

GUILLAUME LEKEU (1870-1894) SONATE POUR PIANO ET VIOLON, V.64 (1892 rev. 1894)

“Bien plus, ce sera bizarre, détraqué, horrible, tout ce qu'on voudra; mais, du moins, ce sera original.” - Guillaume Lekeu, 1887

The Belgian composer Guillaume Lekeu's only violin sonata owes its existence to its dedicatee, Eugène Ysaÿe, who commissioned the work in February of 1892. At the time Lekeu was still a composition student - he had studied with Franck from 1889 until Franck's death, and then continued with Vincent d'Indy. Ysaÿe, meanwhile, was at the height of his fame and ability and was generally considered the finest violinist of the day; but Ysaÿe was Belgian himself, and seems to have taken a keen interest in Belgian artists.

Lekeu would likely have been known to Ysaÿe already - Lekeu had been friends since at least 1889 with the violinist Mathieu Crickboom, who was the second violinist of the Ysaÿe Quartet, had studied with Ysaÿe previous to that, and was a major member of Ysaÿe's artistic circle. However, it was d'Indy introducing Lekeu to Octave Maus, a prominent painter and music critic in Brussels, which would lead directly to the Violin Sonata. Maus was the founder of the 'Cercle des XX' group of avant-garde artists in Brussels, and on 18 February 1892 the Cercle des XX would present a portion of Lekeu's cantata *Andromède*, which had taken 2nd place in the Belgian Prix de Rome in 1891, with the composer conducting. Ysaÿe was in attendance at this performance, and was sufficiently impressed with what he heard to commission the Violin Sonata from Lekeu that very night.

At the time Lekeu was on a meteoric rise as a composer - having learned violin, piano and cello as a child, he began composing on his own in 1885. While he originally planned to study philosophy, he later changed his mind and only then began organized music studies, beginning studies in harmony in 1888, and counterpoint and composition in 1889. Therefore by the time he met Ysaÿe he had had less than three years of composition training.

Lekeu's first inspiration as a composer was Beethoven, whose late quartets inspired his initial forays into chamber music (including a String Quartet in 1887). In 1889 Lekeu traveled to Bayreuth to hear the music of Wagner, which would profoundly influence his melodic approach - Lekeu would later describe the idea he took from Wagner as “des mélodies de telle longueur qu'un seul exposé suffisait à parfaire ... un morceau de musique” (melodies of such a length that one single exposition of them is sufficient to perfect a piece of music). The final decisive influence on Lekeu was Franck, from whom he took both a strong grounding in contrapuntal style but also the principles of cyclical form which Franck had used and Lekeu adopted in turn.

The Violin Sonata does not seem to have given Lekeu particular trouble to complete - it was complete no later than the autumn of 1892, as on October 6th Lekeu and Ysaÿe gave a private reading of the finished sonata. The official première would take place on March 7, 1893, again at a Cercle des XX event, with Ysaÿe on the violin and Caroline Théroine-Mège at the piano. Musicologist Luc Verdebout reports that this concert was a “triumph” for Lekeu. Ysaÿe requested more chamber music from Lekeu, who immediately began work on a Piano Quartet.

Unfortunately, tragedy would soon end Lekeu's promising career - in October 1893 he would contract typhoid fever from a contaminated sorbet at a restaurant. After a long and protracted illness, during which he valiantly struggled to complete the Piano Quartet, Lekeu would eventually succumb on January 21, 1894, the day after his 24th birthday. His Violin Sonata remains today his best-known and most-performed work, as well as arguably representing the too-brief emergence of his mature style.

Lekeu's sonata is constructed on a cyclic structure - the opening theme of the sonata recurs throughout all three movements in various guises, and other themes from the first movement crop up intermittently in the later movements as well. While the sonata is loosely organized around the conventional three-movement structure and forms (sonata form outer movements, ternary middle

movement), Lekeu's treatment of the forms is very free and individual, particularly with regards to harmony.

The first movement opens with an extended slow introduction based on a long, lyrical theme, which briefly modulates to b minor before repeating itself in back in G. This harmonic structure (modulating to the minor mediant, before returning to the tonic) also forms the basis of the rest of the movement, and the remaining themes of the movement are loosely derived from the constituent elements of the introduction theme. The remainder of the movement wanders through a kaleidoscopic haze of keys and chromatic harmonies, but re-establishes the principal keys of G major or b minor at important structural points. Through this, as well as his characteristically long-breathed melodies, Lekeu creates a mood of both impassioned expression and sustained, ecstatic languor.

