

Inside the Concert with Albert Combrink
Rachel-Lee Priday & François du Toit - 11 March 2022

Franz Schubert (1797 - 1828): Violina Sonatina No.1 in D Major, D 384, Op. Posth. 137

Allegro Molto II Andante II Allegro Vivace



It is a tragedy that Schubert died as young as he did, but it is also a tragedy that more of his works were not known while he was alive. Schubert wrote 3 Violin Sonatas at the age of 19 which were only published after his death, becoming instantly popular and earning the publisher quite a bit of money. To attract a growing amateur market, they were published as “Sonatinas” but in fact they are fully grown Sonatas, albeit compact and concise.

It is extraordinary how well Schubert had absorbed the Mozartian model of formal grace and lyric charm over the emotional heroics that were developing around him and - in only a few years - would lead the way to the individualist path of a Brahms or Beethoven.

Despite the tempo indication of *allegro molto* (Very fast and lively), the deceptively simple opening material with simple chords and accompaniment patterns recall some of the depictions of streams and rivers which abound in Schubert’s *Lieder*. The violin remains lyrical and occasionally trades the solo-line with the pianist. The odd turn to the minor appears to be only steppingstones to structural points on a map of an unthreatening landscape.

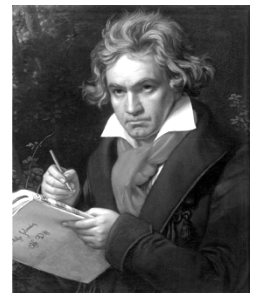
The second movement is a concise ternary structure, built closely on the Mozartian model. The middle section simply starts in the minor key, presenting its intimate song of despair without any preparation or indeed, it would seem, any thought that an audience might be present. This is art speaking to itself and allowing the audience to catch a glimpse. After this very brief dive into despair, the music simply turns back to the first section, with a gentle variation of violin arpeggios providing texture in the undramatic middle voice of the violin, which has the final melodic say.

The *allegro vivace* (Lively and Fast) tempo-indication of the third movement is again taken with an un-Lisztian pinch of salt – although unexpected double octaves in either hand of the piano and virtuosic leaps in the violin belie the difficulty of the music. The athletic leaps seem to portray youthful energy and joy rather than heroism. The lightness and charm of the work gives little hint that it is rather tricky to perform.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827): Sonata No. 5 in F Major Op.24. *Frühlingssonate* (Spring Sonata)

Allegro II Adagio molto espressivo II Scherzo: Allegro molto II Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo

Beethoven’s 4th and 5th Violin Sonatas make a clear stylistic break from the first three, and are the first works of what musicologists define as Beethoven’s Middle Period: a deliberate attempt to escape the model of Mozart and Haydn, but still finding a way of pouring the new ideals of Romanticism into the formal designs of the Classical period. Graceful themes, transparent textures with very little use of the piano’s sustain pedal and traditional accompaniment figures and Alberti Bass patterns abound, but the deeper, darker Beethoven is already straining at the seams.



Named *The Spring Sonata* by its dedicatee Count Moritz von Fries, it was published in 1801, not in a set with the 4th Sonata, but as a separate work standing on its own.

It opens with a flow of easy lyricism, and a gentle radiance, which explains the nickname of the work. The slow movement is quite long for a sonata at this point in history, but Beethoven has the ability to create

tranquil landscapes, where no deliberate activity is driving time or action to any particular point. Undulating piano of the simplest chordal outline, set up a tranquil landscape where the melody – the views – can simply be taken in and enjoyed. Some extremely complicated rhythmic decorations simply float on top of the hypnotic piano part without intruding. Even a few dips into the minor keys do not bump the listener out of the meditation

The third movement is a brief *Scherzo* (literally a little joke) which replaced the *Minuet*. Beethoven used the *Scherzo* as a pallet-cleanser between the introspective slow movement and the more intellectually robust finale. He did this in each of his 9 Symphonies, for example. The violin and piano are playing deliberately out-of-synch and spend a frantic minute trying to catch one another before landing perfectly on the mathematical final downbeat.

