Ray Chen, violin

Julio Elizalde, piano

VIOLIN SONATA NO. 8, IN G MAJOR, OP. 30, NO. 3 (1801–2)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Allegro assai
Tempo di minuetto, ma molto moderato e grazioso
Allegro vivace

DIVERTIMENTO, FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO
(AFTER THE FAIRY’S KISS) (1928/32)
Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)
Sinfonia
Danses suisses
Scherzo
Pas de deux: Adagio – Variation – Coda

:: INTERMISSION ::

SONATA IN G MINOR FOR VIOLIN AND BASSO CONTINUO THE DEVIL’S TRILL (C1745)
Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770)
Larghetto affettuoso
Allegro moderato
Andante – Allegro assai

HUNGARIAN DANCES NO. 7, IN A MAJOR & NO. 17
IN F-SHARP MINOR, FROM 21 HUNGARIAN DANCES, WOO 1 [1868/1880]
Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

ZIGEUNERWEISEN (GYPSY AIRS), OP. 20, NO. 1 [1878]
Pablo de Sarasate (1844–1908)
Beethoven was a key figure in the evolution of chamber music with piano and string instruments, notably the piano trio and the duo sonata with piano and cello or violin. He targeted a wide public and did not scare away amateur music lovers when he followed the convention of the day by issuing the earliest violin sonatas as ‘accompagned sonatas,’ – in other words, ‘for pianoforte with violin accompaniment.’ But the truth was that in all ten violin sonatas, Beethoven creates real duo sonatas that call for considerable technical and musical expertise from both instruments.

Op. 30 No. 3 is not only the shortest of Beethoven’s violin sonatas but, in many ways, the most loveable. Its compact outer movements, vivacious and full of humor, enclose a minuet that both looks to the past and the future. The first movement opens with a brief whirlwind of a theme that generates many subsequent ideas, often with striking key changes, during which one instrument frequently completes the other’s thoughts. The middle movement serves as both minuet (‘very moderate and graceful’ in Beethoven’s direction) and slow movement, with two wide-ranging episodes that add expressive tenderness to a traditional dance form. Beethoven then follows with a wittily ronde finale whose vein of rustic humor was already well mined by Haydn.

For the 11-year-old Igor Stravinsky, seeing Tchaikovsky in the audience at the opera was “the most exciting evening of my life.” Tchaikovsky was to die just two weeks later, but Stravinsky maintained a soft spot for the composer and his music throughout his life. His most substantial Tchaikovsky tribute came more than a quarter of a century later with the allegorical ballet The Fairy’s Kiss of 1928. This orchestral score is based on piano music and songs of the older composer, consciously music that Tchaikovsky had not already orchestrated. Unlike the music of Pergolesi and Co., which Stravinsky freely and exuberantly adapted, but largely kept whole in Pulcinella, The Fairy’s Kiss is Tchaikovsky recomposed, with elements from one piece being brought in to entirely recompose another piano piece or song. It is more of an homage to Tchaikovsky, to the point that Stravinsky was later to forget where Tchaikovsky ended and his own beginning began. Based on Hans Christian Andersen’s The Ice-Maiden, the ballet tells a bittersweet tale of an abandoned child kissed by a fairy whom the fairy later reclaims on his wedding day. In Tartini’s dream, the devil played a sonata that left the composer gasping for breath. “The piece I then composed is without doubt my best, and I still call it The Devil’s Sonata, but it falls so short of the one that stunned me that I would have smashed my violin and given up music forever if I could but have possessed it.”

The sonata was first published almost 30 years after Tartini’s death in French violinist and composer J. B. Cartier’s L’Art du Violon (Paris, 1798), a comprehensive collection of Italian, French and German sonatas and single movements. However, copies had circulated widely among the violin community, and it was even quoted in Leopold Mozart’s treatise on violin playing (1776). The Devil’s Trill opens with a slow flowing, rich-textured siciliano-type movement with frequent double stops from the-string bowing, while, in the finale, even more fireworks alternate with lyrical song-like sections. The finale’s disjointed, often dreamlike sequence clearly portrays Tartini’s dream and an early edition of the score carries the title Sogni dell’autore (The Composer’s Dreams).

