

SEATTLE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

CONCERT II
December 8, 2024

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Sonata No. 6 in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 30, No. 1

Allegro
Adagio molto espressivo
Allegretto con variazioni

Sonata No. 7 in C minor for Violin and Piano, Op. 30, No. 2

Allegro con brio
Adagio cantabile
Scherzo: Allegro
Finale: Allegro

Sonata No. 8 in G Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 30, No. 3

Allegro assai
Tempo di Minuetto, ma molto moderato e grazioso
Allegro vivace

Sonata No. 9 in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 47, "Kreutzer"

Adagio sostenuto; Presto
Andante con Variazioni
Finale: Presto

Sonata No. 10 in G Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 96

Allegro moderato
Adagio espressivo
Scherzo: Allegro
Poco Allegretto; Adagio espressivo

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.

Sonatas No. 6-8 for Violin and Piano, Op. 30

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

Beethoven liked to escape from hot Vienna to spend his summers in the countryside, and in April 1802 he moved to Heiligenstadt. Now a suburb of Vienna, Heiligenstadt was then a rural village, offering sunshine, streams and meadows, and a view of distant mountains. Yet for all its productiveness, this was an agonizing summer for Beethoven—he finally had to face the fact that his hearing problems would eventually mean total deafness. In an extraordinary letter to his two brothers that fall before he returned to Vienna, never sent and perhaps written to himself, Beethoven confessed that he had considered suicide that summer.

But that summer proved extremely productive for the 31-year-old composer. In Heiligenstadt Beethoven completed the three violin sonatas of his Opus 30, the three piano sonatas of Opus 31, his *Second Symphony*, and several other works for piano. While there are occasional moments of turmoil in this music, this is in general some of the sunniest

music—particularly the symphony—he ever wrote. Beethoven was much too great an artist to let the events of his own life dictate or stain his art. He would have agreed completely with T.S. Eliot that the greater the artist, the greater the separation he makes between his life and his art, and one looks in vain (fortunately!) for suicidal impulses in the music Beethoven wrote during the summer of 1802.

Sonata No. 6 in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 30, No. 1

The first of these three sonatas—in A Major—is the least familiar of the set. It is not stormy and dramatic like the second, nor brilliant like the third. This is music of neither flash nor dazzle, and in fact understatement is the key to its powerful appeal: the *Sonata in A Major* is music of quiet nobility. It is also apparently the sonata that gave Beethoven the most trouble; he had originally written a dramatic finale but discarded it and wrote a new final movement (the discarded movement later became the finale of the *Kreutzer Sonata*).

The *Allegro* grows smoothly out of the piano's quiet opening figure, the violin entering as part of the same noble rising phrase. The second theme, announced first by the piano and quickly repeated by the violin, is flowing and melodic. This movement defies easy description. Graceful and elegant it certainly is, and—despite some effective contrast of loud and soft passages—it remains gentle throughout; yet even this description does not begin to convey the grandeur of this music, which is all the more effective because it refuses to become brilliant or go to dramatic extremes.

The *Adagio molto espressivo* is built on the violin's lovely opening melody. This movement sounds very much like Mozart's *cantabile* slow movements—a long slow melody turns into a graceful arc of music. Beethoven gives the piano a quietly-rocking accompaniment, which later becomes quiet triplets. The last movement—*Allegro con variazioni*—is also very much in the manner of Mozart, who used theme-and-variation form for the last movement of several of his violin sonatas. Beethoven was right to reject his original finale—it would have overpowered the first two movements, and it now forms a proper conclusion to the massive *Kreutzer Sonata*. The present finale is a perfect close for

this sonata. The opening theme undergoes six variations, all easily followed, as this graceful music moves to its poised conclusion.