The fourth movement is a classical *Rondo* (refrain), which alternates with other contrasting themes or “episodes”. The form developed in the Baroque era and is still in use in pop music today. In contrast to the first movement, the piano tends to lead the proceedings: a lyrical main theme introduced by the piano is immediately echoed by the violin in its sweetest singing range. Some “modern” Beethovenian features include a surprise rendition of the Rondo-Theme in the minor, and a false Key return at the point where a proper Sonata-Form recapitulation would have occurred: Beethoven could not help but expand and test the boundaries of the forms he had chosen so deliberately. This is perhaps the last relentlessly optimistic music Beethoven ever wrote. His promise as one of the great new composers in Europe would not translate into an easy or financially stable life, and his deafness and its impact on his work, livelihood and mental state was soon to be unavoidable.

Francis Poulenc (1899 - 1963): Sonata for Violin and Piano, FP 119

Allegro con fuoco II Intermezzo II Presto Tragico



Francis Poulenc was an *enfant terrible*. His early music thumbed its nose at the establishment and was unashamedly modernist while avoiding atonality. He was associated with “*Les Six*”, a group of young Parisians proudly declaiming a modern French aesthetic: irreverent, polytonal, bohemian and, as it turned out, both a home and a rallying-call for queer art between the two World Wars.

While Poulenc missed out on formal schooling because of the First World War, he was nonetheless highly educated with a deep love of literature. By the Second World War, a deeper, darker voice had crept into his works: Both Poulenc and his life partner Pierre Bernac were drafted into the military and were separated for years, which affected both deeply. Poulenc responded to his depression with a series of some of his greatest compositions. The *Sonate pour violon et piano*, written in 1943, is one of these.

Poulenc struggled to write for the solo instrument. He had composed two violin sonatas, one of which he performed with the violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange during the 1917-18 season, destroying it after the season as he considered it a failure.

“To tell the truth,” he recalled, “I don’t like the violin in the singular. In the plural, it’s quite different.” In 1942, during a visit to his country retreat in the Loire valley, he studied the Violin Sonatas of Debussy and Brahms in great detail, and drafted his own new sonata.

Poulenc found inspiration for the work in García Lorca’s famous metaphor, “The guitar makes dreams weep”. The line appears at the head of the Violin Sonata’s Intermezzo, described by the composer as “a vaguely Spanish Andante-cantilena”. This movement - the heart of the work - was composed first. The *Presto Tragico* reflects the death of the poet Lorca in the Spanish Civil War. The dramatic first movement sets the scene, and even creates Guitar effects to connect more deeply with the Spanish Civil War underlying the work.

The American composer and author Ned Rorem, who first met Poulenc “as a fan” in 1950, penned a vivid portrait of the man’s defining ambivalence. “In short,” noted Rorem, “his aspect and personality, taste and music each contained contrasts that were not alternating but simultaneous. In a single spoken paragraph he would express terror about a work in progress, hence his need for a pilgrimage to the Black Virgin’s Shrine at Rocamadour; his next breath extolled the joys of cruising the Deauville boardwalk (in search of casual sex). This was no non sequitur but the statement of a whole man always interlocking soul and flesh, sacred and profane; the double awareness of artists and of their emulators, the saints.”

The work reflects all the sharp-edged, contradictory contrasts present in Poulenc’s personality, but the music somehow blurs the boundaries between sacred and profane and creates a new language in which they are interconnected.

Jessie Montgomery (1981): Rhapsody No. 1 for Solo Violin

Rhapsody No.1 written in 2015, is the first Solo Violin work Montgomery wrote for herself to perform. It draws inspiration from the extreme technical and expressive demands of the unaccompanied works of the Belgian Eugène-Auguste Ysaÿe which serve as both Etudes and stand-alone solo works. The piece is intended to be part of a set of 6 solo violin works, each dedicated to a different contemporary violinist and inspired by a historical composer.



