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by Derek Katz

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967)

Sonata for Solo Cello in B Minor, Op. 8 (Arranged for viola by Yura Lee)

By the time Zoltán Kodály composed his Sonata for Solo Cello in 1915, he and his friend and collaborator Béla Bartók had been collecting and transcribing Hungarian folk songs for a decade. In addition to classifying them according to social function and musical characteristics, Kodály and Bartók were very interested in isolating the oldest layers of Hungarian folk culture. In particular, they wanted to distinguish this "Old Style" from the popular dance music that had come to represent the "Hungarian" or "Gypsy" style to urban audiences in the 19th century, especially as mediated through Brahms's Hungarian Dances and Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies.

Kodály and Bartók were also determined to use elements of Hungarian folk music to create compositions that were both national and modern. In his Sonata, Kodály distilled elements of Hungarian folk music and used them as part of a distinctively 20th century musical language. He did this while remaining sensitive to different types of Hungarian vernacular music. Of the three movements of the Sonata, the first two exemplify characteristics of the "Old Style" of Hungarian folk song while the third draws from the "New Style" of popular dance music.

The lower two strings on the cello are both tuned down a half-step for the entire Sonata. This both changes the sound of the instrument, making it slightly deeper, and also alters the harmonies created by the open strings. With the cello tuned this way, a B minor chord can be played using only open strings. Kodály takes advantage of this immediately at the beginning of the Sonata, having the cello sound a full B minor chord on four strings, with the cellist using only a single finger on the left hand. All three movements have effects created by simultaneously playing a melody with the bow while plucking an accompaniment on open strings at the same time.

The first movement of the Sonata primarily uses pentatonic scales (that is, scales that have fewer notes than the standard major and minor scales and are equivalent to the sounds produced by only using the black keys on the piano.) Pentatonic scales are common in many musical contexts and were identified by Kodály and Bartók as being especially typical of "Old Style" Hungarian folk songs.

The first movement also requests rhythmic freedom from the performer, especially in the lyrical second theme group. This, too, is characteristic of "Old Style" songs, especially laments. The slow middle movement is the one that is most overtly modeled on vocal music. Here, the cello plays highly ornamented, keening melodies in the upper register with a plucked accompaniment, very much like a singer accompanying herself on a lute or zither. The extravagantly virtuosic final movement departs from these older vocal models to evoke the instrumental dance music so popular in the 19th century. Here, again, there are many instrumental effects, from bagpipe drones to using the lone cello to imitate an entire string band.

Although these elements of folk music are so important in forming the sound world of the Sonata, it was important to Kodály that no actual folksongs were used in the composition. As he asserted, "there isn't a single atom of a folk song in it...It's a transubstantiated folk music. It uses the language of folk music, but not its form." For Kodály, an actual folk song, complete in itself as a melody, could be used as the basis for variations but was not suitable as something to be manipulated and developed in extended forms like sonatas.

We will hear the Sonata not on the cello, but on the viola. The viola repertoire is relatively small compared to that of the violin or the cello, and violists have long been musical magpies, collecting and transcribing pieces originally for other instruments. Since the four strings of the viola are tuned to the same pitches of those of the cello, but at octave higher, moving cello music to the viola is especially tempting. All violists, for instance, learn the Suites for Solo Cello by Bach, playing them an octave higher than the cello original. The Kodály Sonata, however, presents a number of extraordinary challenges. It is amongst the most difficult works in the solo cello repertoire, and many of the challenges are even more daunting on the viola. In particular, the Sonata goes very high, pushing the boundaries of what is physically possible on the viola even in the register of the cello original. These passages cannot be played an octave higher, and require both creativity from the transcriber and extreme virtuosity from the performer.

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Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) Waltz in A-flat Major, Op. 69, No. 1

Unlike Frédéric Chopin's mazurkas and polonaises, his waltzes stand out by virtue of not being distinctively Polish. When Chopin composed his Waltz in A-flat Major, Op. 69, No. 1, in 1835, the waltz was just beginning its second era of great popularity. The waltz was already fashionable enough throughout Europe by the end of the 18th century to spur concerns about the medical and moral effects of young couples spinning on the dance floor at high speeds and in close proximity. By Chopin's day, the waltz had waned in popularity outside of Vienna, but the age of the great Viennese waltz orchestras, led by Joseph Lanner and Johann Strauss I, was just beginning. Chopin knew the waltz as functional dance music, both from his childhood in Warsaw, and from his stay in Vienna in-between his departure from Warsaw and his move to Paris. As Chopin wrote from Vienna, "Lanner, Strauss and their waltzes obscure everything." In the early 19th century, the waltz began to move from the dance hall to domestic spaces and concert performances. Chopin also would have known waltzes for solo piano by Franz Schubert, and, most importantly, the highly influential Invitation to the Dance, by Carl Maria von Weber.

