

Notes to Violin-Cello Duos
Deborah Wong/Adam Grabois

It is both something of a paradox and a truism that the richest musical experiences can be derived from the most minimal sounding forces. Of these combinations, the configuration represented on this recording, the duo for two strings, is among the most austere: two single line instruments pitched an octave and a half apart, constructed of the same wood, gut and horsehair, realize the coded specifications of three musical scores.

Part of the richness we experience resides in the tonal range produced by virtuosi fully engaged by the works they are performing, as is obviously the case here. In their hands, instruments become an extension of the vocal tract, effecting subtle modulations of timbre, pitch and amplitude analogous to those which a fine singer imparts to the text of a song.

However, like the isolated vowels and consonants of language, these inflections only become coherent when they are embedded within a discourse which is to say a conversation between two players. Declarations are advanced, complaints are registered, claims are refuted, parried and ignored. At times, the third wall between the performers and audience is erased, and we feel ourselves as eavesdroppers, intruders on a private colloquy.

Of the three works represented here, the Kodaly duo offers perhaps the clearest musical depiction of a verbal exchange. This may be due to the fact that Kodaly's training was not primarily as a musician, but as a linguist, Kodaly's doctoral dissertation on the structure of folk song texts requiring the now legendary field work undertaken with his friend and colleague Bartok. Indications of Kodaly's scholarship are found in the occasional interjections into the sonata of *parlando rubato*, a spoken incantation which typically introduces the song proper in traditional folk contexts. These passages function as transitional themes in the stately first movement and as an introductory passageway to the vigorous Balkan dance which functions as the work's finale.

Other folk elements finding their place within the three movements include scurrying pentatonic melodies, open fifth drones, and assaultive *barriolage* suggesting traditional folk instruments and performance practices. Melodic glissandi, grace notes, harsh accents suggest the vocal effects of traditional singers. But while these elements are consistently present they are not sufficient to dislodge the work's solid footings in the romantic tradition, in particular in the refined, complex tonal grammar which had emerged as a musical *lingua franca* by the end of the nineteenth century. The discontinuity between plain spoken populist sentiments communicated through an elite formal medium results in a hybrid sonata--a highly complex work which wears its learning lightly.

While much the same can be said of Bohuslav Martinu's Duo, the conflicting discursive elements are of a fundamentally different kind. Most notably, the duo is an absolute work, one whose musical identity is bound up not so much in external referents but in the generative procedures which define its structure. One such formal device is the tonally

altered invertible counterpoint which opens the work in which the two parts ape each other's gestures tracing out a mirror image in time. Another is the close canon appearing in the second movement where the two parts exchange notes offset by what is in this case a very small time interval, creating a kind of echo effect in the blistering tempo taken here.

These and other baroque contrapuntal devices in modernist trappings stamp the work as a product of twentieth century neo-classicism, a movement which can be seen as a conversation which composers engaged in with their history. Or perhaps an argument. As the musicologist Richard Taruskin has noted, the implicit subject of neo-classicism was the prewar avant garde's naïve embrace of tribal primitivism, a tendency displayed most vividly in Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. The frisson of encountering savage pagan rituals (even in a sublimated artistic form) had substantially lost its allure in the wake of an absurd war and unthinkable destruction largely motivated by similar tribalist sentiments in a nationalist guise. While the good humored charm always present in Martinu's works obscures some of the darker shades of this picture, these are present in the background as the emotional atmosphere of the work.

That similar concerns influenced the Ravel Duo Sonate is apparent in Ravel writings on the work which refer to an "(e)conomy of means . . . carried to its extreme limits" as well as the absence of "harmonies to please the ear" accompanied by "a pronounced reaction in favour of melody." The work's cool, sober neutrality was initially baffling to audiences accustomed to effusive, highly public show pieces like Daphnis and Chloe. What they received instead was a window onto a private conversation of a composer and the thematic materials he is communing with.

A tour de force of structural organization, all the movements are strictly derived from the single premise stated at the outset of the piece. A striking aspect of this premise is the alternating major and minor thirds recalling "le jazz hot" which became a recurrent feature of Ravel's works from the early 1920s. But unlike works like the Violin Sonata in which the blues is explicitly invoked, all extramusical referents in the duo seem otherworldly, as if encountered in a dream subsumed within the work's self-contained logic.

Given the extreme formalist agenda of the duo, Ravel's dedication to Debussy might seem obscure if not provocative. Debussy's mature works constitute a conscious reaction against academic constraints which he saw as inhibiting natural and spontaneous expression. That said, Debussy's very last works, three instrumental sonatas find Debussy reconsidering this orientation. One of these, the violin sonata of 1916 is a structural mirror image of the Ravel duo with each of the three movements continually recycling an initial premise stated at the outset.

Seen in these terms, the subject of the duo might be seen as the reconciliation between the two composers, one which could take place only in Ravel's imagination, Debussy having perished following the savage bombing of Paris in the spring of 1918.

That it is possible to project such an interpretation onto what is, after all, nothing more than non-verbal sounds occurring in time, is itself indicative of the broader subject of the conversation of all of the three works on this disc: the extraordinary range of emotions, ideas, and perspectives on human experience which great works, brilliantly performed, communicate to those of us willing to engage them.