

German mastery

Together, Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms and Felix Mendels-sohn represent the peak of mastery in the German Classical and Romantic traditions, and each composer wrote significant works for cello and piano duo in their respective pinnacle years. The sonatas featured in this program, as selected by David Finckel and Wu Han, represent some of the most important, celebrated and masterfully crafted pieces in the duo repertoire. From Beethoven's incredibly lyrical *Opus 69 Sonata*, composed at the height of the Classical period, to Brahms' soulfully vocal second *Sonata in E minor*, whose beloved fugue pays homage to J.S. Bach, the master of counterpoint, the program traverses the German tradition of consummate craftsmanship in artistry. Concluding with Mendelssohn's exhilarating *Opus 58 Sonata in D Major*, which oozes an affectingly ebullient character that epitomizes the era of German Romanticism, this thrilling program is a tour de force through some of the most revered treasures of the cello-piano duo literature.

Program Notes

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 3 in A Major, Op. 69

Around a decade separates Beethoven's *Cello Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3*; when he composed *Sonata No. 3*, Beethoven had arrived at a phenomenally prolific period of solid maturity and profound mastery. Completed in 1808, the sonata premiered in Vienna, March 5, 1809, with the cellist Nikolaus Kraft, son of the cellist for whom Haydn composed the *Cello Concerto in D Major*. The pianist, the young Baroness von Ertmann, Beethoven's student, was one of the best pianists in Vienna and the dedicatee of *Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101*. This cello sonata was dedicated to another student and close friend, Baron Gleichenstein. Gleichenstein, eight years Beethoven's junior, was the only one of the composer's noble correspondents Beethoven addressed familiarly. When he sent Gleichenstein a printed copy of the sonata, he inscribed it *inter*

lacrimas et luctum ("Between tears and sorrow"), alluding to the Napoleonic Wars. The sonata initially had an interesting publication history: between 1809 and 1847, seventeen editions, seeming to indicate a great demand, produced a total of only about 1000 copies, yet efforts to keep the work in print underlines its popularity. Unfortunately the very first editions contain mistakes still evident in the early 20th century, when an editor suggested cellists mark their music with the many corrections Beethoven identified in his letters to his publisher. This sonata has mature breadth and shares some of the pastoral character of *Symphony No. 6, Op. 68*, which closely preceded it. It replaces the early cello sonatas' sense of power of expression with a free flowing melodic stream, symphonic in character. Although the cello is unquestionably prominent, this sonata marks one of the first times two instrumentalists share musical materials with true equality.

Beethoven highlights the cello's range with long, lyrical lines. In the first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, the cello states the noble main theme, a thoughtful cantilena, directly, without accompaniment; the piano's answering passage concludes with a brief cadenza, after which the instruments reverse roles, until a *dolce* cello cadenza. The second lyrical theme is rhapsodic, with the cello and piano interwoven. A rich mixture of additional ideas is expressed before the whole becomes thoroughly developed. The second movement, *Scherzo, Allegro molto*, is condensed in form by the simple omission of conventional repetitions. The cello and piano each articulate parts of an energetic, syncopated theme. The contrasting Trio is more melodic, with dynamic contrasts and a bass drone. The sonata's only slow music occurs in the songlike introduction, *Adagio cantabile*, to the carefree finale, *Allegro vivace*, a sonata form with a happy first subject and a second melodic theme. In this movement both instruments, but especially the piano, have demanding, virtuosic passages, which create a sense of excitement, but it is not without lyrical depth. The sonata ends with a gentle, but finally jubilant coda.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 1 in E minor, Op. 38

During his long productive life, Brahms published two dozen chamber music works, but it seems he may

have destroyed two or three times as many. Musical ideas from those lost works probably found their way into the other compositions that he assembled, disassembled and reassembled. No critic of Brahms' music was ever as severe as he was on himself.

This sonata, published in 1866, underwent a radical change in form. Originally intended as a four-movement sonata with a central slow movement and scherzo, Brahms stopped composing after the second movement when he became dissatisfied with the direction in which he was taking the music. He hesitated to show it to close friends Clara Schumann, (Robert Schumann's widow) and Josef Gänsbacher, a Vienna Conservatory professor. In 1865, Brahms converted it into a three-movement work, rewriting the first, discarding the second, and adding two new movements and dedicating it to Gänsbacher.

Brahms wrote to his publisher that the dark, solemn and stately work was "not too difficult to play, for either instrument." In the first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, Brahms developed the wide-ranging melodies in sonata form. The movement begins darkly, but becomes brighter by its end. Attentive to the challenge of making sure the piano did not obscure the cello's middle register, Brahms was careful with the dialogues he created. For contrast, the second movement, a gracious *Allegretto*, seems like an unusual minuet with most of the weight on its first beats. The finale, *Allegro*, begins with a vigorous, three-voiced powerful fugue with a long subject inspired by Contrapunctus XIII of Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*. The central section is contrastingly peaceful and pastoral. When the fugal material returns, the movement builds to one climax, and then a second even more forceful climax, before a very fast coda with a restless dialogue between the two instruments.

The first public performance occurred January 14, 1871, at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, four years after its publication, with cellist Emil Hegar and pianist Karl Reinecke.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 2 in D Major, Op. 58

Mendelssohn, an extraordinary child prodigy, made his performance debut at age nine, following which the most distinguished musicians assured his father,

a wealthy banker, that the boy was an authentic genius; consequently, his family spared nothing to bring him to artistic maturity. He grew up to be the greatest German musician of his generation.

Mendelssohn wrote *Cello Sonata No. 2* in 1843, upon return to Leipzig from Berlin to conduct at the Gewandhaus. Simultaneously, he assumed the founding directorship of the new Leipzig Conservatory at which he, Clara and Robert Schumann, and other notable musicians would teach. This period was stressful for Mendelssohn, but this sonata, composed for his brother Paul, does not reflect any angst.

The sonata, which owes a debt to both Classicism and Romanticism, begins, *Allegro assai vivace*, with a confident cello melody. The piano then offers its version of the theme, with the cello accompanying. The piano introduces the intensely lyrical second subject; the cello later extends that melodic line. Throughout much of the sonata, the two instruments are equal partners; each has virtuosic moments.

The piano begins the second movement, *Allegretto scherzando*, with a whimsical Romantic melody echoed by the cello pizzicato. The second theme is more lyrical than the first, and for it, the cello articulates the melody over a pulsating piano line. Mendelssohn repeats the first theme more abruptly the second time around. The second theme returns briefly, too, again in the cello; the movement concludes softly with both instruments playing fragments of the themes.

In the beginning of the slow third movement, *Adagio*, Mendelssohn, who was devoted to Bach's music, giving it its first performances since Bach's time, bases the initial piano arpeggios on the chord structure of "Es ist vollbracht" from Bach's *St. John Passion*. The cello offers another lyrical theme, impassioned and spirited and with an increasingly recitative-like character, as the piano retreats into the back-ground. Finally, the cello's line and the piano's arpeggios join, and the piano repeats the cello theme.

In the protracted sonata form finale, *Molto allegro e vivace*, Mendelssohn uses material reminiscent of his well-known *Spinning Song* as the movement grows out of the ideas of the first few measures. The techniques of both instrumentalists are challenged in lively dialogue, quick and difficult runs and the brilliant closing.