Chopin's waltzes, of course, are not functional dance music, but music suited to the cultivated salon. Within this constraint, there is great variety in his waltz output, ranging from intimate works inscribed in friend's personal albums to extended works more suited for concert performance. This waltz is amongst the more intimate, and was not published until after Chopin's death (resulting in the misleadingly high opus number).

It was composed in September, 1835, and dedicated to Maria Wodzińska, a younger woman to whom Chopin had proposed. Her brothers had been boyhood friends who had boarded with Chopin's family, and he had known Maria since she was a girl. At the time that the Waltz was composed, Chopin was in Dresden with the Wodziński family, still waiting for an answer to his proposal, which would eventual be rejected by her family (probably because of Chopin's poor health and modest financial prospects). The Waltz is popularly known as "The Farewell." As Maria wrote to Chopin shortly after he departed, "when you left us, we were all walking around sad, our eyes filled with tears. You were the subject of all our conversations. That Waltz - the last thing we received and heard you play - has brought us closer together. We found pleasure - they in the listening and I in the playing, as it reminded us of [you]."

The Waltz is made up of three contrasting strains of music. The first is easy to map onto the sadness of parting. The opening is slow, the melody halting, and the harmony drifts. The effect is wistful and poignant. This music seems very distant from the dangerously vertiginous and erotic waltz of the ballroom. The first contrasting strain brings us closer to that ballroom, speeding up, and with the left hand playing an uneven rhythm that approximates the distinctive Viennese waltz rhythm, with a slight hesitation in the middle of each bar. After a return of the opening phrase, the third strain is the closest to functional dance music, simple in both melody and harmony. The opening phrase comes back a final time for a nostalgic close.

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Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644-1704) Passacaglia for Solo Violin in G Minor

It is tempting to think of the early history of the violin as a primarily Italian phenomenon, from the great violin makers of Cremona (Amati, Guarneri, and Stradivari) to violinist-composers like Corelli, Vivaldi, and Tartini. However, there was also the flourishing Austro-German tradition of violin virtuosity in the 17th century, the most distinguished exponent of which was Ignaz Franz von Biber. Born in Bohemia, Biber was in the service first of the Bishop of Olmütz and then of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg (Biber's son Karl eventually followed his father as Kapellmeister of the Archbishop of Salzburg, overlapping at the court with a young violinist named Leopold Mozart). Biber's works for the violin show him to have been a player of formidable technique, who must have been especially comfortable in the higher positions.

The Passacaglia for Solo Violin comes from a remarkable manuscript presented by Biber to the Archbishop of Salzburg. The manuscript contains fifteen sonatas for violin, each one with an engraving of the Mysteries of the Rosary pasted in the upper-left-hand corner. Each of the sonatas requires the violin strings to be tuned to different pitches. Scholars assume that the sonatas were used as part of "Rosary Processions," devotions performed each October in Salzburg involving walking past a series of paintings illustrating the rosary and reciting prayers. The Passacaglia comes at the end of the manuscript and is illustrated by an engraving of an angel with a child. Similarly, the assumption here is that the Passacaglia would have been played in conjunction with the Feast of the Guardian Angel on October 2nd. This is a heady and evocative combination of spiritual, visual, and musical content but needs to be received with some skepticism. It is certain that at least some of the sonatas were composed much earlier and for a different patron and setting, meaning that a connection between the music and the devotions was not part of the original conception.

The Passacaglia, in any case, is unlike the other sonatas. It does not require the violin to use a non-standard tuning and while it does pose significant technical challenges it contains neither the flights into higher positions nor the extravagantly embellished improvisatory excursions of the rest of the set. Instead, the Passacaglia is marked by a rigorous structural plan. A simple four-note scale fragment is played 65 times as the basis for a series variation. Given how short the underlying fragment is, Biber tends to group multiple statements into longer variations. Biber creates variety both by playing with the lengths of variations and also by incorporating his four-note line into different harmonic patterns. There is also a larger structure created by moving the four-note line up an octave in the middle section of the Passacaglia, with the ornamental passage work below it. The Passacaglia poses a fascinating set of options for the listener, who can either hear it in the context of specific religious rituals and devotional meanings, or as austere musical construction whose meaning comes only from its structure.