In his 21 Hungarian Dances, Brahms was drawn to the volatile emotions, invigorating rhythms and dramatic tempo changes of what he viewed as Hungarian music. Many of the melodies from his first collection of ten Hungarian Dances in 1868 were already circulating, either orally or in printed collections. Brahms viewed his work as arrangements rather than original compositions and refused to give them an opus number for that reason. “I offer them as genuine gypsy children which I did not beget, but merely brought up with bread and milk,” he said to his publisher when accused of plagiarism. Analysts today have attributed many to popular composers of the 1830s and 40s. Brahms arranged them all originally for piano duet and they produced a nice little nest egg for him. Along with another four-hand collection, the 16 Waltzes and the vocal Liebeslieder Waltzes, they were responsible for dramatically widening his reputation with the public and for generating considerable royalties. He adapted the first ten Hungarian Dances for piano solo in the 1870s and orchestrated another three (Nos. 1, 3, 10). His publisher, on the other hand, commissioned arrangements for all manner of instruments, the only ones with real traction being those for violin by Joachim in 1871 (books 1 and 2) – including the fiery, stomping, occasionally cajoling No. 5 in G minor – and 1880 (books 3 and 4), which include No. 17 in F-sharp minor, soulful as it opens, but boisterous as it closes.
Sarasate, next to Paganini, the best-known violin virtuoso of the 19th century, was a great showman, renowned for his sweet, singing tone and sensuous sound. The Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, whose pen could be as sharp as a wasp’s sting, took to the Spaniard and wrote: “His tone is incomparable – not powerful or deeply affecting, but of enchanting sweetness. The moment the bow touches the Stradivarius, a stream of beautiful sound flows towards the hearer.” For Sarasate, this beauty of sound became a double-edged sword. He basked in the praise heaped on his playing of Mendelssohn but grew angry when his Beethoven was described as shallow against that of Joachim. Sarasate smiled all the way to the bank, though – at 3,000 marks, his concert fee in Germany was three times that of Joachim. Sarasate also received far more scented letters from admirers than did his violin colleague. He composed (maybe ‘arranged to existing tunes’ is a more accurate way of putting it) his single-movement Zigeunerweisen between Brahms’s initial publication of the first two and last two books of his Hungarian Dances. The introduction sternly commands attention while giving glimpses of the fireworks that lie ahead. The piece is structured along the lines of the csárdás with its slow lassú' opening, emotionally balancing muted melancholy and teardrops with dazzling acrobatic display. Then it steps into a headlong rush of violin pyrotechnics in the climactic friss. It is Sarasate’s command of virtuoso ornamentation and violin bravura that wins through in this spectacular example of late 19th century showmanship.

— Program notes © 2022 Keith Horner. Comments welcomed: khnotes@sympatico.ca

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

RAY CHEN, violin

Ray Chen is a violinist who redefines what it is to be a classical musician in the 21st century. Through his unprecedented online following, Mr. Chen’s remarkable musicianship transmits to a global audience that is reflected in his engagements with the foremost orchestras and concert halls around the world. First Prize Winner of both the Yehudi Menuhin (2008) and Queen Elizabeth (2009) competitions, he has built a worldwide career through his dynamic live performances and recordings. Signed to Decca Classics, his first release was with the London Philharmonic. Previously he had released three critically acclaimed albums on SONY, the first of which (Virtuoso) received an ECHO Klassik Award. Profiled as “one to watch” by the Strad and Gramophone magazines, his profile has grown to encompass his feature in the Forbes list of 30 Most Influential Asians Under 30, appearing in the TV series Mozart in the Jungle and a multi-year partnership with fashion titan Giorgio Armani. Born in Taiwan and raised in Australia, Ray was accepted to the Curtis Institute of Music at age 15. He plays the 1715 “Joachim” Stradivarius violin on loan from the Nippon Music Foundation. This instrument was once owned by the famed Hungarian violinist, Joseph Joachim (1831-1907).

JULIO ELIZALDE, piano

A multifaceted artist who enjoys a versatile career as soloist, chamber musician, artistic administrator, educator and curator, pianist Julio Elizalde has performed in many of the major music centers throughout the United States, Europe, Asia and Latin America. Since 2014, he has served as the artistic director of the Olympic Music Festival near Seattle, Washington. Julio is a founding member of the New Trio, winner of both the Fischoff and Coleman National Chamber Music Competitions as well as a recipient of the Harvard Musical Association’s prestigious Arthur W. Foote Prize.