

November 2021

by Derek Katz

Isabella Leonarda (1620-1704), Sonata duodecima, Op. 16, no. 12 (pub. Bologna, 1693)

The first of the four works featuring Baroque flute on tonight's program is a sonata by Isabella Leonarda. Leonarda, from a prominent noble family in Novara (near Milan), entered an Ursuline convent at 16, and remained there for the rest of her life, rising to the position of Mother Superior. Leonarda was also a music instructor in the convent, and composed over 200 works, almost entirely sacred vocal music. Leonarda is remarkable for the quantity and quality of her compositions, but her life path was quite typical of her time and place. It was very common for daughters of the nobility in the Duchy of Milan to enter convents (over half of Leonarda's generation did), and nuns were given musical training in most of these convents. Leonarda was at the top of a hierarchy in which authority, education and creative opportunities were almost entirely distributed amongst women.

Similarly, this sonata is distinctive as an individual work, but quite representative of instrumental sonatas of the era. The instrumental sonata developed from northern Italy around the beginning of the 17th century, and Leonarda had fairly literally grown up with the genre. The sonata is the last from a collection of twelve sonatas for various combinations of violins and continuo instruments. This opus contains Leonarda's only published instrumental music, and this sonata is the only one for a single violin.

Like other sonatas of the time, this one consists of a series of short sections played without pause, generally alternating between slower and faster tempos and frequently also changing meters to allow for even greater changes of character. Also typically, the violin line is quite active, while the continuo either provides a harmonic foundation or a sort of walking bass. The use of violins is also typical of the emerging violin culture in Italy. Antonio Stradivari was a generation younger than Leonarda, and entering his prime when her sonatas were published.

As Emi Ferguson points out, there isn't any Italian flute repertoire from this time, but the Leonarda sonata provides many areas of freedom for the performers, from places where extended techniques specific to the flute (like pitch bends) can be added as ornaments, to the improvised material for the keyboardist's right hand. The performance is a collaboration across the centuries between Leonarda and this evening's musicians. Again in Ferguson's words, each performance will be different, with partners in crime upping the ante in response to each other.

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**Michel Blavet (1700-1768), Sonates mêlées de pieces, for flute and continuo
Sonata in G major, Op. 2, no. 1, "L'Henriette" (pub. Paris, 1732)**

Michel Blavet was one of the earliest superstars of the flute, renowned across Europe for his tone, technique and intonation. His fame was made possible both by the rising popularity of the transverse flute itself, spreading from Germany in the early 18th century, and also by the possibilities afforded by Paris's vigorous public music scene. Blavet was the performer most often featured at the early concerts of the Paris Concerts spirituel, one of the very rare public occasions for the presentation of concerts including instrumental music. Blavet was also flute soloist for the King, and for the Paris Opéra. Blavet, by the way, was also highly unusual in playing the flute left-handed. Not surprisingly, Blavet's instrumental music is largely for his own instrument, and his flute sonatas are part of an enormous early 18th century French repertoire for the flute.

Stylistically, his sonatas follow French violinist-composers of the time (like Leclair) in synthesizing Italian and French styles. Almost 40 years after Leonarda's multi-sectional sonata was published, Blavet's sonatas are also typical of their time, falling into distinct movements. This sonata has four movements of strongly contrasting characters, including an "Aria" in the form of a rondo titled "L'Henriette." This is presumably a musical portrait, although the subject is no longer known. Again, the keyboardist improvises the material for the right hand. In comparison to the Leonarda, the bass instruments are more active, and interact with the ornate flute line on a more equal footing. These sonatas may have been intended as pedagogical works, as Blavet meticulously indicates breathing places for the flutist.

Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770), Sonata in A major for flute and continuo

While Blavet's sonata is work written for flute by a virtuoso on that instrument, the Tartini Sonata in A major is work specifically intended for the flute, but composed by a great violinist. Tartini, along with Locatelli, was one of the two leading Italian violinists after Corelli and Vivaldi, and composed prolifically for the violin. Unlike Vivaldi, Tartini famously resisted entreaties to compose opera, writing that he refused offers from Venice "...knowing only too well that a human throat is not a violin fingerboard." A flute is not a violin fingerboard, either, and it is not known why Tartini should have composed this sonata for flute and continuo, which survives only in a manuscript in the Royal Library in Copenhagen. Marcello Castellani, the editor of the modern facsimile edition, speculates that Tartini may either have intended the sonata for the French flute virtuoso Nicolas Dôthel, who was active in Italy at the time, or perhaps that it resulted from an attempt to establish contact with the Prussian court and its flutist king, Frederick the Great.

While unusual in featuring the flute, this sonata exemplifies Tartini's elegant and graceful style (Tartini was regarded as classical and restrained, in comparison to the more extroverted bravura of Locatelli). Given the mixture of French and Italian music on this half of the program, it is notable that this sonata by an Italian violinist, possibly composed for a French flutist, has a movement specifically labeled as being in the French style. Once again, this is music for treble and bass, requiring extemporization from the keyboardist. The bass line is more subsidiary than that of the Blavet sonata. Note that in the concluding theme and variations, the bass line is the same for each variation.

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Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764), *Pieces de clavecin en concerts*, Concert No. 1 in C minor (pub. Paris 1741)

For the final piece on this half of the program, we once more leave Northern Italy and return to France. The Concert no. 1 in C minor is from a group of five concerts by Rameau that constitute his only chamber music. These pieces are organized significantly differently from the preceding sonatas. For one thing, the harpsichord part is fully notated for both hands. Also, the viol part (here played on the bassoon) is an independent part, not a doubling of a keyboard continuo. This means that Rameau has created a texture that can expand to four distinct parts: violin (here, flute), viol (bassoon) and the two hands of the harpsichord part. Finally, it is the harpsichord part that is of primary importance. As Rameau writes, "the violin and the viol should adapt themselves to the harpsichord, distinguishing what is accompaniment from what is part of a subject." Rameau indicated that these "concerts" could equally well be played as harpsichord solos. While the flute and bassoon parts are more important (and necessary!) than this would suggest, this is indicative of Rameau aiming his publication at a market of accomplished amateur keyboard players, who might (or might not) be accompanied by other musicians. However, Rameau must also have had professionals in mind.

When these "concerts" were published in 1741, Rameau was the music director for private orchestra of Alexander Le Riche de la Pouplinière, an exceedingly wealthy tax collector. He had just added some outstanding instrumentalists to his group in 1741, quite possibly including Michel Blavet.

Each movement of these "concerts" has a title of some sort, named variously after people, places and objects. It is not clear what (if any) the relationship is between the music and the titles, and Rameau specifies that some movements were given titles after the fact. This "concert" starts with a movement named after an exotic and popular novel, continues to a memorial for a nobleman who was a notable patron of the arts, and finishes with a cheerful movement referring to a suburb of Paris. The gamba player Charles Medlam suggests that perhaps Count de Livri was fond of the book and the suburban gardens. Ferguson points out that the collection of titles reminds us of Rameau as a human being, connected to friends, patrons, students (as well as books and places) and that recreating the works on stage today brings our community together with his.

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), Piano Sonata in C major, Op. 53, "Waldstein" (1803-04, published 1805)

First, the obligatory historical background: The "Waldstein" of the title is Count Ferdinand Waldstein, patron of Beethoven in Bonn and supporter of his move to Vienna. It was Count Waldstein who wrote in Beethoven's autograph book that he was being sent to Vienna to "receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands." It is not known why Beethoven would have chosen to dedicate this piano sonata to Waldstein when he published it in 1805. During this time Waldstein was serving in the British army, and did not return to Vienna until 1809. Even then, he and Beethoven do not seem to have had much contact. The other, and perhaps more intriguing, datum is that the sonata used to be longer.

