

Program Notes
William Meredith

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Sonata for Violin and Piano, Opus 24

The "Spring"—along with the preceding violin sonata in A Minor, Opus 23—was dedicated to Count Maurice von Fries (1777-1826), "Chambellan de S.M.J. & R." (Sa Majesté Impériale et Royale), as he is described on the title page. The count was *the richest man in Austria*, having taken over the family's banking, textile, and landowning business in 1785. On October 15, 1800, he married Princess Maria Theresia and in the following years they threw lavish parties and dinners at their splendid home right across the street from the Imperial Library. Though that library was immediately across the street, the count maintained his own private library of 16,000 books, as well as a famous art collection. Furthermore, he was a passionate music lover and patron. In the spring of 1800—the year of the composition of these sonatas—two famous piano duels took place in Fries' home between the celebrated pianist Daniel Steibelt, whose claim to fame was the invention of the tremolo on the piano, and Beethoven. Though some writers have speculated without evidence that Fries commissioned the two sonatas, it seems more likely that Beethoven was either honoring the count's marriage or currying favor, as he had done with the dedication to Antonio Salieri for the three violin sonatas of Opus 12.

The "Spring" Sonata acquired its nickname after Beethoven's death, a description earned by its "generally cheerful sense of zesty blossoming," as one web source puts it. It is in the same key, F Major, as the later *Pastoral* Symphony composed in 1803 and 1807-08, but there are no direct depictions of bird songs (though birders may well hear moments in the slow movement as evocations of bird calls). The first theme of the first movement is indeed sweetly beautiful but after the movement shifts to the traditional dominant key (here C Major) for the second theme, Beethoven cannot resist turning to his usual stormy C Minor as it proceeds. The piano accompaniment at the arrival of the second theme foretells the opening of the Waldstein Sonata in its use of pulsing eighth notes. The slow movement is set in B-flat Major, a key Schubert described around 1784 as fit for depictions of "cheerful love, clear conscience, hope, aspiration for a better world." If anyone ever tries to tell you Beethoven could not write beautiful melodies, silence them with these words: "Opus 24, second movement!" The entire slow movement is indeed one of Beethoven's most sublime and touching movements, especially when the "tender joy" is afflicted two-thirds of the way through (symbolized by passing through such emotionally dark keys such as B-flat minor, F-sharp minor, and D minor). The dialogue between the partners is exquisite, especially in the coloratura section immediately before the dark section. As he often does after such slow movements, Beethoven clears the mood with a witty scherzo that plays with making the violinist sound behind by a beat. (It's a famous

example of the subject “humor in Beethoven.”) The concluding rondo is in F, again moving to C Major, which is infiltrated by C Minor once more, then quickly rebutted. The next episode turns to an even stormier minor key (D), which effaces the cheer of the rondo theme. This trait of unpredictability annoyed many of Beethoven’s critics, who regarded it as “bizarre.” In the end Beethoven restores the joy of the first theme (represented by the emphasis on the sixth scale step).

Opus 69: “Inter lacrimas et luctum” (“Amid tears and grief”)

Most of Beethoven’s sketches for the sonata in A Major date from February and March 1808, dates that may help us understand the meaning of the work. During those two months, he wrote out a complete score of the first movement, which he revised so heavily that a second manuscript of the entire work became necessary. The second manuscript is lost. On the lost dedication copy of the work (either a manuscript or printed copy of the first edition described in 1827), Beethoven inscribed the mysterious heading given above over the first movement.

Several theories have been proposed to explain the heading. My proposal is that the heading refers to the aftermath of two letters from September 1807 from the composer to the Countess Josephine Brunswick Deym, in which it is absolutely clear that she is finally refusing to meet him any longer. “Is it really true,” he wrote, “that you do not want to see me any longer—if so—do be frank.” Beethoven had fallen in love with the beautiful and musically gifted widowed countess in late 1804, as is clear from some lines from the end of a passionate letter from March or April 1805: “oh you let me hope, that your heart will long—beat for me—my heart can only—stop—beating for you—when—it beats no longer—beloved J[osephine].” Earlier in that letter, after stating that he had won her heart, Beethoven had promised to make himself more worthy of himself and her. Indeed, he did so in the following two years with a remarkable number of brilliant pieces. Though I do not believe that the countess was the famous “Immortal Beloved” of 1812, she was undoubtedly the longest-lasting love of his life. Her refusal to accept a deeper union with him continued to pain him through at least the fall of 1809.

