

CÉSAR FRANCK (1822-1890)

Violin or Cello Sonata in A major (1886)

The violin sonata by César Franck was his wedding gift to the violinist Eugene Ysaye, and was presented to him on the morning of this special day, on 26th of September 1886. In that same period Franck was working on one of his most beautiful works, the Symphonic Poem Psyche for Orchestra and Choir.

As Franck mentioned to his pupil Arthur Coquard, he had been contemplating Psyche over many years in his mind, and composed it in his vacation retreat at Combs-la-Ville- Quincy over the summer of 1886, together with the violin sonata. The story of Psyche is drawn from the second century Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius, which tells of Greek god Eros' nocturnally veiled love for the mortal Psyche, Psyche's wish to behold her lover face to face, and the lovers' parting and then reconciliation. In Franck's retelling, Psyche first dreams of Eros, then she is carried by zephyrs (gentle winds) to Eros' secret garden, where they spend many wonderful nights together. Psyche is warned that she must never seek to see the face of her mysterious lover. But she does not obey, and thus loses Eros. The aftermath of her transgression is very dramatic; Aphrodite sets her impossible tasks, but due to Psyche's unbounded love she receives help from Zeus and becomes a goddess herself. The story ends with the wonderful reunion of Psyche and Eros and their wedding.

In my personal reading, the music of this sonata also inhabits the world of this wonderful myth:

1st Movement: Psyche and Eros, their nocturnally veiled love.

2nd Movement: Psyche's transgression, suffering and love.

3rd Movement: Aphrodite's tasks, Psyche's transformation

4th Movement: Psyche and Eros again together, their wedding, divine power.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Cello Sonata Op.65 (1845-47)

From 1838 to 1847 Frédéric Chopin was in a romantic relationship with George Sand, who was a very famous French writer at that time. It was a relationship between a strong, extravagant, pragmatic woman and a sensitive, delicate man. Throughout his life Chopin had quite a sensitive, weak body and unstable health. He was not especially well organized in his everyday life, and spent most of his time teaching in high class society in Paris. Luckily, for several years he had the practical and emotional support of George Sand. He was mostly composing in Nohant, her country house, where he did not have to teach and where he felt physically and emotionally well enough to work. At the time when he was working on the cello sonata in 1845 they started to have bigger conflicts, mainly because of her children. (Chopin was very protective towards Sand's daughter Sol.) 1846 was the last summer he was in Nohant.

The Cello Sonata Op. 65 turned to be Chopin's last opus, written between 1845-47 in Nohant and Paris. This wonderful work is his only duo sonata. We know from the letters to his family that the process of writing was not easy (there are more than 200 pages of sketches), because he was looking for the perfect fusion between such different instruments.

In my opinion, Chopin felt that the best inspiration for writing for the cello is the voice, the Lied. Perhaps this is why he chose the cello for his duo sonata, and why the piece was such a success. The sonata is not only an enrichment for the cello repertoire, but also for the chamber music in general – it is such a wonderful example of combining or even “melting” a string instrument with the piano.

Right at the beginning of the cello sonata we hear the motive from the first song of Winterreise by Franz Schubert. The harmonies in the third movement of the cello sonata are the same as in Frauenleben und Liebe by Robert Schumann. Can it all be just a coincidence? I don't believe so. I think Chopin did know these songs and felt very connected to the world of Lied, he just did not have yet time or courage to develop and publish his own songs. The music of his cello sonata is also closely related to his own beautiful and unknown songs (op. posthum 74). He asked his friend to destroy after his death all the manuscripts of the songs he had written during his life. But fortunately for us, with the permission of Chopin's family, some of these precious and beautiful songs were published posthumously. Many sad songs with texts about 'Polish destiny' under Russian occupation, about injustice, death, melancholy, songs about love, unhappy love and some light and funny songs.

The characters of the four movements of Chopin's Cello Sonata could be described like the characters or stories in his songs:

1st Movement: Wayfarer destiny (like at the beginning of Schubert's Winterreise) – Chopin's wayfarer story looking back at his life, singing about injustice, love, generosity, pride, sadness, passion, patriotism.

2nd Movement: Dramatic Scherzo – alternating dancing and menacing moments. Trio – untroubled, comforting and openhearted waltz.

3rd Movement: Song from the deepness of the soul, conversation with death.

4th Movement: Tarantella/Rondo – alternately anxious, restless dance, beautiful song from his childhood and happy, light tarantella. The end is in G Major, happy and free.

Xenia Jankovic