PROGRAM NOTES

Jean-Baptiste Barrière: *Sonata for two cellos*

From the Renaissance through the Baroque there were two distinct but related families of bowed stringed instruments: the now familiar violin family with an arched back, four strings and fretless fingerboard; and the viol (or gamba) family characterized by a flat back, five or six strings and a fretted fingerboard. (A five-minute video comparing the Baroque cello and the viola da gamba can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vosK-NKq9FQ).

By the early eighteenth century, the cello had superseded the middle-range violas da gamba in Italy, but in France and the rest of Europe it was a slower transition. (The gamba held on tenaciously in England until the 1780s).

Jean-Baptiste Barrière (1707–1747) began as a gambist but soon discovered the cello, the instrument he was to become famous for as a performer and composer. In 1731 he went to Paris as a string player for the Academie Royale de Musique (an early name for the Paris Opera), where his reputation soon blossomed.

In pre-Revolutionary France, composers, like authors and publishers, had to obtain a royal privilege before their music could be published. Royal privileges were exclusive and usually granted for six years. Barrière's talent as a cellist so impressed King Louis XV that the king granted him a lifelong privilege to publish his music, and his first book of six cello sonatas appeared in 1733. These were followed by three more books of cello sonatas, a book of six sonatas for the pardessus de viole (the highest-pitched member of the viol family), and a book of keyboard sonatas and pieces. Apparently he published nothing after 1741, and his activities beyond that are obscure. Declining health may have been a factor, as he died in Paris at age 40.

All four books of cello sonatas (24 sonatas) are written for solo cello with a figured bass line (i.e., accompanied solos) – with two exceptions. Book III's second Sonata in D minor (1739), is actually a trio sonata with the addition of a treble instrument such as a violin or recorder; and the fourth Sonata in G major from Book IV is for two cellos without figured bass – the cello duet on this program.

The Duet is in three movements. The first is a stately Andante with the voices treated equally; the second, Adagio, is an arioso with the upper cello singing the highly ornamented melody throughout. In the last movement, Allegro prestissimo, the lower cello jumps back in for a cat and mouse finale.

Stephen Soderberg

Antonín Dvořák: *Terzetto, in C major, Op. 74*

There is a sense of nostalgia —clear of irony, clear of regret — that defines Dvorak's Terzetto for two violins and viola. This once-upon-a-time sensation arises partly from the simplicity of its motives and rhythms, which develop throughout. A large part, also, comes from the simple absence of a bass instrument, which brings sense of a folk-tale being folk-told, weightless and half-remembered.

But what remains particularly interesting is how much content the sense of nostalgia contains. It brings not only the wash of the imaginative past, or a mere indication of genre. The Terzetto builds a brief but full fantasy-history over its four movements. The first movement sets up material, mood and contrast; the second brings them a sense of personal proximity; the third brings them brightly to action; the fourth brings a surprisingly operatic solution. And then the time is up. One is left wondering where the time went, and perhaps whether it was even there — it is a piece that once-may-have-been, and then disappears.

Tim Summers

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PROGRAM NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven: *Violin Sonata No. 3 in E-flat, op. 12, no. 3*

"[He had] an inexplicable ability to know what the next note had to be."
– Leonard Bernstein on Beethoven

By the age of 32, Beethoven had composed the ten sonatas for pianoforte with violin. While he was renowned as a pianist, he was also well acquainted with the violin (though his ability on that instrument is open to question). During his lifetime violins were undergoing structural changes. Their range and volume of tone were increasing, due to a longer neck, fingerboard and strings; a higher bridge; and greater tension on the strings. But the pianoforte was undergoing changes as well. In the ten sonatas, Beethoven explores combining two voices, still of unequal sound mass, into a unity. Music critic and author Louis Biancolli called them "a colloquy of reciprocal enrichment."
His Sonata no. 3 in E-flat major, op. 12, no. 3, features violin and piano writing far more substantial than the first two sonatas in opus 12, and its compositional techne rivals that of many of the subsequent ones. Each of the three movements would be worth a lengthy analysis.

In a program note, there is never the space necessary to explore just what makes a piece of music tick, or, as composer Elliott Carter put it, "how it all goes along." So we are forced to search for adjectives that we hope will tempt the audience into the kind of attentive listening that engages the heart. The first movement of this sonata has been described as having "a sense of grandeur, power and majesty found in few other works of Beethoven's early years." The second movement "constitutes the emotional centre of gravity in this sonata." But just once, let's see if we can do better than "You're Going To Like This Piece." We'll just use a single building-block aspect of the third movement. We'll start with another anonymous writer's hopeful adjectives, and then shift to Beethoven's genius: form.

One author has described the sonata's allegro molto finale as "a rollicking, joyous rondo with a catchy if hardly distinctive main theme." One can't disagree that it's a rondo (as Beethoven labels it), or that its character is rollicking and joyous, or that its main theme is catchy. But saying the theme is "hardly distinctive" completely misses an important point about Beethoven's choice of themes generally, and here in particular. The theme – and the entire movement – is saturated with a single three-note rhythmic figure, dit-dit-DAH. By itself, yes, it is hardly distinctive, but what Beethoven does with it is jaw- dropping. He uses every trick in the book. Here is just one example. The theme and segments of the theme are passed between voices, as one would expect. But what one doesn't expect is for that theme-trading to turn into a string of unconsummated fugue entries: just when we expect the voices to break into a traditional fugue – or a fughetta – or at least fugato – Beethoven takes us off in a new direction. Near the end, there is a stretto passage, a technique common in imitative counterpoint, which has entries of thematic material piling up on top of one another. But as one would expect from Beethoven, this is extreme stretto; the voices chasing each other are only a DAH apart. This is over quickly, leading into a race to the finish – sixteen bars with the piano left hand pounding out the signature dit-dit-DAH, until a sudden impish little whimper. And then one final, crashing dit-dit-DAH. (And Beethoven is laughing.)

All you have to do is follow the dit-dit-DAHs.

Stephen Soderberg

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