Sonata No. 7 in C minor for Violin and Piano, Op. 30, No. 2

The choice of key for this sonata is important, for C minor was the key Beethoven employed for works of unusual intensity. The recently-completed "*Pathétique*" Sonata, *Fourth String Quartet*, and *Third Piano Concerto* were in C minor, and in the next several years Beethoven would use that key for the *Funeral March* of the *Eroica*, the *Fifth Symphony*, and the *Coriolan Overture*. The musical conflict that fires those works is also evident in this sonata, which is—with the *Kreutzer Sonata*—the most dramatic of Beethoven's ten violin sonatas.

The opening movement is marked *Allegro con brio*, the same indication Beethoven would later use for the opening movements of the *Third* and *Fifth Symphonies*, and the sonata's first movement has a dramatic scope similar to those symphonies. It opens quietly with a recurrent brooding figure that ends with a sudden turn, like the quick flick of a dragon's tail. The violin soon picks this up and also has the second subject, which marches along clipped dotted rhythms. There is no exposition repeat, and Beethoven slips into the development quietly, but soon the energy pent up in these simple figures is unleashed—this dramatic music features massive chording by both instruments and drives to a huge climax.

By contrast, the *Adagio cantabile* opens with a melody of disarming gentleness, once again announced by the piano, and much of this movement sings gracefully. As it develops, however, the accompaniment grows more complex, and soon these murmuring runs begin to take over the music; Beethoven makes sharp dynamic contrasts before bringing the movement to a quiet close. The brief *Scherzo* is full of stinging accents and rhythmic surprises; its trio section is a subtle variation of the movement's opening theme, here treated in canon.

The *Finale*, marked *Allegro*, returns to the mood of the opening movement—again there is a quiet but ominous opening full of suppressed energy that will later explode to life.

This finale is in modified sonata-rondo form, and despite an occasional air of play and some appealing lyric moments, the movement partakes of the same atmosphere of suppressed tension that has marked the entire sonata. Beethoven brings it to a suitably dramatic close with a blazing coda marked *Presto* that remains resolutely in C minor.

Sonata No. 8 in G Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 30, No. 3

The last of the three violin sonatas Beethoven wrote in Heiligenstadt has deservedly become one of his most popular. If the first of the three is characterized by quiet nobility and the second by turbulent drama, the last is marked by high spirits and energy. Of all Beethoven's violin sonatas, this one looks the most "black" on the page, for its outer movements are built on an almost incessant pulse of sixteenth-notes. But for all its energy, this sonata never sounds forced or hurried. Throughout, it remains one of Beethoven's freshest and most graceful scores.

The very beginning of the *Allegro assai* sets the mood: quietly but suddenly the music winds up and leaps upward across nearly three octaves. It is a brilliant beginning, and Beethoven will make full use of the energy compressed into those three quick octaves. Almost instantly the flowing second theme is heard, and these two ideas—one turbulent, the other lyric—alternate throughout the movement before the music comes to a close made all the more effective by its sudden silence.

Beethoven marks the second movement *Tempo di Minuetto*, but specifies *ma molto moderato e grazioso*. This is not the sort of minuet one might dance to, and the key signal is *grazioso*, for this is unusually graceful music. The beginning is wonderful. The piano has the haunting main theme, while the violin accompanies. But the violin accompaniment has such a distinct character that it is almost as if Beethoven is offering two quite different themes simultaneously. Both ideas are part of the development, interrupted at times by other episodes before the quiet close: the main theme breaks down into fragments and vanishes in a wisp of sound.

The concluding *Allegro vivace* is a perpetual-motion movement: the piano launches

things on their way, and both instruments hurtle through the good-natured finale. A second theme tries to establish itself but is quickly swept aside by the opening theme, which powers its way cheerfully forward. There are some nice touches along the way: at one point the music comes to a screeching stop, and then over the piano's "oom-pah" rhythm Beethoven launches into the "wrong" key of E-flat, only to make his way back into the home key of G to bring this sonata to its brilliant close.

