

# October 2021

by Derek Katz

## César Franck (1822-1890), Sonata for Piano and Violin in A major (1886)

César Franck's violin sonata is perhaps the most beloved violin sonata of the later 19th century. A glib (but not misleading) explanation for its popularity is that it is chock full of great melodies. I do think that the tunes are at the core of the sonata's appeal, but their presentation is closely tied to ideas and practices specific to the composer and his musical surroundings.

One key to the sonata's seductive sound is the vocal quality of the violin writing. 19th century violinists modelled themselves on singers in very specific ways, imitating the natural pulsing of the human voice with their left-hand vibrato, and using the bow to emulate a singer's breath control. The Franck sonata was composed for Eugène Ysaÿe, one of the great virtuoso violinists of his time, but there is very little in the violin part that is specifically idiomatic for that instrument (as demonstrated by performances of the sonata on other instruments, especially the cello, but also the viola and even the flute). The violinist's main role is to "sing" melodies.

The piano writing, on the other hand, is strongly marked by Franck's own experience as a keyboard player, and especially as an organist for whom improvisation was still a vital practice. The first edition of the sonata titles it a "sonata for piano and violin." This apparent instrumental inversion is partially a remnant of (or allusion to) the conventions of Beethoven's day, but also reflects the compositional process. Franck seems to have written out the piano part first, as this part of his manuscript is notated confidently, and without major corrections. The violin part, however, was clearly sketched in later, and has many omissions and second thoughts. Franck seems to have conceived the complete work at the keyboard, and then extracted the violin part at a later stage in the process.

Generations of critics and scholars have made much of motivic connections between the movements of the sonata. While the prospect of musicologists breaking out their protractors and slide rules to demonstrate that themes share three- or four-note shapes is unlikely to arouse much

audience enthusiasm, it is both true that the strong sense of having heard things before creates a sense of reminiscence within the sonata, and also that there are some very striking reappearances of complete melodies in later movements.

Franck openly chose to compose this sonata to contribute to a genre closely associated with Beethoven, but the piece seems much more concerned with the sensuousness of tone color and with vocality than with Germanic seriousness. In listening to the very opening, it's easy to imagine Franck improvising at the keyboard, finding a harmony that he really liked, lingering over it, savoring it for its own sake, and experimenting with different voicings. The subsequent violin theme could have equally sprung out of improvising arpeggiations of those same pungent chords.

The thing that strikes me about the other three movements is that each one announces itself as one thing, and then turns out to be primarily about presenting juicy, lyrical melodies. The second movement immediately presents itself as a turbulent scherzo, but what initially sounds like a contrasting middle section eventually subsumes the stormy opening in importance. Similarly, Franck labels the third movement as a *Recitativo-Fantasia*. This already suggests the worlds of vocal music (the operatic recitative) and of improvisation (the free fantasy), and, once again, the initial gestures give way to an expansive melody. This is both not just melodic, but a complete statement, with a beginning and an end, and will turn out to be the Big Tune of the sonata, returning multiple times in the final movement. The increasingly majestic statements of the Big Tune at the end of the sonata complete a journey from the intimate parlor of the opening movement to the vast operatic stage of the finale.

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## John Corigliano (1938- ), *The Red Violin Caprices* (1999)

John Corigliano has described the violin as his “first love.” This love developed from hearing his father practice and perform the great concertos of the violin repertoire during his almost quarter-century as concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic. The *Red Violin Caprices* are based on a theme from the younger Corigliano’s score for the 1998 movie *The Red Violin*, directed by François Girard. Corigliano won the Academy Award for Best Original Score for his music for the film, which featured violin solos played by Joshua Bell. Corigliano has gotten quite a lot of mileage out of material from the movie, using it as the basis for multiple pieces for Bell, including a Concerto and a Suite, as well as these *Caprices*.

The story of the movie follows a violin from the 17th century to the 20th, and from Europe to Asia and America. One might reasonably expect the *Caprices* to evoke a similar sweep across time and space. Instead, the *Caprices* seem firmly rooted in the world of the 19th century virtuoso, and perhaps especially in the world of Paganini. The *Caprices* use a theme from the movie as the basis for a set of variations. This immediately suggests the innumerable variations and fantasies on popular opera themes by Paganini, Liszt and their peers (and is not the cinema the late 20th century equivalent to 19th century opera?).

