finale, and there are soaring lyric episodes here too. But the principal impression this movement makes is of a barely-restrained energy, and at the close the violin comes soaring suddenly downward and the music is over almost before one knows it, some of its energy still hovering in the air even after the instruments have stopped playing.

## Sonata No. 5 in F Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 24, “Spring”

The nickname “Spring” for this sonata did not originate with Beethoven, but this is one of those rare instances when someone else’s nickname for a piece of music is exactly right—no matter how often one has heard this music, it always sounds fresh.

The “*Spring*” Sonata opens with a long arc of seamless melody, one of the loveliest Beethoven ever wrote. Beethoven first has the violin play it, then—as if reluctant to give up something so beautiful—he gives the same theme to the piano: the double statement of the opening theme extends over 25 measures. If spring is said to go out like a lamb, there is a darker side to this music that reminds us that it can come in like a lion, and one of the particular pleasures of the opening movement is the contrast between the sunny opening melody and the darker secondary material. After an extended development, the movement ends on a fragment of the opening idea.

The *Adagio molto espressivo* is of extremely simple structure: first the piano and then the violin play the song-like main idea, which develops not through a rise in tension but by increasingly complex ornamentation. An effective touch here is the steady flow of murmuring sixteenth-notes: that rippling, murmuring sound—present throughout almost the entire movement—complements the music’s serenity.

The *Scherzo* is brilliant. One of Beethoven’s most original movements, it lasts barely a minute—the ear has only begun to adjust to the dazzling asymmetry of its rhythms when it ends. Beethoven intentionally makes it sound “wrong”—the violin appears to be one beat late—and the real fun of this movement comes at the very end, where “wrong” music resolves so gracefully that listeners suddenly become aware just how “right” it has been all along.

The concluding *Rondo* returns to the mood of the opening movement, for it too is built on what seems to be a never-ending flow of melody, music that spins on effortlessly. Full of good-spirited energy, this movement offers several varied episodes along the way, but the chief impression is the graceful ease of what is some of the sunniest music Beethoven ever wrote.



Program notes by Eric Bromberger