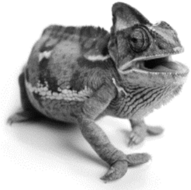

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2023-2024 chamber music season
Up Close 2: Pioneers and Pathmakers

Sunday, April 7, 2024, 4 PM at Goethe-Institut, Boston

Program:
Ludwig van Beethoven, Violin Sonata No. 10 in G Major, Op. 96
Kaija Saariaho, *Tocar* for violin & piano
Béla Bartók, Sonata No. 1 for violin & piano, Sz. 75, BB. 84

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was the son and grandson of professional musicians, both employed in Bonn, Germany at the court of the Electorate of Cologne. Surprisingly few details of his early years are known, but he displayed enough talent performing on both the violin and piano that he was compared to the young Mozart by a visiting teacher. He visited Vienna in 1787 and probably met and had one or more lessons with Mozart, but only stayed for two weeks due to the fatal illness of his mother. In 1789 Beethoven effectively took over the care of his family, petitioning the court for half of his alcoholic father's salary. In 1790 he met Haydn, and with the help of the Electorate of Cologne moved to Vienna to study with him beginning in November 1792. The relationship, though cordial, was not entirely happy, and – likely to Beethoven's relief – Haydn left in early 1794 to London for one of his extended stays. Beethoven now sought instruction from Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, a master of contrapuntal techniques, and also studied for a time with Antonio Salieri, particularly regarding setting Italian texts to music. By 1796, he had established a renowned career as Vienna's leading virtuoso pianist and was beginning to travel on concert tours, playing his own music and that of others, and often improvising to great acclaim.

But all would not continue happily; as early as 1801 he began to share the information of his increasing deafness, and he suffered to the point of despair with the condition for the rest of his life. Beethoven's individualistic, headstrong, often rebellious nature was only heightened by the social isolation of deafness, and his personal relationships were never smooth. Family troubles continued as well, and in 1813 he became guardian of his nephew Karl despite protracted legal battles with the boy's mother. The relationship with Karl was perpetually marked by drama, taking enormous amounts of time and energy. In 1814, at the height of his fame, Beethoven gave

his last public performance as a pianist; he could no longer function as a performer, and his loneliness and isolation only increased. As his personal struggles intensified, however, his music only reached deeper and deeper into his own soul, and plumbed further the extreme, sometimes violent, sometimes almost divine emotions of the individual human life. His great achievement as a composer can be summed up as the appropriation of the classical forms of Haydn and Mozart's generation for the new age of Romanticism, showing the world how the expression of the intensely personal can become the expression of the universal.

Beethoven's tenth and final sonata for violin and piano (or "the fortepiano and a violin" as was still the customary title) was composed in 1812, nearly a decade after the previous nine, which were all written between 1797 and 1803. It is also considered the final work of his middle period, as various personal crises were peaking – deafness, family conflict, and whatever unrequited love prompted the writing of his famous "Immortal Beloved" letter – and his creative output was minimal until about 1816.

With such a long gap after the ninth "Kreutzer" sonata – a towering monument of grand statements and brilliant virtuosity – it should come as no surprise that the tenth sonata represents a stylistic departure. The mood is generally warmer, softer, and gentler, and the statement of the first four-note theme at the beginning of the piece is the only time in the violin sonatas that Beethoven presents his initial idea so plainly, without accompaniment or embellishment of any kind. The second movement is a hymn-like adagio that foreshadows the life-affirming beauty of so many of his late works, and the theme and variations of the finale are as varied and imaginative as anything he wrote.

The premiere of the tenth violin sonata was given in December 1812 by its dedicatee, the great French violinist Pierre Rode, and Archduke Rudolph at the piano. Notably (and rarely!), Beethoven capitulated to the tastes of the performer in this work. As he wrote to Rudolph: "I did not make great haste in the last movement…because I had, in writing it, to consider the playing of Rode. In our finales we like rushing and resounding passages, but this does not please R and—this hindered me somewhat." Clearly, we can thank Rode for the unique character of Beethoven's final violin sonata.

Kaija Saariaho was born in 1952 in Helsinki, Finland and studied at the Helsinki University of Art and Design, the Sibelius Academy, and later at Musikhochschule in Freiberg, Germany. In 1982 she began attending courses at IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique or Institute for Research and Coordination Acoustic/Music), the European center for scientific innovation in music located in Paris, where she lived for the rest of her life. The focus of her (and many others') work at IRCAM was "spectral" music, which uses the acoustic properties of sound as the basis for compositional method. To that end, she did extensive work in the computer analysis of acoustic sound and synthesizer technology.

Saariaho established herself as one of Europe's most important contemporary composers, her premieres performed by musicians of the stature of Gidon Kremer and Dawn Upshaw, and she won numerous prestigious accolades including the 2003 Grawemeyer Award. Saariaho's music is characterized by masterful manipulation of tone color, and gradual development primarily

through changes of timbre and dynamics. She explored the possibilities of sound through an exhaustive variety of means, including live electronics, computer-assisted composition, and innovative interactions between instrumental and vocal performers and electronic sound. Even in her most intellectually rigorous work she maintained a direct style of communication with the audience. Kaija Saariaho passed away in May 2023, her life cut short by brain cancer.

