

Westside Connections and The Kreutzer Sonata

Joelle Deyo

The Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra recently concluded their “Westside Connections” concert series with a night of music and story inspired by



Classical-era composer Ludwig van Beethoven and spanning some 200 years. Narrated by special guest and award-winning author Mona Simpson, whose novels include *Anywhere But Here* and *Off Keck Road*, the evening’s repertoire touched on the themes of friendship, passion, jealousy, and revenge surrounding a single piece of music—Beethoven’s famous and well-loved Violin Sonata No. 9.

In 1803, Beethoven composed the sonata in

dedication to his friend George Bridgetower, a young violinist whose talents had rightly impressed the elder German composer. After they premiered the piece together at the Augarten Theatre with Beethoven on piano and Bridgetower sight reading portions of the music cold over Beethoven’s shoulder, the two friends fell out—not over the performance, which had been a great success, but over a woman, of all things. An insulted and furious Beethoven quickly rededicated the sonata to virtuoso Rudolphe Kreutzer, whom he had met only once, but who was regarded as the greatest violinist of his time.

The name Rudolphe Kruetzer has been synonymous with the “No. 9” ever since. The irony is that Kreutzer never played the sonata, calling it both incomprehensible and unplayable. We now know that it is neither, and whether it is the drama surrounding the work or the work itself which has endured and inspired generations of writers and composers to create masterful works of their own, there is no question that Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No. 9 remains compelling and emotionally relevant over 200 years after its creation.

As testament to the staying power of the work, Leo Tolstoy entitled his scandalous 1889 novella *The Kreuzter Sonata*, which he wrote following

a period of personal crisis and anxious moral introspection.

Expounding on the issues of marital love-turned-to-hatred, infidelity, rage, and ultimate revenge, the novella—defended by Tolstoy as an argument for the ideal of sexual abstinence—was widely censored for its portrayal of moral perversion. Today, it is counted among the classics and, like Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No. 9, it has gone on to inspire a wide array of artists. Productions of the book have been adapted for film, radio, and television. It also inspired at least one painter, René François Xavier Prinnet, who immortalized a passionate, illicit embrace shared by two of the story’s main characters on canvas.



Prinnet Painting

As Beethoven’s sonata gave rise to Tolstoy’s novella, so Tolstoy’s novella gave rise to another famous composition, Leoš Janáček’s 1923 string quartet of the self-same name. The composition calls the psychological drama of a tormented woman much like the one in Tolstoy’s story. Each of the four movements depicts an increasingly chaotic emotional climate through sonic dissonance before climaxing into catharsis

The rest, as they say, is history, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra was there to share a slice of it with an audience of seasoned music lovers on April 15th.

Playing Janáček’s quartet were Chilean native Josephina Vergara on violin, Northwestern and USC graduate Tamara Hatwan on violin, Australia-born Victoria Miskolczy, LACO’s associate principle violist, and Armen Ksajikian, cellist and scoring musician with over 900 motion picture soundtracks to his credit. The foursome masterfully brought to life the *Kreutzer Sonata*, capturing the depth of pathos inherent in the composition, all the while leading the audience deeper into the mind of the composer and the ill-fated femme of Russian fiction who stirred him.

Working backward from Janáček to Tolstoy to Beethoven, the evening concluded with a presentation of Violin Sonata No. 9, performed by Margaret Batjer on violin and Jeffrey Kahane on piano. Batjer has been concertmaster of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra since 1998 and joined the faculty of the USC Thornton School of Music in 2005. A sought-after chamber musician, she appears regularly at the Marlboro Music Festival, La Jolla Summerfest, Salzburg Festival, and Italy's Naples and Cremona festivals.

Kahane is not only a classical concert pianist; he is also a conductor and, presently, the director of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. With multiple awards and recordings to his name, the native Angeleno began playing piano at age five. He has since gone on to perform with the [New York Philharmonic](#), [Cleveland Orchestra](#), [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#), [Philadelphia Orchestra](#), and [San Francisco Symphony](#)—to name *just* a few.



We don't usually think of classical music in terms of rock and roll, but it's safe to say that the pair rocked the house with the first movement of the sonata and then spirited the audience away through their impassioned performance all the way to its completion. Batjer and Kahane made it easy to imagine the very first time the piece was played by Beethoven and Bridgetower, who never had the fortune of performing together

again, but who left an indelible mark on the face of classical music that can still be seen and heard all over the world today.

The Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra has completed their Westside Connections series, but classical music enthusiasts can still enjoy much of the wonderful music they have to offer this season. Baroque Conversations 5, featuring the music of Bach, will be performed on Thursday, May 9th at 7 PM, and a Concerto Finale featuring selections from Beethoven, Hugo Gonzalez-Pioli, and Shostakovich will take place on May 18th at 8 PM, and May 19th at 7 PM. For tickets and venue info, visit www.LACO.org.

