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Faculty Recital Series

Joseph Lin, Violin
Robert Levin, Fortepiano

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The Juilliard School
presents

Joseph Lin, Violin
Robert Levin, Fortepiano

Part of the Daniel Saidenberg Faculty Recital Series

Thursday, April 25, 2019, 7:30pm
Paul Hall

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 10 in G Major, Op. 96
Allegro moderato
Adagio espressivo
Scherzo: Allegro—Trio
Poco allegretto

Intermission

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828) Rondo in B Minor, D. 895
Andante
Allegro

SCHUBERT Fantasy in C Major, D. 934
Andante molto
Allegretto
Andantino
Allegro vivace—Allegretto—Presto

Performance time: approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes, including an intermission

Major funding for establishing Paul Recital Hall and for continuing access to its series of public programs has been granted by The Bay Foundation and the Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation in memory of Josephine Bay Paul.

Please make certain that all electronic devices are turned off during the performance. The taking of photographs and the use of recording equipment are not permitted in this auditorium.
The pairing of violin with piano, a product of centuries-old tradition, has given us a rich literature and endless exploration for players of both instruments. One realizes, however, that the music written for this instrumental duo makes up but a small fraction of the creative output of the great composers, and such pieces hardly capture the full scope of a composer’s artistic vision. The question then arises: How do we value and appreciate these works in a larger context? And for the performer: How does one breathe life into the music with an awareness and understanding that extends beyond the work itself?

Beethoven’s 10 sonatas for violin and piano are a substantial offering, to be sure. From his early and middle periods, nine of the works were composed between 1798 and 1803, and the G Major Sonata, Op. 96, was written in 1812. For the younger Schubert, explorations of the violin and piano pairing began in 1816 with three sonatinas that reflect the spirit of Mozart. A rather expansive duo came the following year, the name perhaps confirming the violin’s equal partnership with the piano. After the duo, nearly a decade passed before Schubert came back to writing for violin and piano, resulting in the B Minor Rondo, D. 895, of 1826 and the C Major Fantasy, D. 934, of 1827.

If the three works on this evening’s program reveal Beethoven and Schubert at a mature stage in their respective development, it is interesting that these pieces do not seem especially representative of either composer. In the delicate lyricism of Beethoven’s Op. 96 and the showy brilliance of Schubert’s Rondo and Fantasy, one finds a certain respite from the weightier artistic and philosophical concerns that occupied each composer at the time. Collaborative circumstance and necessity no doubt played a large part in shaping the character of these pieces. Yet the essential qualities of Beethoven and Schubert are never far below the surface, and having been distilled, they emerge with even greater purity.

Ludwig van Beethoven
Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 10 in G Major, Op. 96

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born: December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany
Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna

Spanning the last two decades of his life, Beethoven’s friendship with his pupil and patron, Archduke Rudolph of Austria, was one of the composer’s most fruitful relationships. Beethoven dedicated no less than 14 works to Rudolph, including the G Major Sonata, Op. 96, as well as the piano trio, Op. 97, happily known as the “Archduke Trio.” Numerous letters between Beethoven and Archduke Rudolph provide considerable insight into this relationship, and Beethoven’s work on Op. 96 is mentioned in one of these letters. The sonata was written not only with Rudolph in mind as the pianist, but also for the French violinist Pierre Rode, with whom the Archduke gave the first performance. Evidently, Beethoven felt obliged to consider the playing style of Rode and confessed that this contributed to the more subdued tone of the finale. One wonders if Beethoven also had Rode’s
preferences in mind when composing the first movement; in any case, what emerges is a remarkably refined opening statement, a gentle conversation between the two instruments. It is hard to imagine that the same composer had written the intensely dramatic, tortured exchange that introduces the ninth sonata, Op. 47. Granted, the “Kreutzer” Sonata, as that piece came to be known, was composed nearly a decade earlier, and for a very different kind of violinist—George Bridgetower, whom Beethoven once admired as a sort of madman of the violin.

Clearly Beethoven had come to a very different place with Op. 96, and the first movement unfolds with hardly a cloud in the sky. Even the birds seem to be chirping nature’s delicate harmony in the trill subject that begins the piece. Long legato lines and crystalline parallel arpeggiation by both instruments suggest a gentle breeze, and only gradually does rhythmic activity become more pronounced, with spirited triplets emerging to accompany the dotted rhythms of the lively second theme. The ensuing development eschews any outward conflict, though gentle modulations and turns into the minor mode reveal a rich interior world of expression.

It is the inner life that Beethoven continues to mine in the profound depths of the second movement. An expansive hymn melody in E-flat is introduced by the piano, dignified in restraint and vulnerable in its prayerful offering. As the melody draws to a close, a caressing violin echoes the piano, gently extending the cadence before itself rising upward in heartfelt song. Never failing to respond with complete acceptance, the two voices exchange their most intimate thoughts as the movement unfolds in timeless reflection.

