Discussion of the Violin Music of Jules Massenet, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Fritz Kreisler and Chen Gang

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Abstract

Discussion of the Violin Music of Jules Massenet, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Fritz Kreisler and Chen Gang

By

Chang Xu

Master of Music in Music, Performance

This paper is based on my graduate violin recital. I will be analyzing the musical works in my recital program and discussing the strategies about how to plan such a solo recital. Meanwhile, the purpose of this paper is a contemplation of myself prompting my improvement. As a student in the string performance major, a solo recital is a way to show the techniques learned and to reflect one’s personal understanding of the music. I chose Massenet’s Thaïs for the opening work, followed by two sonatas by Beethoven and Schubert. I put two short pieces at the beginning of the second half and ended the performance with a small Chinese work.

In order to be more professional with musical interpretation it is necessary to conduct research and analysis of the chosen pieces. A great recital does not just have high technique and virtuosity of playing, but also includes many aspects such as how to plan a program and how to control one’s nerves throughout the recital.
Program Notes and Expanded Commentary of Recital

Program Notes

The small work entitled Méditation was originally composed by Jules Massenet as an intermezzo in Act II of the opera “Thaïs”, and later arranged for violin and piano. The opera, based on the novel of the same title by Anatole France, revolves around the Christian monk, Athanael, converting a courtesan, Thaïs, only to discover that his fascination with her was in fact based on lust. As Burton Fischer states, the story conveys the hideousness of religion.¹

Expanded Commentary

The opening of the arrangement of Méditation is already a rendition of the true operatic qualities of the piece. In the beginning measures the piano part mirrors the original harp and orchestral figurations—the part is peaceful, like Athanael’s reflection in Act II of the opera. Zank reviewed this piece in American String Teacher as follows: “… the introduction establishes an ongoing pizzicato pattern emulating harp arpeggios: basses begin with three eighth notes, joined on the second eighth note by cellos with six eighth notes.”² In the middle of the work, the key transitions to C major and a dramatic dynamic change also takes place. (Figure 1) Massenet used Più mosso in measure 22, while the key change also takes place. (Figure 1) Massenet used Più mosso in measure 22, while the key change also takes place.

¹ Burton Fisher, Massenet's Thaïs (Los Angeles: Boca Raton: Opera Journeys Publishing; Sony Electronics [Distributor], 2006).
changes dramatically and suddenly. With the increased tempo, the music drives forward, expressing a nervousness and instability.

After these changes and dramatic fluctuations, the music returns to the main material, much like the resolve Athanael found for his own conflicts through meditation. This small work for violin and piano is an excellent opening piece for a recital, not only for its beautiful melody but also for its calming effect on the audience. Through this piece listeners can open their ears and hearts for the rest of the recital. The performers, in turn, get an opportunity to adapt themselves to the stage and the acoustics of the hall, and to find their calm for the remainder of the performance.
Program Notes

The Violin Sonata No. 8 in G major, Op. 30 No. 3 was finished by Ludwig van Beethoven in 1802 and is dedicated to Tsar Alexander I of Russia. The sonata was composed during the middle period of Beethoven’s life, when he was experiencing both a physical and psychological agony over the illness that affected his hearing and that eventually was to cause his deafness. However, he fought the burdens of his life, and his compositions during this period became extremely powerful and meaningful. Although Beethoven’s music expressed sadness, we can still find his passion with life in the music. This sonata exemplifies this period, and remains one of the most famous works of Beethoven. Lewis Lockwood and Mark Kroll mention this sonata: “...the three big sonatas of Opus 30...are in the context of Beethoven’s experimental aims as he moved towards a “new poetics” of the accompanied sonata.”

Expanded Commentary

In an attempt to contrast two sonatas within the same era I chose one by Beethoven, the Sonata No. 8, and the Sonatina in D Major by Franz Schubert. Compositions by Beethoven have various themes and forms, particularly exemplified in his sonatas. He used methods that were very similar to his symphonic elements and orchestral composing methods: by combining the musical elements of the traditional Viennese classical school.

with his own idiosyncratic methods he developed an original style that made him one of the greatest composers of the classical period.

The expression of Beethoven’s music style relates very much to his life experiences, particularly to his ongoing fight with his ailments. His musical works were often expansive in concept, involving dramatic musical development and distinct contrasts based on German and Austrian music traditions. Beethoven’s contribution to the classical period and music overall makes him one of the greatest composers in history, and there is no doubt that anyone in the field music must study Beethoven and his works. He provided innumerable valuable works, and especially many for the violin. Thus, it is essential for violinists to study his music extensively. His works are the basis for study of good dynamic contrast, careful intonation, and precise bow control for any violinist. Furthermore, Beethoven’s music also teaches great expressiveness and virtuosity to any performer.