Sonata No. 9 in A Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 47 "Kreutzer"

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Beethoven was beginning to get restless. The young man who had arrived in Vienna in 1792 was a tremendous pianist, but as a composer still had much to learn, and he spent the next decade slowly mastering the High Classical form of Haydn and Mozart. By 1802 he had composed two symphonies, three piano concertos, a set of six string quartets, and numerous sonatas for piano, for violin, and for cello. These had all been acclaimed in Vienna, but in that same year Beethoven wrote to his friend Werner Krumpholtz: "I'm not satisfied with what I've composed up to now. From now on I intend to embark on a new path." That "new path" would become clear late in 1803 with the composition of the "*Eroica*." That symphony revolutionized music—it engaged the most serious issues, and in music of unparalleled drama and scope it resolved them.

But even before the "*Eroica*," there were indications of Beethoven's "new path." Early in 1803 the composer met the violinist George Polgreen Bridgetower (1778-1860). Bridgetower, then 25, was the son of Joannis Fredericus de Augustus, who was of African descent, and Maria Schmid, who was German-Polish. A decade earlier, he had performed in the orchestra for Haydn's concerts in London and was now establishing himself as a touring virtuoso across Europe. Bridgetower and Beethoven quickly became friends, and when the violinist proposed a joint concert at which they would perform a new sonata, the composer agreed. But, as was often the case, Beethoven found himself pressed for time. He made the process easier by retrieving a final movement that he had written for a violin sonata the previous year and then discarded. Now, in effect working backwards, he rushed to get the

first two movements done in time for the scheduled concert on May 22. He didn't make it. The concert had to be postponed two days, and even then Beethoven barely got it done: he called his copyist at 4:30 that morning to begin copying a part for him, and at the concert he and Bridgetower had to perform some of the music from Beethoven's manuscript; the piano part for the first movement was still in such fragmentary form that Beethoven was probably playing some of it just from sketches.

As soon as he completed this sonata, Beethoven set to work on the "*Eroica*," which would occupy him for the next six months. While the sonata does not engage the heroic issues of the first movement of that symphony, it has something of the *Eroica's* slashing power and vast scope. Beethoven was well aware of this and warned performers that the sonata was "written in a very concertante style, quasi-concerto-like." From the first instant, one senses that this is music conceived on a grand scale. The sonata opens with a slow introduction (the only one in Beethoven's ten violin sonatas), a cadenza-like entrance for the violin alone. The piano makes a similarly dramatic entrance, and gradually the two instruments outline the interval of a rising second (E to F#). At the *Presto*, that interval collapses into a half-step, the movement jumps into A minor, and the music whips ahead. Beethoven provides a chorale-like second subject marked *dolce*, but this island of calm makes only the briefest of returns in the course of this furious movement. The burning energy of that *Presto* opening is never far off: the music rips along an almost machine-gun-like patter of eight-notes, and after a hyperactive development, the movement drives to its abrupt cadence.

Relief comes in the *Andante con Variazioni*. The piano introduces the melody, amiable but already fairly complex, the violin repeats it, and the two instruments briefly extend it. There follow four lengthy and highly elaborated variations, and while the gentle mood of the fundamental theme is never violated, these variations demand some complex and demanding playing. For all its complexities, this is a lovely movement, and Beethoven and Bridgetower had to repeat it at the premiere.

The final movement opens with a bang—a stark A-Major chord—and off the music goes.

Beethoven had composed this movement, a tarantella, a year earlier, intending that it should be the finale of his *Violin Sonata in A Major, Opus 30, No. 1*. But he pulled it out and wrote a new finale for the earlier sonata, and that was a wise decision: this fiery finale would have overpowered that gentle sonata. Here, it dances with a furious energy that makes it a worthy counterpart to the first movement. At several points, Beethoven moves out of the driving 6/8 tarantella meter and offers brief interludes in 2/4. These stately, reserved moments bring the only relief in a movement that overflows with seething energy, a movement that here becomes the perfect conclusion to one of the most powerful pieces of chamber music ever written.

