



Program Notes

Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason • November 29, 2020

### **Ludwig van Beethoven, Andante—Allegro vivace from Cello Sonata No. 4 in C Major, Op. 102, No. 1 (1815)**

The trials and tribulations of 2020 have thrown a wrench into what was supposed to be a Beethoven-filled year. On the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the composer's birth, we cannot gather en masse to hear the Ninth Symphony performed by great numbers of artists; we cannot visit museum exhibitions to pore over his manuscript scores. Even the journey of the Beethoven Music Barge, which was slated to sail from Bonn to Vienna this past spring, had to be postponed. Thankfully, many events have been transformed rather than canceled—one can listen to a [virtual performance](#) of Ode to Joy by members of the Rotterdam Philharmonic, each musician playing from their own home; or hear a string trio play a pop-up recital on the streets of New York. Thrust outside the concert hall under such strange circumstances, Beethoven's music takes on different resonances: monumentality softens into malleability.

The Cello Sonata, Op. 102, No. 1 meshes well with these new listening conditions. Intimate and inviting, it is music that draws the listener close. Marked *teneramente*, or tenderly, it opens with a warm melody in the cello's middle range, supported by an empathetic piano. Seemingly unencumbered by the conventions of sonata form, this introductory section feels almost improvisatory. (In the manuscript score, Beethoven wrote that this was a “free sonata,” a phrase that nods to formal specificity while also embracing flexibility and adaptation.) In naturally resonant C major, the cello sings with special openness, filling the surrounding space with sound.

In the *Allegro vivace*, which follows immediately, there is a pointed change in mood. Both cello and piano leave their meandering melodies behind, offering a stern theme in lockstep. With ever-increasing energy, the two instruments enter into an intense, even combative dialogue. How reassuring, then, to hear glimmers of the introduction's warmth return as the movement progresses: momentary respites from struggle, gently insisting upon being heard.

### **Camille Saint-Saëns, *The Swan* (1886)**

Nobody wants to be a one-hit wonder—much less a *silly* one-hit wonder. After writing his now-celebrated *Carnival of the Animals* in 1886, Saint-Saëns insisted that the “Grand Zoological Fantasy” not be performed in public until after his death; it was too frivolous, he thought, and he didn't want it to become a proxy for his broader musical reputation. At the urging of friends, he finally relented somewhat, allowing *The Swan* to be heard as a standalone work during his lifetime. This was an astute choice. Unlike the suite's lighthearted other movements—which parody other composers, make fun of piano students, and even poke fun at Saint-Saëns himself—*The Swan* is pure grace. The cello's plaintive melody glides above rippling sixteenth notes in the piano, spinning an unbroken legato line. Beautiful, mournful, and poignant, the piece was performed at Saint-Saëns' funeral in 1921. The remainder of the suite was published posthumously just three months later.

Beyond its beauty, part of what has secured *The Swan*'s much-loved status is its role in the world of dance. The Russian choreographer Mikhail Fokine, in collaboration with ballerina Anna Pavlova, choreographed a solo piece set to Saint-Saëns's music (usually known as "The Dying Swan") in 1905. Pavlova reportedly performed it more than four thousand times over the course of her career, to enduring admiration and acclaim. More than a century later, the music and choreography continue to move audiences. This past May, American dancer Misty Copeland invited 31 fellow dancers from around the world to film themselves dancing the piece while in isolation in their respective homes. The resulting video, "[Swans for Relief](#)," has been used to raise funds for artists in need of support during the pandemic. It is at once elegiac and hopeful—art that acknowledges the challenges of the present and looks toward a better future.

### **Sergei Rachmaninoff, Sonata in G Minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 19 (1901)**

Even the name of Rachmaninoff's sonata—titled as a work for cello *and* piano, rather than a "cello sonata" with implied piano accompaniment—sets it apart from others in the genre. The two instruments are in equal partnership, each rising to the challenge of the sonata's considerable virtuosic demands. Because both cello and piano play music of such complexity, Rachmaninoff has more musical space to work with—and he runs with it. The Sonata is expansive, almost symphonic in its length, dramatic scope, and musical variety.

Rachmaninoff had struggled following the critical failure of his First Symphony in 1897, then regained confidence after the rapturous reception of the Second Piano Concerto in 1901. The Sonata, composed during the fall of 1901, brims with assurance. A searching introduction sets the stage for a first movement characterized by soaring melodic lines in both instruments. Frenetic energy pulses through the triplet-driven second movement, which jumps abruptly from agitation to exultant melody. The third movement is almost like an art song: brief, lyrical, impassioned. The sonata's final movement is celebratory and heroic, a rollicking excursion filled with triumphant melodies and dramatic flourishes.

The Sonata is often described as both quintessentially Russian and quintessentially Romantic. The cellist Steven Isserlis has suggested that its national sound has to do with the ways that it echoes Orthodox hymns: a combination of close harmonies, repeated single notes, and bell-like ringing. The piece's Romanticism, meanwhile, puts it somewhat at odds with the turn-of-the-century moment in which it was written. In 1901, rather than experimenting with modernism, Rachmaninoff looked backward toward the musical styles of the nineteenth century. This attachment to the past would continue to define the composer's mentality throughout the rest of his life. "I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien," Rachmaninoff lamented in 1939. "I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. I have made intense effort to feel the musical manner of today, but it will not come to me." Yet perhaps it is the sonata's nostalgic perspective, coupled with its extravagant beauty, which explains its continued appeal. It remains a portal to another time and place.

*Lucy Caplan holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and African American Studies from Yale University. The recipient of the Rubin Prize for Music Criticism, she teaches at Harvard College and writes frequently about music, history, and culture. © Lucy Caplan, 2020*