The slow second movement shows Lekeu's melodic style, and the influence of Wagner on him, even more strongly. The first section unfolds in one unbroken melodic line from beginning to end, creating the impression of a continuous melody of constantly shifting colours. The contrasting middle section is constructed mainly from thematic material from the first movement. The theme then returns in a hushed, muted, reprise which brings the movement to a quiet close.

The finale begins in the most agitated manner of all the movements, bristling with frenetic drive. However, the broad theme that quickly establishes itself again hearkens back faintly to the first movement in its melodic contours. This impression solidifies further in the development, where Lekeu begins with an extended quote of the slow introduction (now in B major), and most strongly at the end of the recapitulation, which abandons the third movement material completely to reprise the equivalent passage from the first movement, a strikingly unusual but effective structural decision. An energetic coda then ends the movement and the sonata in a blaze of brilliant G major.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) SONATA FOR PIANO AND VIOLIN, OP. 47 (1803)

Beethoven's op. 47 unquestionably stands alone among his violin sonatas, written with an unusual intensity and virtuosity of style combined with an unprecedented length. At 40-45 minutes, it is at least half again as long as most Beethoven sonatas and double the length of some, and the only sonata of similar scope Beethoven wrote is the *Hammerklavier* piano sonata written 15 years later. It is perhaps therefore appropriate that it was composed under similarly dramatic circumstances.

In 1803, the young English-Caribbean violinist George Bridgetower visited Vienna. Bridgetower was known in musical circles both for his "bold and spirited style of execution" as well as his identity as a biracial person (in the language of the time, a mulatto). Bridgetower's father had served with Prince Esterhazy in the 1780s while Haydn was also there, and the younger Bridgetower called himself a pupil of Haydn's. Additionally, Bridgetower had performed several times in London with Franz Clement, who was well-known to Beethoven and would eventually premiere Beethoven's Violin Concerto. These connections brought Bridgetower to Viennese society and therefore to Beethoven; by May 1803 Beethoven had heard Bridgetower and evidently admired his playing, as evidenced by a letter of introduction he wrote for Bridgetower to Baron von Plankenstern at this time. A concert with Beethoven was arranged, with some haste, and scheduled for 24 May.

The sonata Beethoven decided to write for Bridgetower was therefore written in a considerable rush. Its completion necessitated such a last-minute scramble that the solo part for the second movement had not yet been completed by the day of the concert, and at the dress rehearsal that morning Bridgetower was obliged to sight-read from the manuscript piano score by reading over Beethoven's shoulder. The first movement had been completed scarcely any sooner, though Beethoven had at least managed to write a fair portion of it in advance. (The only reason that the third movement was ready more promptly was that Beethoven, very practically, recycled a movement he had written but rejected for an earlier violin sonata.) While attendance at the concert is recorded as being "not very full", many

influential aristocratic patrons were in attendance, and the sonata was well-received, to the point that the second movement was hailed to be repeated.

At some point after the concert, Beethoven and Bridgetower are thought to have had a falling-out. The violinist J.W Thirlwall, writing 50 years afterwards, reported that Bridgetower had told him he and Beethoven “had some silly quarrel about a girl” which prompted Beethoven to break off contact. However, some recent scholarship has questioned the reliability of this account, and whether this argument took place at all.

Speculation abounds as to what motivated Beethoven to eventually dedicate the sonata to Rodolphe Kreutzer, who besides being one of the leading French violinists of the day (alongside Rode and Baillot) was also an incredibly well-connected musical figure in Paris. Kreutzer and Beethoven had only met once, and Kreutzer did not appreciate Beethoven’s music, calling it ‘unintelligible’; in light of this antipathy on Kreutzer’s part, a dedication to him might seem strange. Some have suggested that the dedication to Kreutzer was meant as a slight towards Bridgetower in light of their reported falling-out. However, this was hardly the first time Beethoven had ‘re-dedicated’ a work at publication from the intended performer to some well-connected figure; for example, the Violin Concerto was premiered by Franz Clement, dedicated to him on the autograph, but published with a dedication to Stephan von Breuning, while the Triple Concerto is traditionally associated with Beethoven’s piano student (and patron) Archduke Rudolph but was published with a dedication to Prince Franz von Lobkowitz.

Clive Brown suggests that Beethoven was considering a move to Paris at the time of publication of the *Kreutzer* sonata, and therefore that the dedication to Kreutzer should be considered as part of a strategy to ingratiate himself with the Parisian musical scene. It is well-documented that Beethoven was dissatisfied with his income in Vienna at this time and was thus looking elsewhere for a better-paying position. While the dedication to Kreutzer seems to have accomplished little (Kreutzer never played the sonata), Beethoven’s job-hunting would bear fruit a few years later, when in 1808 Beethoven’s Viennese patrons Archduke Rudolph, Prince Lobkowitz, and Prince Kinsky were obliged to offer Beethoven a substantial pension to prevent him accepting a position at the court of Jérôme Bonaparte in Kassel.