Composer's program note:

> One of my first ideas for *Tocar*, about the encounter of two instruments as different as the violin and piano, was the question: how could they touch each other?
>
> Whilst composing music, I always imagine the instrumentalist's fingers and their sensitivity. The violin sounds are created by the collaboration between the left hand and the bow controlled by the right hand. On the piano, the pianist should be extremely precise in order to control the moment when the fingers touch the keys, afterwards the sounds can be colored only by the pedals. In spite of such different mechanisms, both instruments also have some common points, purely musical, noticeably they share some of the same register.
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> In *Tocar* both instruments move forward independently, but also keep an eye on each other. I imagine a magnetism becoming stronger and stronger – the piano part becomes more mobile – which draws the violin texture towards the piano writing culminating in an encounter in unison. After this short moment of symbiosis, the violin line is released from the measured piano motion, continuing its own life outside the laws of gravity.
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> The title, in Spanish, is translated as "to touch, to play."
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> *Tocar* was commissioned by the international Jean Sibelius Violin Competition. The work was premiered by the 20 semi-finalists in Helsinki on the 26th, 27th, and 28th November 2010.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) was born in Nagyszentmiklos, Hungary, now part of Romania. His parents were enthusiastic amateur musicians and encouraged his early interest. He was playing the piano by age four, composing by six, and discovered to have perfect pitch at seven. He was a shy and physically frail child, and his family moved often. Nevertheless, he was performing in professional settings in his teens, and when he auditioned for the Vienna Conservatory and Budapest Academy of Music (later known as the Liszt Academy) in 1899, was offered scholarships to study piano and composition at both. He chose Budapest, which had grown rapidly to become one of the largest cities in Europe. His compositions of the time are unremarkable, but he was an outstanding pianist with a promising solo career. He became infatuated with the music of Richard Strauss, and Bartók's own transcription of *Ein Heldenleben* for solo piano was a favorite performance showpiece. He joined the piano faculty in 1906 and was tenured there from 1909 to 1934.

In 1905 Bartók met Zoltan Kodály. They became close friends and began together to research

traditional Hungarian music, traveling to collect and classify folk songs, setting them in the manner of art songs for solo voice and piano, and incorporating their rhythmic and melodic elements into original works. It was through this research, eventually expanded to include folk traditions of neighboring Eastern European cultures, that Bartók found a compelling and original compositional voice, and his reputation as both a composer and performer grew through the 1910s. The isolation of the war curtailed performing and ethnomusicological research, but he delved even more deeply in creative work, expanding his harmonic language in the direction of dodecaphonic atonality. In the early 1920s he returned to field work and a renewed performing career, becoming so busy that he took a full three years off from composition in the mid-1920s, even describing himself as an "ex-composer." He resumed composing in 1926, following several visits to Italy and much study of Baroque music. The 1930s saw him gaining ever more international acclaim; he joined the Permanent Committee for Literature and the Arts of the League of Nations' Commission for Intellectual Co-operation, and the latter part of the decade was probably the most productive time of his compositional career. His output from this period included *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, the Fifth and Sixth String Quartets, the Second Violin Concerto, and *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet and piano.

The political situation in Europe in the late 1930s increasingly interfered with Bartók's musicological research. He was also forced to change publishers and take steps to protect his manuscripts. A successful concert tour of the United States in 1940 inspired a move to New York later that year. His financial situation was quite difficult though, and his health faded steadily, with a diagnosis of Leukemia in 1944. He wrote the *Concerto for Orchestra* in 1943 on a commission from Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony and completed the Third Piano Concerto just before his death in September 1945.

One of Bartók's most prominent collaborators was the illustrious violinist Jelly d'Aranyi (1895-1966), great-niece of Joachim and one of the many Hungarian artists who settled in London in the 1920s. She was a fascinating figure in her own right; in addition to works by Bartók, she was dedicatee of Ravel's *Tzigane,* Vaughan Williams' *Concerto Academico*, and, with her sister Adila Fachiri, Holst's Double Concerto for two violins. She was also instrumental in the resurgence of Robert Schumann's presumably lost Violin Concerto. Following a séance during which she claimed to have been contacted by Schumann himself, she used her many personal and professional contacts to locate the manuscript in the Berlin State Library. Nazi intervention prevented her from giving the first public performance as she had intended, but she did give the London premiere.

Bartók first met the d'Aranyi family in 1902 when he visited their home to play chamber music on several occasions. Their friendship was rekindled when she returned to Hungary briefly in 1921, and Bartók became infatuated with her both personally and for her intense, charismatic musicianship. The day before returning to London she asked him to write a piece for her, and he took up the task enthusiastically. According to her biographer Joseph Macleod:

> Bartók had the themes in his head the next day, and would have told her at the Danube steamer, if he had been more sure of himself after so long a silence. While writing it, he kept imagining with what *élan* she would play the Allegro first movement, how beautiful her *cantilena* would be in the Adagio, and with what *fuoco barbaro* she would play the

> exotic dance rhythms in the third movement. […] He had written it entirely for her, he said, and if she couldn't or didn't play it, then he would never play it.

They performed the piece together on a tour of England in 1922. Bartók was pleasantly surprised by how well it was received, especially given that he was at the height of his most experimental period, creating sonorities and moods that were not easy for listeners to comprehend at first. After all, he had interrupted work on the brutally uncompromising score of the ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* for this sonata. He wrote, "It's quite astounding that my first private recital has had so much space given to it in the press; *The Times* devoted a second article to it. [...] It is quite something that the papers are treating my coming here as some exceptional event. I would really never have hoped for this."

- Gabriel Rice

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