
Maurice Ravel

Sonata for Violin and Piano

Trio in A minor

Maurice Ravel had written a **violin sonata** during his student days, in 1897, but it remained unpublished until long after his death. Thus, when he turned again to the medium in the mid-1920s, he seemed to be embarking on a genre that was totally new to him. The years following the First World War had been difficult ones, owing to his constant insomnia and fear of failing creative power. Yet during this time he produced *La Valse*, the delightful opera of childhood *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, the violin showpiece *Tzigane*, and some smaller chamber works: a memorial piece for Claude Debussy later expanded into the Sonata for violin and cello, another memorial piece for Gabriel Fauré, and the present sonata. He began the sonata in 1923 while still working on *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* and shortly after completing his famous orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The sonata was written for Hélène Jourdan-Morhang, who worked with the composer closely on the conception of the solo part. It took him four years to finish the work, but it remained one of Ravel's favorite pieces.

The three movements of the sonata range from an open and gentle lyricism to a "Blues" to a lively *perpetuo moto*. Ravel composed the "Blues" movement before his visit to America (which took place in the year following the sonata's completion), just as his first visit to the waltz capital of Vienna came only after he had completed his musical depiction of *that city* in *La Valse*. Ravel's biographer Norman Demuth claims to have taken a famous dance-band leader to hear the Ravel sonata, on which occasion his guest declared the second movement to be the most perfect blues he had ever heard and expressed surprise that the composer stayed "in the serious music racket."

Ravel enjoyed spending the summer in his Basque homeland. He arrived at St. Jean-de-Luz in the summer of 1913, fresh from the scandalous world premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris, after which the Basque country must have seemed exceptionally peaceful. Here he devoted himself to the composition of a **piano trio**, his first new piece of pure chamber music since the string quartet of a decade earlier, completing the first movement by the end of March. But he got bogged down and had difficulty bringing it to an end. The impetus to finish the work came when Germany declared war on France in August. Composition became the means by which Ravel sought oblivion from the horrors that were inevitable. He had tried to offer his services to his country by joining the infantry but was rejected for being two kilos under the minimum weight. He wrote to a friend, "So as not to think of all this, I am working—yes, working with the sureness and lucidity of a madman." In just under four weeks, by 29 August 1914, he had completed the trio, one of his most serious large-scale pieces.

The opening *Modéré* presents a theme written in 8/8 time with the melody consistently disposed into a 3 + 3 + 2 pattern that Ravel identified as "Basque in color." The second theme is a lyrical diatonic melody first presented in the violin and briefly imitated by the cello. These two themes and a tense connecting passage serve as the major ideas of the movement, building with increasing pace and intensity to a solid climax followed by a gradual descent to a gentle close. The heading for the second movement, *Pantoum*, refers to a verse form borrowed by such French Romantic poets as Victor Hugo from Malayan poetry; its connection with Ravel's music is a mystery. The movement is the scherzo of the work, playing off a rhythmic string figure colored by the insertion of pizzicatos throughout and a simple legato theme that serves as the foil to the rhythmic motive. The *Passacaille*

derives its shape from the Baroque form more frequently known by its Italian name *passacaglia*, in which an ostinato melody or harmonic progression is repeated over and over as the skeleton background for a set of variations. Ravel's approach to the form is, not surprisingly, a good deal freer than that of the Baroque composers. The movement is wonderfully tranquil. By contrast the *Animé* of the finale offers gorgeous splashes of instrumental color in a masterly display of brilliant writing for each of the instruments—long trills in the strings serving as a foil for dense chords in the piano in a triumphant close.

—Steven Ledbetter

Fredy Ostrovsky

Born in Bulgaria in 1921, violinist Fredy Ostrovsky went to Vienna at thirteen and at sixteen graduated with highest honors from the State Academy of Music in Vienna. He continued his studies in London with Carl Flesch, then came to the United States in 1940 to study at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. He served three years in the U.S. Army and was a member of Glenn Miller's Army Air Corps Band, after which he became concertmaster for Paul Whiteman and played with various musical groups in New York, finally joining the Boston Symphony in 1952. He has taught at the New England Conservatory and has been concertmaster of the New Hampshire Philharmonic.

Jean Alderman

Born in Beverly, Massachusetts, pianist Jean Alderman completed her undergraduate work at the University of Rochester (Eastman School of Music), pursuing further studies at Harvard, Boston University, and Columbia University. Following a summer as a chamber music pianist at the Berkshire Music Center, she became a member of a violin-piano duo which performed extensively both in this country and in Europe. She also spent a year studying in Vienna as a recipient of the Frank Huntington Beebe Award. Ms. Alderman performs chamber music frequently in the New England area. She has given programs at the Gardner Museum, on WGBH-TV and radio, and in Jordan Hall as a New England Conservatory faculty member. She is currently on the staff of The Music School at Rivers and is a member of the Performing Faculty at Wellesley College.

Jennie Shames

Massachusetts-born violinist Jennie Shames made her first concert appearance at five; she has since performed extensively in solo recital and with orchestras throughout New England and Pennsylvania. While at Harvard University, where she earned her bachelor's degree in 1979, she was concertmaster of and a frequent soloist with the Bach Society Orchestra. During that time she was also a member and often concertmaster of the Opera Company of Boston. In 1978, Ms. Shames won the Arlington Philharmonic Young Artists' Competition and played the Brahms Violin Concerto with that orchestra. She attended the Young Artists' Program at Tanglewood in 1974 and was a member of the Berkshire Music Center fellowship program in 1976; her teachers included Jerome Rosen and Joseph Silverstein. Ms. Shames joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1980.

Joel Moerschel

Cellist Joel Moerschel was born in Oak Park, Illinois, and began his cello studies at the Chicago Musical College, where his teacher was Karl Fruh. He was principal cellist with the Chicago Civic Symphony and performed as soloist with the Oak Park Symphony and the Michigan City Symphony. Mr. Moerschel earned a bachelor's degree and performer's certificate at the Eastman School of Music, where he was a student of Ronald Leonard. He was principal cellist of the Eastman Philharmonic and a member of the Corning Philharmonic and the Rochester Philharmonic, as well as cellist for Musica Nova and the Eastman Honors String Quartet. Mr. Moerschel is a former member of the Wheaton Trio and Musica Viva, founder of the Francesco String Quartet, and a current member of the contemporary music ensemble Collage. A Boston Symphony member since 1970, he has performed extensively as a recitalist and chamber musician in Boston, New York, and the midwest.

Brady Millican

Brady Millican was born in Texas, where he began his piano studies when he was eight. After graduation from the Eastman School of Music, he was the winner of the Francis Toye Award at the Royal College of Music in London. While in Europe he was among the last American musicians to benefit from the guidance of the famed French pedagogue, Nadia Boulanger. In addition to concerts at the White House, in Carnegie Hall, and on two European tours, Mr. Millican has been broadcast live on the *Morning Pro Musica* program over National Public Radio, and he has recorded piano music of Gottschalk with Eugene List for Turnabout records.