

I've been playing the *Sonata for Piano and Violin in A major* by César Franck since I was fifteen years old. And ever since the first time I played this piece, I've been in love with it. Over the years, that love has only grown. I've worked on it with all of my teachers. But I could never figure out precisely why I loved it so much.

The usual programme notes focus on the form of this sonata and how Franck played with tradition, how all of its themes stem from the opening measures of the violin part. But no matter how much I too enjoy analysing it on musical grounds, I've always had the feeling that there is a narrative element to it as well. Although there's no evidence of a scenario or script, I experience an unmistakable feeling of transformation while playing this sonata.

César Franck (1822-1890) composed this work in the summer of 1886 in Quincy, near Paris. He was 63 years old at the time. According to reports, his wife was more devoted to God than to him, and he was secretly in love with his elegant student, the Irish woman Augusta Holmès.

Franck wrote this sonata (or completed it, as it may have initially been intended for piano and cello) for the wedding of his friend Eugène Ysaÿe – one of the greatest violinists of his time and, like Franck, born in Liège, but one and a half generations earlier. Moreover, the wedding gift had to be performed at the wedding party, after a hasty run-through, on a borrowed violin and a hotel piano. Imagine having that virtuoso piano part suddenly being placed on your music stand!

When I was telling that story as an introduction to a recital, I wondered: Could love have something to do with this piece? A relationship between two people? Could the four movements of the sonata be musical reflections of the different stages of a lifelong love? A relationship in which, after a rosy period of infatuation (the warm, passionate, yet often subtle *Allegretto ben moderato*) there are also periods of turbulence (the rumbling, restless *Allegro*). People change, and they seldom do that in synchrony. In the third movement (*Recitativo-Fantasia*), which has an improvisational character, I hear that despair – it will never be the same again, you're growing apart. Finally (in the *Allegretto poco mosso*), there is reconciliation, or perhaps maturity, buoyant realism. In this concluding movement, the piano and violin alternate the same melody in canon style, as if Franck is describing two individuals who live together in satisfaction, looking back at their lives (we hear citations from earlier movements), but knowing that they will never really be together as one.

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) had a similar idea: 'The notion that love is a merging of two beings is an erroneous romantic construct. The essence of the erotic relationship is that it involves two people, whereby the other is absolutely the other.' Or as the Dutch philosopher Jan Drost puts it in his book *Het romantisch misverstand* (The Romantic Fallacy, 2011), 'It seems as if nothing could be more beautiful than two people in love becoming as one. But when I say that I want to 'become as one with my lover', what am I in fact saying? Nothing other than that there is no longer any distinction between me and the other person.... We are two halves of a new and original unit; our differences are merely apparent and resolvable.... But if this becomes reality, where am I? And especially, where did the other go? The other no longer exists. Neither of us exists any longer.... If

there is no other, who can I love?’ In short, I see this beautifully portrayed in the last movement of the sonata, which explains the title of this album: *Symbiosis*.

Franck’s sonata is an outstanding example of a piece that offers a violinist many possibilities for different fingerings, which can result in radically different colourings. This is another reason why the piece continues to fascinate me so much. The first time I performed this sonata with Dina Ivanova, not only did I fall in love with the music even more, but I knew we had to record it.

The composer Poldowski (1879-1932), was born in Brussels to an English mother and a Polish-Jewish father, Henryk Wieniawski, the famous violin composer. Her birth name was Irene Regina Wieniawska. When she was 10 months old, her father died. She and her mother moved to London; but she would return to Brussels to study at the conservatory, and also lived in Paris.

She began to compose at the age of five and became a fantastic pianist. She married Sir Aubrey Dean Paul, an army officer of noble descent. Refusing to take advantage of either the name of her father or her husband, she published her work under the pseudonym of Poldowski. In London, where she mingled with high society, she had an haute couture shop that counted the British Royal family among its clientele. She gave concerts all over Europe and the United States, but the lifestyle of a musician began to pall on her.

I became acquainted with her work when I made a programme revolving around the poet Paul Verlaine. It turned out that Poldowski had not only beautifully set Verlaine’s *L’heure exquise* to music but also written a *Sonata in D minor*. After I played through it, I couldn’t understand how I had never heard this piece before. It’s a splendid work, written in the French late-romantic style, but at the same time extremely original because of its wonderful textures. The piece – very powerful, sometimes capricious and melancholic – which was published in 1914, has three movements, but is lacking a separate slow movement: the *Andante semplice* is concealed in the *Scherzo*. The various published editions of the sonata show inconsistencies, which we have adjusted in consultation with Tyrone Greive, who made the edition from 2003 on which we have based our performance.

The other female composer on this album (and the third born in the Low Lands) is Mathilde Wantenaar from Amsterdam. She is considered one of today’s most promising young Dutch composers. Our names were first coupled in 2014, for the Alba Rosa Viëtor Composition Competition in Utrecht. Wantenaar wrote the three *Sprookjes* (Fairytale), which I had the honour of performing for that competition; and it won both the jury and the audience prize.

Her highly imaginative idiom is accessible, but grates at the right moments. The subtitle of the *Sprookjes* is *Muzikale vertellingen voor viool en piano* (Musical Tales for Violin and Piano). These are not, however, the kind of tales that have a beginning and an end; Wantenaar leaves it up to the listeners to create their own stories. She herself does not see anything in particular for the first ‘fairytale’; for the second, she pictures a lazy hot summer afternoon. The third is the most narrative to her way of thinking: it starts with the sound of

trumpets heralding a message. Then you zoom out, look at a castle from a short distance away, paddle across the water in the moat. You hear droplets falling from the paddles as they glide through the water. Then it becomes misty. You enter a forest. At the end of this 'fairytale' you see the castle again, but now it's a ruin. 'Dreams' would have also been a good title for this work. First and foremost, though: these dreams are hers, but listeners are invited to add their own.

Dina and I feel that each of the three works by these strong personalities strengthens the others – resulting in a splendid symbiosis.

Merel Vercammen