The Sonata No. 8 contains three movements: Allegro assai, Tempo di minuetto, and Allegro vivace. The first movement is written in sonata form in a 6/8 meter. One of the most important characteristics of this movement is the “conversation” between the violin and the piano. For example, the dialog between the two instruments revolves around the imitation of the parts in measures one and two, and the answer the piano gives in measure three while the violin is silent. (Figure 2) This movement is driven by four motifs. Each motif is a transition, and each motif leads the melody, allowing the piece to move forward. Another motif of the movement, beginning at measure 92 on the upbeat, marks the
development section. (Figure 3) We can see the conversation between the violin and piano, making the musical texture interwoven. At the beginning of this motif, Beethoven used a section of trills, which seems to be somewhat out of place. However, the piano carries the trills as the violinist rests, and the piano and violin both take turns carrying the melody, making the musical interchange lively here before finally returning to the theme.

On a performance viewpoint, this movement poses a challenge as the forward-moving rhythm tends to make both players rush. An emphasis on tempo control must be made constantly, on top of the importance of synchronization between the two players. Furthermore, the plethora of dynamic markings in the score are all important, as they define the musical style and intent of Beethoven, and naturally the players must dutifully observe all of them.

The second movement is a minuet in E-flat major that includes four main themes. The first theme is characterized by an arpeggiation of the dominant harmony played by piano. The tone here is pastoral and peaceful and flows freely through changes of the note figurations. The second theme becomes brighter and lighter. Its pace feels lifted and dance-like due to triplet figures and ornamented turns. In measure 9, the melody becomes broader and more connected with the help of a more whimsical rhythm in the piano part. (Figure 4) In contrast, theme four jumps out of the slow melody from theme three, with sixteenth note runs for both the pianist and the violinist; interestingly, this both ends the second movement and also prepares the mood for the last movement.
The second movement has notable variation of the typical characteristics of a slow movement: it starts at a calm pace, becomes faster in the middle adding both tempo and drive, and gradually returns to its original feel. Beethoven kept the balance in the music and conformed to the classical composing style by using four simple musical themes for the entire movement. However, for a successful performance, both parts must be coordinated meticulously, as the parts are entwined together for a complete line.

The last movement of this sonata is a playful rondo, comprised of continuous runs of sixteenth notes. Every variation is short and delicate, never failing in its unavoidable return to the primary theme. Although the composition is continuously driven forward, lending it a certain element of passion, it never lacks elegance, staying true to its classical style. As Robert Maxham describes, the violinist and pianist would naturally support each other should the colors of this movement be displayed:

“The engineers have preserved much of their thunder, but sometimes, at moments of repose, the violin appears to recede--and not entirely, perhaps, due to the dynamic balance inherent in works often dominated by the keyboard…In the Sonata, op. 30/3, they revel in their ability to shift manners suddenly, with a skill that highlights Beethoven's chameleon-like moods, that shift mercurially from storms to blue skies and back to lightning bolts within a few measures' span.”

Program Notes

Undoubtedly, Schubert’s compositions have similar elements to those of Beethoven. Though, Schubert was known especially for his song-like instrumental music. In his music, we can always feel hope, freedom, happiness, and love, and his *Sonatina No. 1 in D Major* is no exception. This famous work has three movements: *Allegro molto*, *Andante*, and *Allegro vivace*.

Expanded Commentary

This sonatina by Schubert has a simple structure that is easy for a performer to understand and analyze for proper expression. Schubert’s ways to express clearly and directly his musical intentions also aid the musician. Furthermore, the duet between violin and piano cannot be ignored: Schubert utilized musical dialogue constantly in the music, entailing not only the importance and function of each instrument, but also the emphasis on vocal lines of his composition.

Examples of these stylistic characteristics are numerous. In the opening of the first movement, the violin and piano carry the melody jointly, highlighting the vocal nature of the line. (Figure 5) After the opening melody, the piano stops doubling the melody and instead creates a rhythmic and harmony line through an accompanying eighth note pattern; this creates an enormous contrast from the opening. As the volume of the melody drops dramatically, the harmony thickens, already creating a completely different atmosphere. This clear expression is most exemplar of Schubert. (Figure 6)
While the expression of Schubert is relatively transparent and could be considered to be somewhat logical, a performance of his compositions is certainly not without difficulties. While the conversation between the violin and the piano can be found throughout the piece, the tempo is highly accelerated in the third movement. It is clear that the violinist and pianist must take turns carrying the same melody. (Example. 7) Careful coordination in slow rehearsal is almost always necessary for the two players to match harmoniously.
Program Note

Fritz Kreisler was an Austrian-American violinist and composer, lauded as one of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century. His masterful fusion of technique and expression on the violin created a distinctive sound that influenced all bowing and fingering methods since. Kreisler also wrote many timeless violin showpieces that took the musical cues of the past and which he whimsically false-attributed to other, long dead composers. *Praeludium and Allegro* (in the Style of Pugnani) is one of the most popular of these compositions.