The theory that the sonata’s inscription is related to Beethoven’s suffering over the loss of Josephine is supported by the key of the work, A Major. Since at least 1779 this key had been associated with love and tender passions, and the writer Schubart, whose works Beethoven knew, characterized it as the “hope of seeing one’s beloved again when parting.” The sonata begins and ends in that key, and the second movement rotates between A Major and Minor (that key associated with both with sorrowful as well as serious and menacing states of the soul). The extremely short third movement (only eighteen measures) is set in E Major, a key Beethoven associated with a special kind of sublime eternal love (and it is also the key of the second main theme of the first movement). These few eighteen measures are among the composer’s most beautiful and other worldly depictions of a rare states of the soul.

The “Archduke” Trio, Opus 97

Another of Beethoven's favorite people—the Archduke Rudolph—received the dedication of this famous trio, but the story is more complex than one might expect for his most important and prestigious patron. Because Beethoven was losing so much money to foreign publishers who were reprinting his works almost immediately after they appeared without paying him anything, he began an experiment to try to publish the works simultaneously in Vienna and in England. The trio is among those works. The Viennese publisher was his friend Siegmund Anton Steiner, the English publisher Robert Birchall. On May 18, 1816, Beethoven wrote to Charles Neate, who was helping with the English side of the project, to say that he wanted him to find someone “from whom there might be expected a present” (that is, money). Neate actually found a woman who was ready to pay 10 guineas for the dedication, but somehow or other it never happened. Steiner's edition from September 2016 and Birchall's first edition from December 2016 both bore dedications to “His Imperial Highness The Archduke Rudolph of Austria.” The generous unknown woman lost her opportunity to be famous in the trio's nickname.

Another mystery concerns the long period between the composition of the work (the second half of 1810 through the first half of 1811) and the first edition from final months of 1816. The work was premiered on June 11, 1811, with Archduke Rudolph performing the piano part in a garden concert in the summer palace of Prince Lobkowitz (another important patron). One audience member wrote scathingly about the event: “The concert ... was somewhat boring especially the Trio by Beethoven that never ended.” Another pre-publication performance featured Beethoven at the piano on April 11, 1814, in a benefit concert in the hall of the hotel “Zumrömischen Kaiser” in Vienna. (The gifted violinist was Ignaz Schuppanzigh and the cellist the equally gifted Joseph Linke.)

The work has what might be considered an “extra” movement for the standard classical period trio: the second is a Scherzo in the same key as the first movement (B-flat Major). The “slow” movement in D Major is actually an *Andante cantabile, ma però con moto* (to be played in a singing manner at a moderate speed, but however with [forward] motion). And the singing, as Beethoven instructs the pianist, is to be “semplice” (simple). Unfortunately for Beethoven, the slow movement is so downright gorgeous that it is only rarely played at an *andante* tempo. The concluding movement is rustic and expansive Rondo of 410 measures that returns to B-flat Major and concludes with an exciting *Presto stretta*. The four movements greatly expand the normal duration of a classical period trio. The beloved recording of the trio by Szeryng, Fournier, and Kempff clocks in at 45:29 minutes, for example. By comparison, Haydn's piano trios are much shorter: both the “Wanderer” and the “Gypsy” are only fifteen minutes. Perhaps the Archduke Trio was one inspiration for those Schubert works, especially the late ones, that were described as being of “heavenly length.”

(For information on key symbolism in Beethoven's works, the essential text is Paul Ellison's *The Key to Beethoven: Connecting Tonality and Meaning in His Music*, published by Pendragon Press in 2014. For information on how to obtain a copy or if you have questions about the notes, please email me at william.meredith@sjsu.edu)