

ISABELLE FAUST / ALEXANDER MELNIKOV

November 1, 2016

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Violin Sonata in A Minor, Opus 23

Presto

Andante scherzoso, più allegretto

Allegro molto

Violin Sonata in F Major, Opus 24 “Spring”

Allegro

Adagio molto espressivo

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo

INTERMISSION

Violin Sonata in G Major, Opus 96

Allegro moderato

Adagio espressivo

Scherzo: Allegro

Poco Allegretto; Adagio espressivo

Violin Sonata in A Minor, Opus 23

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

In 1800-01, shortly after completing his *First Symphony*, Beethoven composed two violin sonatas, and evidence suggests that he intended them as a set. Not only were they composed and published together, but he apparently intended that they should be performed together. And so this recital offers the rare opportunity to hear these two sonatas as Beethoven wished them to be performed. One 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.

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 in F Major for Violin and Piano, Opus 24 “Spring”

What a study in contrasts these two sonatas make! The *Sonata in A Minor* is sharp, pithy, almost violent; the “*Spring*” is flowing, long-lined, and relaxed. 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.

Violin Sonata in G Major, Opus 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 six 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