

South Bay Chamber Music Society

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Henry Gronnier, violin

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Program Notes by Boglárka Kiss, D.M.A.



Nowadays, the musical term *sonata* may refer to a genre as well as a compositional form. As a genre, the *sonata* became standardized during the Classical era and is generally thought of as a multi-movement work for one or two instruments. *Sonata form* became distilled over a period of approximately half a century in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Most commonly, it is a compositional structure that is featured in the symphony, concerto, sonata, and other chamber works.

Our very own Robert Thies pondered the role of pianists in chamber music, focusing on sonatas in his article, "I am Not an Accompanist." Please click the following link to read his article:

http://robertthies.org/rthies_main/documents/CMTarticle.pdf

Sonata No. 3 in E Major for Violin and Keyboard, BWV 1016 (c. 1721)

Johann Sebastian Bach (German, 1685-1750)



The origins of the sonata as a genre are rather vague. The word *sonata* means 'played' and was intended to contrast with *cantata*, which is a sung piece of music. In the Baroque, the term *sonata* was applied quite loosely, but most works with this title from this era were written for one or more instruments with *basso continuo*. Basso continuo provided the harmonic underpinning of the music and could be performed on a variety of instruments. The most common combination of *continuo* instruments featured one that could play chords (e.g. harpsichord, lute, piano) and one that could sustain notes (most commonly the cello or bassoon). Over time, *basso continuo* lost its popularity, particularly after the invention of the piano.

Bach's six sonatas for violin and keyboard are early examples of works that present two equal partners in the context of a sonata.

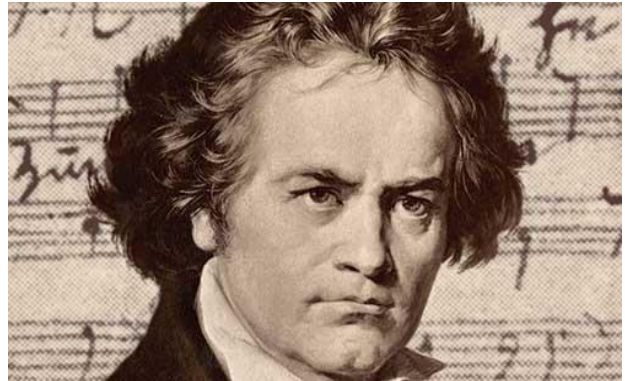
Bach wrote the first five of the six sonatas using the *church sonata* model, which contains four movements of contrasting tempi, typically slow-fast-slow-fast. The sonata on today's program opens with an ornate melody over a single bass note that remains unchanged for a long time. Even later the bass changes only at extremely wide intervals, creating an impression of spaciousness. The second movement is an extended three-part invention in which the opening theme is imitated. The third movement is a passacaglia, that is, it is based upon a bass line that is repeated over and over again. Against the recurrent bass, an expressive melodic line unfolds, alternating between the violin and the right hand of the keyboard. The movement leads directly into the lively finale.

Please click the following link to hear this work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHx5v0edAes>

Sonata No. 4 for Piano and Violin in A minor, Op. 23 (1801)

L. v. Beethoven (German, 1770-1827)

With the growing popularity of the piano as a solo instrument in the mid-1700s, the role of the violin diminished significantly, albeit temporarily, in sonatas written for the two instruments. Often, the violin's role was limited to simply doubling the right hand of the keyboard. (In fact, the *piano trio* was achieved by adding a cello to play along with the left hand of the piano during this time.) It was mostly through Beethoven's efforts that true equality of parts



came to be in this musical setting, and in the duo sonata literature in general. Still it is important to remember that the “violin sonatas” written during this era were published as *sonatas for piano accompanied by violin*, reflecting the limited role of the violin.

Beethoven intended his *Sonata No. 4 for Piano and Violin* to be published as a contrasting companion piece to his “*Spring*” *Sonata*, but due to a publishing error, the two sonatas now appear under different opus numbers. If the “*Spring*” *Sonata* is bright and sometimes humorous, its A minor companion is austere. In the outer movements, the piano is often reduced to sparse two-part writing, and all three movements, despite demonstrating considerable forward momentum throughout, end quietly.

The principal melody of the opening movement is restless, contrasting markedly with a more serene second theme. The second movement, although playful, masks structural complexities that include sonata form and imitation, while the third movement, a rondo, returns to the gloominess of the first, closing the work with a sense of bleakness.

Please click here to hear the work performed live: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQMpxHET-gs>

Sonata in A Major for Piano and Violin (1886)

César Franck (Belgian-French, 1822-1890)



César-Auguste-Jean-Guillaume-Hubert Franck was a composer, pianist, organist, and music teacher. He was born at Liège, in what is now Belgium, and became a French citizen later in life.

He showed remarkable musical gifts that enabled him to enter the Liège conservatory at the age of eight, and his progress as a pianist was so astonishing that his father took him on tour when the composer was only 12. A year later, Franck's father sent his young son to Paris to continue his studies at the Paris Conservatoire. Although he won several composition prizes as a student, his father removed him from the institution in the hopes that he would develop a career as a virtuoso performer.

In order to please his father and earn much-needed money, Franck gave concerts for a while and continued to write music. But his unwillingness to keep concertizing, negative press reviews of his compositions, and a strained relationship with his father turned Franck to earn a living as an organist and teacher. He enjoyed a reputation as a gifted improviser, and in 1872 became professor at the Paris Conservatoire. It was during his professorship that Franck wrote the pieces that eventually became part of the standard repertoire, among them the *Sonata for Piano and Violin in A*.

Franck wrote the work when he was 63, as a wedding present for the 31-year-old Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe who kept the Sonata in his repertoire for the next 40 years of his life, and played it with many pianists. His championing of the Sonata contributed to the public recognition of Franck as a major composer.

The work is in four contrasting movements, with each featuring a specific formal structure, including sonata form. The work is also cyclic in nature, meaning that all the movements share common threads: Melodies from one movement reappear in subsequent movements, but transformed in some way. The piece is further notable for the difficulty of its piano part. Its technical challenges include frequent extreme extended figures and virtuoso runs and leaps, particularly in the second movement.

The gentle melody introduced by the violin in the first movement is the thematic core of the entire work, followed by the swirling turbulence in the sonata-form second movement. The third movement is improvisatory in nature, and free in both structure and expression. The last movement features the main melody in imitation between the instruments, and recurs in a rondo-like manner to a triumphant and soaring conclusion.

Watch a live rendition of this work here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTTtqD113_U&t=23s

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