CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

JOSHUA BELL, VIOLIN
PETER DUGAN, PIANO

MAY 14, 2021

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PROGRAM NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Major, Op. 12
I. Allegro vivace
II. Andante, più tosto Allegretto
III. Allegro piacevole

In 1799, a critic in the 19th century music periodical *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* wrote a rather critical review of twenty-eight-year-old Ludwig van Beethoven's three opus 12 sonatas for fortepiano with violin. The writer first admits that he had been previously unfamiliar with "the pianoforte pieces of the author," then declares them "strange" and "overladen with difficulties," before unspooling this remarkable image for the reader: "After this diligent and strenuous labor he [the critic] felt like a man who had hoped to take a walk with a genial friend through a tempestuous forest and found himself barred every minute by inimical barriers, returning at last exhausted and without having had any pleasure." Anyone who is familiar with this piece of music—being performed this evening by Joshua Bell and Peter Dugan—might be stunned by this statement.

It turns out that our intrepid critic had made one critical mistake: he had only considered the piano's part of the composition in his review. In the late 18th century, it was common practice among publishers to only print individual parts rather than a full score, due in part to a lingering perception that the violin's contribution to a piece was ornamental, and the meat of the work was held by the fortepiano. Not so for Beethoven, who viewed the violin as an equal partner to the piano, with each instrument more than pulling its weight in a lively, continuous dialogue.

The set's second sonata, in particular, is a study in balance, with violin and keyboard alternating roles with clockwork regularity. The piece opens with the piano stating the theme—a falling series of two-note figures—while the violin chugs along in accompaniment. Sixteen measures later, they swap. That pattern of alternation repeats in the second theme and throughout the songlike second movement, and even appears in much of the typically boisterous third movement. The durations of each alternation vary, ranging from the length of a theme to a scant few beats, but the basic template remains, creating a sense of surprise when the two occasionally fall into unison or into something closer to a canon. But still, this is very much an "anything you can do, I can do better" kind of sonata.

It's no surprise, then, that our aforementioned critic was befuddled; he had only heard half of the music! His misguided review didn't seem to have much effect on the piece's success, though. Publishers throughout Europe rushed out edition after edition of the opus 12 sonatas in order to keep up with the surging demand for the sheet music. (I would also be remiss not to mention that the first edition, which was printed in Vienna, is credited to that little-known Italian composer "Sig. Luigi van Beethoven.") While this may not have the rhetorical oomph of, say, the "Kreutzer" Sonata, it is still a delightful work.

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959)

Baal Shem (Three Pictures of Chassidic Life)
II. Nigun

"I aspire to write Jewish music, not for the sake of self-advertisement," Ernest Bloch told Olin Downes in a 1917 *Musical Observer* article, "but because I am sure that this is the only way in which I can produce music of vitality and significance."

Written in 1923 during an extended residency in Cleveland, *Baal Shem* is probably the most famous of Bloch's Jewish pieces. The second movement, "Nigun," often stands on its own, as it does in this evening's performance. Named for the eighteenth-century Polish rabbi Baal Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name," also known as Israel ben Eliezer) who founded the Hasidic movement, the piece in its entirety depicts different aspects of Hasidic devotion in three virtuosic movements. While Bloch doesn't use any actual Hasidic melodies here, he does draw extensively on their different scales and modes.

For Hasidic Jews, song and dance are considered the primary method for expressing spiritual joy and achieving *devekut*, or unity with God. The melodies that worshipers sing, called *nigun*, are almost always wordless, and ordered in such a way as to dramatize the process of arriving at *devekut*. While Bloch's "Nigun" doesn't necessarily follow the strict precepts of a Hasidic *nigun*, it does channel the energy and improvisatory structure of the form. During the piece, time itself seems very nearly suspended, as the violin unspools seemingly endless arrays of lines, each more expressive and rhapsodic than the last. The piano largely provides a scaffold around which the violin sings. Even when it builds to a frenzy in the late moments, even that frenzy seems to float, suspended, almost moving beyond any human conception of time, regardless of how many notes fly by. Perhaps there, in those capacious sheets of expressivity, Bloch comes close to a vision of the divine. It is, to say the least, music of vitality and significance.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Major, Op. 78
I. Vivace ma non troppo
II. Adagio
III. Allegro molto moderato

This sonata opens with the simplest of gestures. The piano softly chimes some simple G major chords as the violin plays a long-short-long rhythm that exhales downward. The ringing piano continues through a basic, unadorned chord progression, while the violin continues singing, gradually crafting the most delicate of melodies. The mood is still, meditative, achingly tender. That atmosphere remains unperturbed even as the texture thickens, the harmony darkens, and Brahms begins playing his usual rhythmic and harmonic games. Even though writing about classical music is all too often leaden with unearned superlatives, it's hard not to feel that there is something almost miraculous going on here.

Even more miraculous is this sonata's very existence. Brahms was a notorious perfectionist, burdened by the weight of his own expectations and the entire history of Austro-Germanic classical music (a burden he largely put on himself). Before starting on this sonata in 1879 at age 46, Brahms had written and discarded (i.e. burned) at least four other violin sonatas that didn't meet his exacting standards. Some speculate that he hadn't figured out how to pair his style of piano writing with the Joseph Joachim-inspired lyricism he imagined for the violin. This piece suffers from no such problems. The violin and piano balance exquisitely, from their ringing first gestures all the way through the second movement's contrasting outbursts and slippery chord progressions, and then to the intricate machinations of the finale (whose themes, interestingly, come from a pair of his earlier songs). Throughout, that long-short-long rhythm subtly binds everything together. It is a feat, and a feast.

But why did this particular sonata escape the fire to find an audience's ear? Perhaps, for once, the mode of composition actually had something to do with it. In May 1879, Brahms was returning to Vienna after one of his periodic trips to Italy when he made an unexpected detour to the Austrian village of Pörtschach on Lake Wörth, just north of the Alps. He wrote to a friend, "I only wanted to stay there for a day. And then, as this one day was so beautiful, for yet another. But each day was as fine as the last, and so I stayed on. If on your journeys you have interrupted your reading to gaze out of the window, you must have seen how all the mountains round the lake are white with snow, while the trees are covered with delicate green." It is that unperturbable spirit that suffuses this work, the memory of languid days alchemized into a composition of such obvious beauty that no composer in their right mind could discard it. And we are all better for it.

Notes for this evening's program were written by Dan Ruccia.