The idea of the caprice also is reminiscent of that same world. The most famous set of caprices for solo violin, are, of course, by Paganini, and the most famous caprice from that set is the 24th, which, like the Corigliano *Caprices*, is a set of variations in which each variation addresses a different technical device on the violin. Even the technical devices themselves found in the Corigliano are recognizably derived from Paganini’s vocabulary. Paganini couldn’t have written the Corigliano *Caprices*, but he could have played them, and wouldn’t have encountered any techniques that weren’t already in his bag of tricks.

The theme is stately, based on a simple rise that takes two tries to get going (two notes...no, three!) followed by a descending sigh. It has a particularly poignant character created with a bittersweet mixture of major and minor. The following variations take us on a journey through bravura fiddle technique, impressing us with velocity, exotic drones created by simultaneously bowing and plucking, and with melodies played in octaves (which, for a violinist, is like singing a melody with one finger). The theme returns in the final variation, picked out in accented low notes.

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## Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884), Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 15 (1855, revised 1857 and 1880)

Bedřich Smetana has long been revered in the Czech lands as its preeminent national composer, intimately tied to the struggle for Czech political autonomy in the later 19th century. Outside his native land, Smetana is most closely associated with his tone poem *The Moldau*, which has long been a staple of pops concerts and music appreciation programs. The Smetana Piano Trio, though, is from very early in his compositional career, long before he had any intention of becoming a distinctively national composer, and, for that matter, before he had come to grips with the Czech language.

The Piano Trio, from 1855, is the earliest work on this program by over thirty years, and comes from a time when Smetana was accepting that his aspirations to be an international touring piano virtuoso, following the paths of Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann, were unlikely to be realized. It was Smetana's first major work, and the first composition that signaled that his future was as composer, not merely as piano teacher. As a budding composer, his idols were Liszt, Hector Berlioz and Robert and Clara Schumann, all of whom he met in Prague in the 1840s. The Piano Trio is very much the work of a pianist with a Lisztian approach to the keyboard, and one whose sense of chamber music style drew from the two Schumanns. In the first movement in particular, the piano writing is clearly that of a virtuoso with a big technique, who knows the tricks of getting a big sound out of his instrument. That movement also has a couple of suspiciously Chopinesque moments of delicate ornamentation. The middle scherzo is both reminiscent of the polkas that Smetana had been composing for solo piano (in homage to Chopin's mazurkas) and also obviously shaped by the two Schumanns, especially in its contrasting sections. These slower contrasting sections also compensate for the absence of a slow movement proper.

Reception of the Piano Trio has been shaped by Smetana's biography, essentially to the exclusion of other stories or approaches. By his own account, Smetana was moved to compose the piano trio by the death of his four-year-old daughter Bedřiška (Fritzi), an especially beloved and musically talented child, from scarlet fever.

Inevitably, the Trio has been heard as a memorial work, and, as such, seem especially appropriate for the current moment. It's very easy to hear the piece as deeply sorrowful. All three movements are in the minor. The Trio opens with a keening lament for the violin alone, insistently descending in a halting rhythm, all on the throaty lowest string on the instrument. Even the following contrasting theme, a beautiful and tender melody for the cello, was based on motives that Fritzi liked to sing, according to the reminiscences of one of Smetana's friends. Commentators have expanded on these elements and heard the Scherzo as a portrait of the young girl at play, and found the tolling of funeral bells in the march in the finale.

Perhaps, and possibly it would be best to just end there. And yet, this leaves out so much. The descending violin lament at the very opening is immediately answered by a hopeful rising response from the cello. That poignant cello theme in the first movement is followed by a noble and clangorous march in the major that is in no way funereal. Both the second and third movements end in the major. The main theme of the third movement is lifted from a student piano sonata that Smetana composed in 1846, before Fritzi was even born. Yes, there is a minor march near the end of the Trio with muffled low notes in the piano that could be bells or drums, but it's immediately followed by a grand (if not grandiose) series of restatements in the major at full volume. If anything, Smetana, like Franck, is following the time-honored device of ending with the best tune, played as passionately and assertively as possible. It's a very moving piece, but I'm convinced that we'd be just as moved, and perhaps in slightly different ways, even if we knew nothing of the biographical circumstances.