Beethoven’s former student and friend Carl Czerny offered an alternate possibility, suggesting that the third theme of the first movement was borrowed from an earlier piece by Kreutzer (as suggested to him by “a French musician”), and the dedication therefore was meant to acknowledge this compositional debt. While a logical possibility, Czerny was not able to identify a work of Kreutzer with this theme with which to verify his theory, and no-one since has identified one either.

The first movement is the only one of Beethoven’s violin sonatas to begin with a slow introduction. (Even among Beethoven’s sonatas for other instruments the appearance of a slow introduction is very rare - the closest parallel elsewhere is the opening movement of the *Pathétique* piano sonata, which is of a similar mood and intensity.) This is made even more unusual and dramatic by Beethoven’s decision to begin the work with the unaccompanied violin playing chordally, which recalls the Baroque violin music of Bach and Biber.

The impassioned and rhythmically driving thematic material of the remainder of the movement recalls several other works originating from the same time period - it appears particularly closely related to the *Waldstein* piano sonata of 1804 and the Fifth Symphony (which Beethoven started work on in 1804 as well, though he would not complete it until 1808). While Beethoven described the sonata as ‘in un stile molto concertante quasi come d’un concerto’ in the first edition, this seems to be reflected mainly in the character and scope of the movement, as the underlying structure is a relatively conventional sonata-form, albeit extended to great length. Rather, Beethoven achieves his dramatic effects through the considerable rhythmic propulsion of the multitudinous fast passages in eighth notes, and through bold modulations and harmonies moving through an unusually broad range of keys. Beethoven saves his one structural innovation for the very end of the movement (and thus maximum dramatic effect), where the slow introduction material unexpectedly threatens to intrude on the Coda, before Beethoven promptly brings the movement to a ferociously energetic conclusion.

The central slow movement is cast in theme-and-variations form, with the rounded-binary theme followed by four variations and an extended coda which forms a fifth, looser, variation (though unlike the other four variations this is not specially indicated in the score). The theme is unusually long for a variation structure, owing to its repeated strophes, which Beethoven uses to create a call-and-response between violin and piano. Due to this repetition, this movement is among Beethoven's longest in variation form despite the relatively modest number of variations.

The character of the theme is calm and noble, a mood which Beethoven returned to throughout his career for slow variation movements. (It resembles in atmosphere both the central variations of the Fifth Symphony as well as the finale of the op. 109 piano sonata.) The first two variations each increase the rhythmic density and energy, while the third offers a slow minor-key contrast; this is a very common plan across Beethoven's variation movements. The fourth variation returns more closely to the original theme, but artfully embellished with a wide variety of trill figures. Beethoven reserves his most strikingly ingenious ideas for the final variation, which after a dramatic quasi-cadenza to introduce itself, begins to break away from the theme to introduce developmental ideas derived from the thematic material. Thus this final variation fulfils the roles of both variation and coda.

Beethoven originally intended the Presto finale for the op. 30 no. 1 sonata, but after completing it decided it was "too brilliant" for that work and immediately wrote a different finale for that sonata. Pressed sorely for time to complete the *Kreutzer*, Beethoven evidently decided it would fit much better among more lively company and pressed it into service without any alteration. Beethoven's shrewd judgment becomes obvious when we consider the length of the movement - at 539 measures it was more than double the length of the op. 30 sonata's first movement, but perfectly proportioned to the equally gargantuan other movements of op. 47.

This movement is set in a lively tarantella rhythm and written in sonata form. It maintains an ebullient and cheerful mood throughout, as reflected by how it remains almost exclusively in the major, only very briefly passing through minor keys. Even the frequent sforzando interruptions fail to darken the mood and instead suggest high spirits. As in both preceding movements, Beethoven makes a sudden and dramatic brief switch to Adagio near the end - then, even more dramatically and in contrast to the other movements, repeats it almost immediately afterwards again. This unusual structural coordination across movements would suggest a deliberate strategy... except that the previous completion of this movement for op. 30 precludes this, and proves it to be instead a fortunate coincidence. (Though perhaps this coincidental correspondence is what led Beethoven to deem this movement suitable for inclusion in the first place - or perhaps the existing movement inspired him to try the same idea in the other movements.) Regardless, after this the thematic material returns triumphantly and the sonata ends in a boisterous rush.