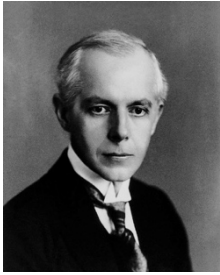
Jessie Montgomery is an acclaimed composer, violinist, and educator. She is the recipient of the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence, and her works are performed frequently around the world by leading musicians and ensembles. Her music interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, poetry, and social consciousness, making her an acute interpreter of 21st-century American sound and experience. Her profoundly felt works have been described as “turbulent, wildly colourful and exploding with life” (*The Washington Post*).

Jessie was born and raised in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in the 1980s during a time when the neighbourhood was at a major turning point in its history. Artists gravitated to the hotbed of artistic experimentation and community development. Her parents - her father a musician, her mother a theatre artist and storyteller - were engaged in the activities of the neighbourhood and regularly brought Jessie to rallies, performances, and parties where neighbours, activists, and artists gathered to celebrate and support the movements of the time. It is from this unique experience that Jessie has created a life that merges composing, performance, education, and advocacy.

Her growing body of work includes solo, chamber, vocal, and orchestral works. Some recent highlights include *Shift, Change, Turn* (2019) commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, *Coincident Dances* (2018) for the Chicago Sinfonietta, *Caught by the Wind* (2016) for the Albany Symphony and the American Music Festival, and *Banner* (2014) – written to mark the 200th anniversary of The Star Spangled Banner – for The Sphinx Organization and the Joyce Foundation.

Since 1999, Jessie has been affiliated with The Sphinx Organization, which supports young African-American and Latinx string players and has served as composer-in-residence for the Sphinx Virtuosi, the Organization’s flagship professional touring ensemble. She was a two-time laureate of the annual Sphinx Competition and was awarded their highest honour, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence. She has received additional grants and awards from the ASCAP Foundation, Chamber Music America, American Composers Orchestra, the Joyce Foundation, and the Sorel Organization.

Béla Bartók (1881 - 1945): Six Romanian Folk Dances, Sz. 56, BB 68



The 6 *Dansuri Populare Românești* is a suite of 6 short pieces composed for Piano in 1915 and orchestrated in 1917. Their popularity is such that they have been transcribed for every instrument imaginable. It is based on melodies from Transylvania which Bartók collected on musicology trips: he had convinced the University to fund some trips to visit far off areas where the traditional music of Rumania and Hungary were dying out, and to capture some of these fiddle and flute tunes before they went extinct. He left us with a treasure trove of archive material. Originally published as Hungarian dances, the titles were changed when Transylvania became part of Romania in 1920 – which explains some of the various published titles one might encounter. Bartók was very precise in his transcriptions and insisted that the entire set should take four minutes and three seconds to perform.

1 **Bot tánc / Stick Dance:** A very formal procession dance with high kicks to the ceiling

2 **Brâul / Sash Dance:** A Spinning dance in which dancers hold each other's waists and spin around. Violin Harmonics create a hypnotic and ghostly flute-like effect.

3 **Topogó / In One Spot:** Violin Harmonics create a hypnotic and ghostly flute-like effect. Dancers stand on their toes and balance as they touch one foot at a time to the ground.

4 **Bucsumí tánc / Dance from Bucsum:** The Mixolydian mode (a type of scale) creates an Arabic colour and an outburst of intense passion.

5 **Román polka / Roman Polka:** A dance for courting couples, fast and energetic, with small steps echoed by small interval in the violin writing. This leads without a break into:

6 **Aprózó / Fast dance:** Double stops in the violin create a Hurdey-Gurdey drone effect which drives the dancers on till they collapse exhausted at the end of a wonderful night out at the village square.