Expanded Commentary

As Kreisler attributed this piece to Gaetano Pugnani, *Praeludium and Allegro* exhibits many Baroque characteristics. The beginning of the *Praeludium* consists of drawn-out quarter notes that comprise long phrases. (Figure 8) Hence, every note needs the utmost care from the player.  

While the piece holds simple, beautiful lines and themes, there lie many technical challenges in the performance of the work. Positional jumps in the *Praeludium* are often treacherous for any violinist’s intonation and tone quality, and require careful bow distribution and speed. I believe the *Allegro* should be played quite quickly, but must not lose its lightness and elegance, despite many string crossings and dynamic

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changes. This piece reflects both the technical prowess and ingenuity musicality that defined Kreisler’s own virtuosity.

Program Note

_The Flowers_ is a popular song composed by Zhenbang Lei and was later arranged for violin and piano by Tiehua Han and Gang Chen. It is based on a Uyghur folksong and was originally composed for a Chinese film. This composition is in four parts, each moving forward through variation and development. The composer used rhythmical patterns and non-Western tonalities from traditional Uyghur music. By doing so, Han not only enriched the simple folk melody, but also utilized several traditional and extended techniques of violin playing.

Expanded Commentary

In any non-Western piece, the sonic expression of graphical depiction through Western methods remain difficult—however, composers will find their solutions. For example, traditional Uyghur singers will often embellish an emphasized note; these ornaments resemble turns. Thus, the many grace notes and trills in the piece represent these improvised vocal flutters, and specific note values have been assigned to them in order to mimic the traditional flair. (Figure 9) However, the performer needs to take care not to let these decorations impede the flow and agogic push of the music. (Figure 10)
Another type of ornamentation of Uyghur folk music piece is the slide note. While the composer might not always mark these slides in the score, a Uyghur singer will add a slide between two words, or even before specific words. To genuinely play in this style, the performer must determine where these slides are, often despite the absence of such markings.

Furthermore, the tempi of these traditional songs flow freely and will often fluctuate. Instead of focusing only on speed, the player must express the dance-like feel and rhythm that dictates Uyghur music and culture. Most notably, any rubato, no matter how drastic, must not lose time overall; fortunately, the composer carefully notates these fluctuations.

For example, each “accelerando” in the score (Figure 11), will always be succeeded by a “ritardando” soon after. (Figure 12) The performer must observe all of these in order to give this music its proper feel.
Discussing of Strategies for Planning a Solo Recital

This recital was based on my two years of graduate studies and serves in many ways as a culmination of my understanding of musical interpretation and violin technique. During the two years of my graduate violin studies, I focused on the violinistic aspects for the improvement of my instrumental performance and understanding of music as a whole. The preparation of a recital encompasses all of that.

The preparation of a recital begins with choosing from a vast repertoire, and juxtaposing the selections in some relevant progression. While the massiveness of the bulk of the violin repertoire makes this process difficult, there are many strategies for simplification. For example, it is common for performers to arrange the program by period, so often works are chosen to represent contrasting periods. Naturally, a performer will want to choose works by composers they admire; likewise, a performer will inherently choose compositions that will show off their own musical strengths and styles.

During the process of planning a program, the performer must develop a deep understanding of the music chosen. Furthermore, the player must meet the technical requirements for these works. Naturally, musical interpretation must have a place during practice, and hierarchical classification of the repertoire may help divide a work into smaller sections for easier practice. (Figure 13) Memorization will often be necessary: according to a journal article named Practicing Perfection: How Concert Soloists Prepare for Performance Roger Chaffin and Topher Logan write: "Musical performances by concert
soloists in the Western classical tradition are normally memorized. For memory to work reliably under the pressures of the concert stage, the performance must be practiced until it is thoroughly automatic".6

Equipment also ranks paramount during the preparation of a recital. The responsible performer will make sure his instrument will not be prone to failure during the performance. A violinist will ensure the bow hair and violin strings are not so old that the sound quality is negatively affected, but also not so new that random fluctuations will occur. In addition to taking care of their personal equipment, a good performer will also note the environment and the effect that its variables have on sound.

Lastly, in order to present a high quality performance, the player must not only achieve a high technical level, but also needs to maintain a good psychological state. Stage anxiety is a common problem in many performers and is a known detriment during performance. Dianna T. Kenny mentions stage anxiety in her book: “…the experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance…which is manifested through combinations of affective, cognitive, somatic and behavioral symptoms.”7 It is this psychological element of a recital preparation that is often neglected by performers until the last moment. While obvious considerations of repertoire, style, 


daily practice, rehearsing and other logistics of a recital are certainly at the heart of one’s preparation, the importance of a balanced and well-trained set of nerves cannot be overstated.
Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
Figure 12

Figure 13
Bibliography