Beethoven was so taken with Bridgetower's playing that he intended to dedicate the sonata to him. And so we might know this music today as the "*Bridgetower*" *Sonata* but for the fact that the composer and the violinist quarreled, apparently over a remark that Bridgetower made about a woman Beethoven knew. The two eventually made up, but in the meantime Beethoven had dedicated the sonata to the French violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer, and so we know it today as the "*Kreutzer*" *Sonata*. Ironically, Kreutzer did not like this music—Berlioz reported that "the celebrated violinist could never bring himself to play this outrageously incomprehensible composition."

Sonata No. 10 in G Major for Violin and Piano, Op. 96

Beethoven wrote the *Sonata in G Major* at the end of 1812, shortly after completing his *Seventh* and *Eighth Symphonies*. French violinist Pierre Rodé—solo violinist to Napoleon and later to the czar in St. Petersburg—was making a visit to Vienna, and Beethoven wrote the sonata for that occasion, claiming that he had tried to cast the last movement in the somewhat less dramatic style that Rodé preferred. Rodé did give the first performance in Vienna on December 29, 1812, and on that occasion the pianist was Beethoven's pupil and patron, the Archduke Rudolph—Beethoven's hearing had deteriorated so badly by this time that he could no longer take part in ensemble performances. Beethoven's hearing may have deteriorated, but not so far as to prevent his being disappointed in Rodé's playing. He kept

the sonata in manuscript for several years, revised it in 1814-15, and finally published it in 1816.

Of Beethoven's ten violin sonatas, nine were written in the comparatively short span of six years: 1797 to 1803. Of course there was tremendous growth in those six years—think of the difference between the Mozartean early sonatas and the *Kreutzer Sonata*—but it is also true that Beethoven's violin sonatas do not span his career in the way that his piano sonatas, string quartets, and symphonies do. Only the *Sonata in G Major* comes from outside that six-year span, and there are no violin sonatas from the final fifteen years of the composer's life. But this final sonata—so different from the first nine—gives us some sense of what a late violin sonata might have been like, for many of the characteristics of Beethoven's late style are already present here: a heartfelt slow movement derived from the simplest materials, a sharply-focused and almost brusque scherzo, and a theme-and-variation finale of unusual structure and complexity. Even the restrained first movement, music of understatement and “inwardness,” looks ahead to the works Beethoven would write during the extraordinary final seven years of his life.

The *Allegro moderato* opens as simply as possible. The violin's quiet four-note figure is immediately answered by the piano, and that easy dialogue between the instruments characterizes this restrained, almost rhapsodic movement. The dancing second theme is presented first by piano with violin accompaniment, and then the instruments trade roles. The brief development section—more a discussion of the material than a dramatic evolution of it—leads to a full recapitulation of the opening. Throughout, Beethoven repeatedly reminds the performers: *dolce, sempre piano* (“sweet, always quiet”).

The *Adagio espressivo* is built on a theme of moving simplicity, much like the slow movements of the late quartets. The piano lays out this long main idea, and the violin soon joins it. This movement breathes an air of serenity that is all the more remarkable when one sees the printed page: it is almost black with Beethoven's elaborate ornamentation, much of it in 64th notes that he has carefully written out. The *Scherzo* follows without pause. Propulsive and quite brief, it rides along off-the-beat accents in its outer sections and a

flowing trio in E-flat Major. There are no exposition repeats in this concise movement, which concludes with a very short G-Major coda.

The concluding *Poco Allegretto* is one of the most extraordinary movements in all ten of Beethoven's violin sonatas. It opens with a tune that sings simply and agreeably. But instead of the expected rondo-finale, Beethoven writes a series of variations on this opening tune. Just as the ear has adapted to variation form—and just as the music has grown increasingly animated—Beethoven throws one of his wildest curves: the tempo becomes *Adagio espressivo*, and the mood returns to that of the slow movement, heartfelt and intense. Beethoven writes out ornamentation here so elaborate that the instruments almost seem to have individual cadenzas. The very end of the movement is as unusual as the rest—the opening tempo returns, but now this breaks down into a series of individual sequences at different speeds and in quite different moods. Finally, at the point when we have lost any sense of motion or direction, Beethoven whips matters to a sudden close, the piano flashing upward to strike the final chord.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger