

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Dr. Jannie Burdeti

Béla Bartók: Sonata for Solo Violin Sz. 117, BB 124

Tempo di ciaccona

Fuga: Risoluto, non troppo vivo

Melodia: Adagio

Presto

Yehudi Menuhin received the manuscript of Bartók's Sonata for solo violin in March 1944 at the age of twenty-seven. He later wrote, "Little did I foresee that he would write me one of the masterpieces of all time. . . . I admit I was shaken. It seemed to me almost unplayable." However, after a few months of study, the celebrated violinist revised his initial view: "The Solo Sonata is eminently playable, beautifully composed for the violin, one of the most dramatic and fulfilling works that I know of, [and the] most important composition for violin alone since Bach." A decade prior, the young Menuhin had been the first violinist in history to undertake the monumental task of recording the complete set of Partitas and Sonatas for solo violin by Bach. Moreover, one of the first pieces that Bartók heard Menuhin perform live was Bach's unaccompanied Sonata in C Major. Perhaps inspired by the violinist's playing, when he was approached by Menuhin for a commission—"not hoping for a third concerto, just a work for violin alone"—Bartók modeled his solo sonata on Bach's solo violin works, which follow the structure of Italian church sonatas (*sonata da chiesa*): a slow introduction followed by a fugue, a lyrical slow movement, and a fast finale.

Bartók's first movement, titled *Tempo di ciaccona*, makes use of the pacing of the chaconne genre, the gravitational tendency toward the second beat, and a similar eight-bar phrase construction. In addition, Bartók would no doubt have also had in his mind's ear the Sonata in B Minor for solo cello, by his friend and fellow Hungarian Zoltán

Kodály, written a few decades earlier, which opens with a similar panache. Not unlike Kodály's work, Bartók's *Tempo di ciaccona* requires the performer to be almost constantly playing double, triple, or quadruple stops.

The steely fugal movement opens with an austere subject punctuated by silences. Menuhin remarked that he found this to be the most brutal music he ever encountered. It is a four-voice fugue, and although its exposition proceeds as expected, the voices soon converse freely. Musicologist Halsey Stevens describes it as a "fugal fantasy."

The third movement, *Melodia*, features music that Bartók had jotted down in his "Arab field book." It begins with a haunting chromatic melody. As is characteristic of many of his slow movements, Bartók features "night music," evoking the colorful sounds of nature after sunset.

In the original manuscript of the final movement, Bartók notates quarter tones (smaller subdivisions of the scale than the twelve-note Western system), illustrated by arrows. Menuhin writes: "[He] gave me the option of playing these passages in half tones [as in the Western scale], and given that I had only weeks to prepare the Sonata, I found the demand of accurate quarter tones in fast tempo too intimidating and chose his alternative." Today, both versions are performed. Elements from previous movements peek through the frenzy of constant sixteenth notes. After the whirlwind, the sonata finishes fearlessly on a triumphant G-major chord.

Not unlike Mozart and Schubert, Bartók, despite his fame, faced great financial troubles during the final years of his life. He wrote to his son Péter: "Here am I with my 'world-fame,' and in such misery. Of course, one can not fill one's stomach with world-fame!" To avoid the Nazis in Hungary, Bartók moved to the United States in 1940 as a political exile. The last five years of his life, from 1940 to 1945, were fraught with difficulties finding performances and paying bills, as well as ill health that prevented him from composing, all while doctors struggled to diagnose and treat his leukemia. His last

works included his Solo Violin Sonata, Third Piano Concerto, Concerto for Orchestra, and a sketch of his Viola Concerto.

Franz Schubert:
“Ständchen” from *Schwanengesang*, D. 957, No. 4
(arr. By Mischa Elman)

Written during the last months of the composer’s brief life of thirty-one years, *Ständchen* remains one of Schubert’s most well-loved songs, composed for voice and piano. Tobias Haslinger published it after Schubert’s death as the fourth piece of his song cycle *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song). Written by poet and music critic Ludwig Rellstab, the poetry exudes the passionate yearning of a lover for the beloved. It begins, “Softly my songs plead / through the night to you; / down into the silent grove, / beloved, come to me!”

Franz Schubert:
“Sei mir gegrüßt,” D. 741
(arr. By Stella Chen)

Not unlike *Ständchen* in both its meter and piano accompaniment, *Sei mir gegrüßt* (I greet you) appeared a few years earlier, in 1822. The poet was Friedrich Rückert, who with his poetry inspired not only Schubert but also Robert and Clara Schumann, Brahms, Mahler, Richard Strauss, Bartók, and many others. Rückert was fluent in thirty languages, and his translations of Asian poetry are widely celebrated.

Sei mir gegrüßt conveys the ecstasy of love with such surges of emotion as “You who were torn from me and my kisses, / I greet you! / I kiss you! . . . One breath of love dissolves time and space, / and I am with you, / you are with me; / I hold you closely in my arms’ embrace, / I greet you! / I kiss you!”

Eleanor Alberga: No-Man's-Land Lullaby

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1949, Eleanor Alberga decided at the early age of five, when she began lessons, that she would become a concert pianist. In her words, at twelve, she suddenly fell madly in love with the music of Bartók, who holds a powerful influence on her to this day. Her strongest musical influences include the tonality and rhythms of her native Caribbean heritage, as well as contemporary European music, and she finds much inspiration in her dreams, in nature, and in dance. Alberga lives in the UK with her husband, violinist Thomas Bowes.

Of her work *No-Man's-Land Lullaby*, she writes:

“Setting about writing a new work for violin and piano in the summer of 1996, I had planned a somewhat lightweight and predominately up-beat piece. However, I was to receive visitations which ensured that the piece which emerged as *No-Man's-Land Lullaby* has neither of these qualities. Indeed, for me the work became a kind of acknowledgement of European-ness and a realization that her two World Wars were part of my heritage also.

“Visiting parts of Europe over that summer of 1996 I was struck by the almost unreal beauty of the landscapes, yet I received a heavy sadness in the atmosphere that took me back to the events of half a century ago, some of which had been played out against this very scenery. At the same time I was visited by a melody. It arrived unbidden and would not leave me alone. It seemed however, to offer comfort.

“It was the imagery of the First World War that seemed finally to bring these things together, especially the image of men dying slowly and uncomforted in a place called *No-Man's-Land*. The piece is cast in three sections and is entirely based on the melody that emerges most identifiably towards the end.”

The melody that is revealed near the end hints at Brahms's famous *Wiegenlied* (Lullaby). An alternate title of this piece appears on Alberga's website as "No Man's Medley."

Richard Strauss: Violin Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 18

Allegro, ma non troppo

Improvisation: Andante cantabile

Finale: Andante — Allegro

Under the tutelage of his father, Franz—a French horn player so accomplished that he was dubbed the “Joachim of the horn”—Richard Strauss was nourished on the music of the classical masters: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. He began learning the piano at three years old and violin at eight. Written in 1887 and preceded by Op. 5 and Op. 6 (a piano and cello sonata, respectively), Richard Strauss's Violin Sonata marks the last of his early instrumental works and an end to his use of classical forms.

During the conception of his violin sonata, Strauss perfected his mastery of orchestral writing, and indeed, this sonata boasts epic proportions, breadth, and an intoxicating intensity of Romantic fervor, evoking the full spectrum of symphonic colors. Significant influences may have been his extensive exposure to orchestral music during this time period: he joined his father's amateur orchestra as a violinist in 1882, trained with Hans von Bülow in the rival schools of Brahms and Wagner (which was considered quite unusual), and held the position as the third conductor in the Munich Court Opera between 1886-1889. The nature of his extremely Romantic writing during this period is also said to result from his love for Pauline de Ahna, his wife-to-be.

The first movement of the sonata opens with a heroic gesture, reminiscent of a brass section. Its energetic rhythmic motive returns in various guises in a “truly symphonic treatment either in Lisztian unison, declamatory phrases, cumulative imitation, or through the tension of ostinato,” as noted by Norman Del Mar. The music is

filled with moments of great tenderness and intimacy, as well as an abundance of melodic material. The second theme is a soaring melody that spans two and a half octaves. Soon after, the development reestablishes the obsessive rhythmic element first heard in the beginning.

Steeped in lyrical elegance, the central movement, “Improvisation,” opens like a song without words. A stormy section follows, quoting Schubert’s *Erlking* and later dissolving into a reprise of the opening melody. Del Mar writes that, despite its ABA form, the moniker of “improvisation” stems from its middle section, after the storm, “in the sudden disintegration . . . into an infinitely delicate lace-work of rapid Chopinesque figures.” The coda sneaks in a hidden quote from the Adagio of Beethoven’s *Pathétique* Sonata.

After a foreboding and somber piano introduction, where Strauss anticipates the principal theme of the ensuing Allegro, the finale makes a return to the bravura character of the first movement, calling to mind his tone poem *Don Juan*. He includes a reference to Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* amid the rapidly rising figures. Following the vigorous and adventurous development section, a tremendous flourish for the piano heralds the recapitulation. The completion of this violin sonata of symphonic scope was a stepping stone for Strauss, as he would for the next years turn his attention toward the symphonic tone poem.



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