Exchanges of a less lofty sort burst onto the scene in the Scherzo, so characteristic of Beethoven. A restless tune in G Minor, full of weak-beat accents, is juxtaposed with a fleeting dance in E-flat that recalls both preceding movements as the two instruments soar and spin around each other. Following a da capo, the scherzo material is playfully transformed into G Major, reassuring us that all is well for the home stretch.

Indeed there is a remarkable ease as the theme of the finale is stated in turns between the piano and violin. Beethoven may have felt constrained by Rode’s playing style, but he certainly made the most of it in this set of variations. From one to the next, Beethoven explores both the mundane and the profound, as well as everything in between. References to the preceding movements abound, and as if to be explicit, he writes Adagio espressivo in the fifth variation, precisely the same marking he gave to the second movement. One might say that this expansive improvisation was destined to descend, as it ultimately does, to the key of E-flat where we find the theme exploring different ways to return home. A raucous Allegro interrupts, and Beethoven tosses aside any reluctance to demand virtuosity from his players, delivering a satisfying and brilliant conclusion to this wonderful journey.
Franz Schubert
Rondo in B Minor, D. 895

If Beethoven’s Op. 96 was to some extent shaped by his knowledge of Archduke Rudolph and Pierre Rode as performers, this was also true of Schubert in composing the Rondo and Fantasy for the young violin virtuoso Josef Slavík, who had come to Vienna in 1826 from his native Bohemia. The Rondo was composed in October of 1826, and premiered by Slavík and Karl Maria von Bocklet early in 1827. It is worth noting the proximity of the Rondo’s composition to that of Schubert’s great G Major string quartet written in June of 1826, for numerous unmistakable elements of the quartet appear in the Rondo. Such connections reveal a certain irony in the title, Rondo, a form which lends itself to lightness of character rather than a large-scale work with such a vast dramatic scope. But as if the expressive and motivic contents of the G Major quartet continued to consume him, Schubert could not help but infuse these into the violin and piano piece, creating a rather outsized Rondo. Far more than just a vehicle for virtuosity, this piece possesses boundless lyricism and a depth of expression that belies its title.

In the stormy overture that introduces the Rondo, one hears references to the first and second movements of the G Major quartet, including hints of the remarkable harmonic invention that will dazzle us later in the piece. The unanswered question posed repeatedly in the introduction comes in the form of a two-note rising subject from which the Rondo theme is ultimately derived. Schubert explodes any simple notions of what such a theme should be, leaving us with more questions than answers: Where does the Rondo theme start and end? Is it in major or minor? The latter question is of course the central one of the G Major quartet, and in form, the Rondo shares much in common with the finale of the quartet, while the charming repeated-note figure of its main theme conjures up the third movement of the quartet. Moreover, Schubert appears to take delight in a kind of harmonic disorientation; as in the quartet finale, modulations are encountered at every turn, and for the B Minor piece to land in B-flat Major early on is merely a sign of the many playful adventures to come.

Franz Schubert
Fantasy in C Major, D. 934

Outwardly, Schubert’s reasons for composing the Fantasy for Slavík a year later, in December 1827, were perhaps not altogether different than that which led to the Rondo. Yet Schubert had no doubt been changed in profound ways by the events of that year, not least of which was the death of Beethoven in March of 1827. Accompanying the funeral procession as it made its way through the crowds that had lined the streets of Vienna, Schubert was one of the torchbearers, mourning the master whom he so
revered. The aching emptiness left by the passing of Beethoven needed to be filled, and Schubert felt the burden to carry on in Beethoven’s footsteps. At the same time, Schubert was ever more aware of his own mortality, though presumably regardless of any premonition that his final days were to be less than a year away.

It is in this context that we may find meaningful resonance in that other masterpiece—Schubert’s C Major string quintet, which was completed about a half-year after the Fantasy and just a few months before Schubert’s death; its shared key and remarkably similar opening progression suggest that in both pieces, Schubert was striving to attain something spiritual, profound, and lasting, especially in the wake of Beethoven’s death. As a descriptive title, Fantasy evokes a certain rhapsodic freedom, but here too, it seems to understate the depth and vision of Schubert’s music.

The piano opens with hushed tremolos murmuring confessions of the heart, as the violin whispers a timeless meditation that rises almost imperceptibly. In the ensuing Allegretto the two instruments exchange playful statements of a rustic tune in A Minor, eventually chasing each other in canon. Virtuosity emerges with exuberant passagework showcasing both players’ agility. As the music proceeds through a turbulent modulating section, the A Minor theme fades ever further away, and when the dust finally clears, we find ourselves entering the composer’s most personal realm—that of song.

Schubert’s 1822 setting of the love song “Sei mir gegrüsst” provides the melodic basis for the theme and variations in the Fantasy. Moreover, Schubert deftly weaves the song into the fabric of the Fantasy by casting the section in A-flat Major, a stunning tonal shift that allows the opening pitches of the song to echo the violin’s first notes of the entire piece. What follows is an expansive set of four variations, each remarkably delicate in texture and expression while demanding the utmost technical refinement from both performers. At the close of the variations, it is indeed the opening violin theme of the Fantasy that reappears; this time, however, the piano provides little relief, its quivering tremolos moving from one unresolved harmony to another as tension builds palpably.