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Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) Cello Sonata in G Minor, Op. 65

Since its very inception, the Chopin Cello Sonata has been surrounded by narratives of personal difficulties and a problematic reception. It was a piece that Chopin struggled to compose, working on it for over a year, and leaving behind an unusually large collection of sketches and early versions. Chopin wrote in an 1846 letter that he was "at times content, at other times not with my Sonata with violoncello. I throw it into a corner, then gather it up anew." This was also a troubled time for Chopin in general. Not only was his relationship with George Sand collapsing, but she was publishing chapters of an overtly autobiographical novel in which the Chopin equivalent was presented in a very unflattering way. This public humiliation was accompanied by a decline in Chopin's always delicate health, as he was increasingly limited by tuberculosis that would soon prove fatal.

The Sonata was initially received with neither warmth nor understanding. Chopin first presented it in public in 1848 at his last public concert in Paris, but only played the second, third, and fourth movements. He had test-driven the Sonata in private for friends and other musicians, but, according to one of his students, "the first movement was not understood. It appeared to the hearers obscure, involved by too many ideas, in short, it had no success." Perhaps Chopin was right to be cautious. The great virtuoso pianist Ignaz Moscheles later heard in the Sonata, "passages which sound to me like someone preluding [improvising] on the piano, the player knocking at the door of every key and clef, to find if any melodious sounds were at home."

It is easy from our vantage point in the 21st century to be unsympathetic and confused by Chopin's early audiences, and by reactions like Moscheles'. The Sonata is now a beloved staple of the cello repertoire, and has long since ceased to seem problematic. One of the issues must have been that the Sonata was not typical of what Chopin was best known for. As a substantial, multi-movement work for two instruments, it stands out sharply in the context of Chopin's nocturnes, mazurkas, polonaises, and waltzes for solo piano. These short pieces, mostly in the character of dance music and mostly in simple forms, are still the core of the essential Chopin for most of us. Or, to put it negatively, there is also a long tradition of Chopin being viewed as a composer who had problems with larger forms.

Robert Schumann wrote that Chopin "neglects entirely any works of larger dimensions; perhaps the glitter and dissolution of Parisian life have something to do with this."

This no doubt reflects both a general prejudice on Schumann's part against French culture and also a more specific gripe with the booming business surrounding virtuoso piano culture in Paris at the time, but he may not have been completely wrong. It was, after all, a small audience of wealthy and socially elite Parisians that Chopin didn't trust to approve of the first movement of the Sonata. Presumably, this audience would have heard the other movements as being more nearly akin to Chopin's short solo piano pieces. They are each about the same length as a typical character piece. The second movement Scherzo is similar to a mazurka in style and comes in the same three-part ABA form typical of the mazurkas. The following slow movement, essentially a single long melody shared in alternation between cello and piano, is not so distant from a nocturne. The final movement doesn't map as easily onto Chopin's preferred piano genres, but it is again a relatively short movement, based on two distinct and attractive themes, the second one of which probably would have been heard by Chopin's audiences as typical of Slavic folk music. The first movement, meanwhile, is as long as the other three movements put together (if the repeat in the first movement is observed), and Chopin's first private audiences were correct to hear in it an unusual wealth of motives and ideas.

The Cello Sonata reflects both Chopin's life-long affinity for the cello and his collaboration with the cellist Auguste Francomme, to whom the Sonata is dedicated. Chopin and Francomme also presented a Mozart piano trio (with the violinist Jean-Delphin Alard) on the same concert with the premiere of the Chopin Cello Sonata. In addition to playing chamber music with Francomme, Chopin published a joint composition with him, a virtuoso fantasy on themes from a Meyerbeer opera, with each musician writing the part for his own instrument. While Francomme does not seem to have been involved with the actual composition of the Cello Sonata, a comparison of the cello part with Francomme's cello part for the joint fantasy shows that Chopin knew Francomme's playing well and was carefully crafting a part for his particular strengths. Francomme was deeply embedded in Parisian musical life, teaching at the Conservatoire, founding chamber music and quartet societies and playing in multiple opera orchestras. Chopin's close association with Francomme is a reminder that the aristocratic salon, while central to Chopin's musical life, was far from the complete extent of it.