

Oberon's Grove

Three Sonatas @ Chamber Music Society March 01, 2023



Above: pianist Wu Qian

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Thursday February 28th, 2023 - At Alice Tully Hall tonight, **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** offered a program of sonatas by Brahms, Shostakovich, and Beethoven; a quartet of esteemed players joined forces for music-making of the highest order.

Johannes Brahms had decided to retire from composing in 1890, but in January 1891, he attended an arts festival in Meiningen where he greatly admired performances of Weber's *Clarinet Concerto* and the Mozart *Clarinet Quintet* featuring the local orchestra's solo clarinetist, Richard Muhlfeld.

The composer had always made fine use of the clarinet in his symphonies and serenades. And now, his excitement at hearing Muhlfeld play prompted Brahms to write two sonatas for clarinet and piano, his final chamber music compositions; they were completed during the summer of 1894.



This evening, the second of these two sonatas was performed by Ricardo Morales (above), principal clarinetist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, with Wu Qian at the Steinway. Earlier this season, Mr. Morales gave a radiant performance of the Mozart *Clarinet Concerto* with his home orchestra at Carnegie Hall; read about it [here](#).

Tonight, Mr. Morales lavished his gorgeous timbre on the melodic treasures that Brahms provides for the clarinet. Right from the start of the *Allegro amabile*, the clarinetist's sweet sound and marvelous feel for dynamics brought forth phrase after phrase of soothing lyricism, finely matched by Wu Qian's poetic playing. The *Allegro appassionato* alternates major and minor passages, creating lovely shifts of mood; an interlude for the piano leads on to fresh themes, which continue to rise up in the ensuing *Andante con moto*. There is a playful central section with a sprightly feel, but then the music turns pensive. The concluding *Allegro* veers from animated to calm, with an extroverted finish. Our two musicians were ideal musical partners, their savorable playing a delight from first note to last.



Master violinist Paul Neubauer (above) then took the Alice Tully Hall stage for the Shostakovich *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, Op. 147 (1975), with Wu Qian again at the Steinway. This sonata was to be the composer's final work: he wrote the first two movements in ten days during early July 1975, and the third in two days later that month. Shortly afterward, Shostakovich was hospitalized for the final time. On August 9, 1975, the day of his death, he was proof-reading his last work.

From note one, this music is extraordinary: Shostakovich offers no traditional key signature, but rather writes in what has been referred to as "free atonality". From the viola's *pizzicato* introduction, which is joined by the pianist's plucked notes, a slow and delicate dance commences. An eerie viola melody is heard, descending and bending; the piano turns solemn before a sudden burst of passion erupts. The music turns dreamy, with Mr. Neubauer's whispering *tremolos* accompanied by mysterious passages from Wu Qian's keyboard. A viola cadenza starts subtly, then goes deep. A funereal piano motif and more plucked notes from the viola lead to a fading finish. A magical hush filled the Hall as the players prepared to go forward.

An entertaining gypsy dance opens the *scherzo*-like *Allegretto*. A softly darkish interlude ensues, with underlying tension. The music stalls out, re-emerging with the return of plucking passages. Viola and piano play in unison, followed by a viola cadenza. The dance resumes, but the movement has a haunting finish.

Death seems to hover over the sonata's final *Adagio*. A lonely passage for the solo viola is followed by a dark piano theme. A poignant melody emerges: slow, sad, and hushed. Twice we hear the piano in an unmistakable echo of the opening of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata. Now the music moves thru many phases, from passion to resignation, wherein the doomed composer seems to be unable to let go of life: one more phrase, one final thought. A spell-binding wistfulness pervades, and after a final glow of dark-moonlight, everything fades to silence. For a few incredible moments, Mr. Neubauer's bow remained poised over the strings of his viola: the palpable stillness felt like a timeless homage to the composer. And then the tumultuous applause commenced, seeming to be as much for Shostakovich as for our two remarkable artists.



Above: Alexander Sitkovetsky, photo by Vincy Ng

Following the interval, Wu Qian completed her busy evening playing the Beethoven's *Sonata in C-minor for Violin and Piano*, Op. 30, No. 2, with her husband and frequent musical partner, Alexander Sitkovetsky, as soloist. Talk about making beautiful music together! These two outdid themselves tonight.

The Beethoven opens with a dazzling *Allegro con brio*, with a piano introduction leading to a minor-key dance. Both players revel in the virtuoso demands of the music, with brisk and brilliant passages entwined with song-like interludes where the Sitkovetsky timbre is at its most persuasive. The forward momentum of the music carries us to an exciting finish.

Wu Qian's beautifully articulated piano introduction to the *Adagio* develops into a heartfelt theme from both players, with Sasha's playing rich and true. Rolling piano scales give a restless undercurrent; following a brief plucking motif from the violin, the movement comes to a delicate end.

The piquant *Scherzo* is both gracious and lively, and then there's a rumbling start to the *Finale-Allegro*, which is marked by turbulence as well as touches of wit. As the music reaches its virtuosic peak, Sasha is dancing along, his violin singing supremely as the sonata moves to a fabulous finish. The audience rose up cheering, calling the delightful duo back for three bows: an exhilarating end to a wonderful evening.

~ *Oberon*