A release unlike any other in the violin-piano literature comes in the form of the joyful Allegro vivace. Erasing all hint of uncertainty, this glorious apex celebrates every element of the piece: lyricism, yearning, brilliance, and fantasy. The simple rising motive from each of the preceding themes is reflected with confidence in the Allegro music, and this lively parade of characters would not be complete without a brief visit to A Minor, followed by one last recollection of the delightful song in A-flat. If all is given over to wild abandon in the closing Presto, such a memorable journey could have no better conclusion.

Joseph Lin teaches violin and chamber music at Juilliard.
Joseph Lin

Joseph Lin was first violinist of the Juilliard String Quartet from 2011 to 2018 before stepping down to devote more time to his family. He continues on the faculty of Juilliard, where he teaches violin and chamber music. He has led several initiatives in chamber music and collaborates with Juilliard students and colleagues. His 2019 projects include a Musicians From Marlboro tour on violin and viola, Chamberfest collaborations with Juilliard students, and performances of Bartók’s Violin Concerto No. 2. From 2007 to 2011, Lin was an assistant professor at Cornell University, where he organized the inaugural Chinese Musicians Residency in 2009. The following year, he led a project with Cornell composers to study the violin sonatas and partitas of Bach and to create new music inspired by Bach, which culminated in a series of concerts premiering the new works alongside Bach’s. In 2018 Lin returned to Bach with a performance of the complete sonatas and partitas at Sumida Triphony Hall in Tokyo. He was a founding member of the Formosa Quartet, which won the 2006 London International String Quartet Competition. In 1996, he was awarded first prize at the Concert Artists Guild International Competition and was named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts. In 1999, he was selected for the Pro Musicis International Award, and in 2001, he won first prize at the inaugural Michael Hill International Violin Competition in New Zealand. His recordings include the music of Korngold and Busoni with pianist Benjamin Loeb, an album of Debussy, Franck, and Milhaud with pianist Orion Weiss, and the complete unaccompanied works of Bach and Ysaÿe. His recording of Mozart’s A Major Violin Concerto with original cadenzas was released in 2017. With JSQ, Lin recorded Elliot Carter’s fifth quartet, as well as its most recent album of Beethoven, Davidovsky, and Bartók. Lin’s violin teachers have included Mary Canberg, Shirley Givens, and Lynn Chang. A Pre-College alumnus, he graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in 2000. In 2002, he began an extended exploration of China, spending 2004 studying Chinese music in Beijing as a Fulbright Scholar.
Robert Levin

Pianist Robert Levin has performed with the orchestras of Berlin, Birmingham, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Montreal, Tokyo, and Vienna with conductors Bernard Haitink, Neville Marriner, Seiji Ozawa, Simon Rattle, and Esa-Pekka Salonen. On fortepiano he has appeared with the Academy of Ancient Music, Handel and Haydn Society, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique with John Eliot Gardiner, Christopher Hogwood, Charles Mackerras, Nicholas McGegan, and Roger Norrington. His recordings for DG Archiv, CRI, Decca/Oiseau-Lyre, Deutsche Grammophon Yellow Label, ECM, New York Philomusica, Nonesuch, Philips, and SONY Classical include the complete Bach concertos with Helmuth Rilling and the English Suites and The Well-Tempered Clavier for Hänssler’s 172-CD Edition Bach-Akademie. The complete Beethoven cello and piano works for Hyperion with Steven Isserlis was named Gramophone’s recording of the month in 2014. Levin studied piano with Louis Martin and composition with Stefan Wolpe in New York. After graduating from Harvard, he was invited by Rudolf Serkin to head the theory department of the Curtis Institute of Music; he left after five years to become a professor at the School of the Arts, SUNY Purchase. In 1979 he became resident director of the Conservatoire Américain in Fontainebleau, France, at the request of Nadia Boulanger, teaching there until 1983. From 1986 to 1993 he was professor of piano at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. The president of the International Johann Sebastian Bach Competition and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he has also been Dwight P. Robinson, Jr. Professor of the Humanities at Harvard. In 2016 he was inducted as honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was the inaugural Hogwood Fellow of the Academy of Ancient Music in 2017 and 2018. A noted theorist and Mozart scholar, he is the author of many articles and essays on Mozart. His completions of Mozart fragments are published by Bärenreiter, Breitkopf & Härtel, Hänssler, and Peters, and they have been recorded and performed throughout the world. His cadenzas to the Mozart violin concertos have been recorded by Gidon Kremer with Nikolaus Harnoncourt and the Vienna Philharmonic for Deutsche Grammophon and published by Universal Edition. A Carnegie Hall commission to complete Mozart’s Mass in C Minor was premiered in 2005. He continues his collaboration with Steven Isserlis performing the complete Beethoven cello and piano music.
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