Beethoven originally provided the sonata with a full-length (and very attractive) slow movement. According to Beethoven's student Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven played this version of the sonata for a friend, who declared that the work was too long, and Beethoven subsequently replaced the slow movement with a shorter introduction to the final Rondo. Given that Beethoven was neither known for taking advice, nor for being overly concerned about his compositions trying the patience of his audiences, this story seems a little too tidy and convenient. There is also a short C major piano piece in the form of a scherzo and trio from this time that may have been intended for a four-movement version of this sonata. The discarded slow movement was later published as the "Andante favori" (WoO 57). The scherzo and trio was not published during Beethoven's lifetime, but can now be found as the Bagatelle in C major (WoO 56).

Most accounts of Beethoven's career hold up the "Eroica" Symphony as a turning point, both in the sense of Beethoven pushing the limits of the forms and styles that he had inherited from Haydn and Mozart, and also in terms of beginning a series of works concerned with heroism. In addition to the "Eroica," these would include both works connected to heroic deeds through drama (the opera *Fidelio*, and the music for Goethe's *Egmont*) and those, like the Symphony no. 5, in which valor and triumph are

implied by musical events. In this schema, the "Waldstein" Sonata would be the "Eroica" of Beethoven piano sonatas, composed at the same time as that symphony, and demonstrating the same kind of break with previous works in its genre. An early catalogue of Beethoven's works from 1860 even describes the sonata as being made of "heroic pianistic deeds."

Wherein lie these heroic deeds? To some extent, the "pianistic deeds" are those executed by the pianist. This is an unusually athletic sonata, and one that foregrounds an aggressive and vigorous approach to the keyboard. As with the Symphony no. 5, the heroism also seems to be implied by musical narratives. The first movement and the introduction to the Rondo both rise up from the depths of the keyboard, and all of the movements start very softly, allowing for dramatic expansions of range and volume. The pairing of the introduction and the Rondo, in particular, seems to imply a movement from darkness to light, like that experienced by the prisoners in *Fidelio*, temporarily released from their dungeon to blink in the sunlight.

One more biographical circumstance may be worth mentioning here. The "Waldstein" Sonata was the first piano work that Beethoven composed after receiving a new Erard grand piano from Paris. This instrument would have been unlike Viennese pianos in a number of respects, all of which seem relevant to this particular sonata. The instrument had a slightly longer keyboard than Beethoven's previous pianos (albeit the same compass as the newest Viennese instruments), and, while Beethoven does not use every last key, he does use the lowest bass notes (most notably at the beginning of the introduction to the Rondo) and frequently expands the upper limits beyond his previous practice. This sense of Beethoven pushing out to the extremes of his keyboard is something that is lost in performances on modern instruments. The Erard would have had a fuller, rounder and darker sound that would have been particularly effective at the very opening of the sonata.

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The French instrument had a much heavier action, which required more strength to manipulate, but allowed more arm weight to be translated into volume of sound. Unlike the Viennese instruments, which operated the dampers using knee levers, the Erard came with four pedals, and with the ability to move between sounding one, two or three strings with a given key, thereby facilitating the dramatic dynamic changes in the "Waldstein" sonata, and perhaps also suggesting the striking use of open dampers for the entire Rondo theme, which allow the harmonies to overlap and blend into each other.

This does raise the question of for whom Beethoven was composing this sonata. Some of its qualities may have been suggested by the Erard piano, but the only other such instrument in Vienna at the time was in the possession of by then sadly frail Haydn. Beethoven may have been contemplating a move to Paris at this time, but, even there, how many players would be able to approach this work? The "Waldstein" Sonata comes at an awkward moment when Beethoven was writing music that was no longer practical for the amateur player that had historically

been the target market for sonatas, but decades before the professional solo piano recital would provide a new home (Clara Schumann apparently started including the "Waldstein" on her concerts in 1842). The "Waldstein" was published, and amateurs must have purchased it, but one wonders how many could grapple with the many fiendish long trills with counter-melodies above and below, or with the dramatic octave glissandi in both hands near the end of the sonata.