Martinů Cello Sonatas

Johannes Moser
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Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)

Complete Cello Sonatas

	Cello Sonata No. 2, H. 286	
1	I. Allegro	7. 51
2	II. Largo	7. 27
3	III. Allegro commodo	5. 10
	Cello Sonata No. 1, H. 277	
4	I. Poco allegro	6. 11
5	II. Lento	5. 51
6	III. Allegro con brio	5. 54
	Cello Sonata No. 3, H. 340	
7	I. Poco andante	8. 26
8	II. Andante	7. 24
9	III. Allegro (ma non Presto)	5. 31
	Total playing time:	59. 51

Johannes Moser, cello
Andrei Korobeinikov, piano

Andrei Korobeinikov & Johannes Moser
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We came together in the spring of 2022 at a beautiful remote studio in the middle of the Dutch countryside, with wide open fields and just a few pigs and cows standing as witnesses, and we found ourselves in a perfectly sparse environment to embark on a once in a lifetime journey to explore and record the world of the *Martinů Sonatas*, a journey nothing short of pure existentialism and deep personal expression.

While the three sonatas offer incredibly strong individual positions, Andrei and I found that the true adventure begins when experiencing the three sonatas together. This tour de force has the listener (and the performers!) traveling through deepest darkness, explosive exuberant expression all the way to hymnal relief and joyous song. It almost feels like the dramatic overarching curve was meant to tell an epic tale through three snapshots of his life. Martinů's voice is famously recognizable through his textures and harmonic choices. However, these musical mechanics never feel self-serving in these pieces, instead they move the personal narrative forward and support the emotionality rather than overshadowing it.

Through his sonatas, Martinů extends an almost painfully honest invitation to his inner state, an existence tortured by wartime, emigration, longing for the homeland, yet also finding spiritual catharsis and hope. These emotions felt almost hyper-real to us as the recording coincided with the attack on Ukraine. Martinů's feelings became our feelings, watching the horror of a war unfolding, but also searching for hope and relief in the midst of turmoil.

Johannes Moser

In many well-known chamber sonata masterpieces the interrelation between the "monodic" soloist and the piano seeks to reflect the dialogue based on "man-world" coexistence. However Martinů emphasises the extreme interdependence of both parts. He evokes the indivisible sides of a hermetic world encompassing a single consciousness (or subconsciousness). Johannes and I underwent the extraordinary experience of enjoying images and emotions together, as a single entity.
This was extremely demanding and exciting!

Andrei Korobeinikov

Exile and Glory

Bohuslav Martinů was a staggeringly prolific composer. But as well as creating a sizeable output — much of it still undercelebrated — he proved richly diverse across a career that spanned early maturity in the Czech lands, a thrilling development in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s and exile in the USA during the Second World War. Throughout, Martinů drew on these locations and experiences, fashioning an idiom that was as mutable as that of two of his touchstones: Debussy and Stravinsky. But regardless of where the composer found himself, he had a metaphorical anchor: the small rooms in the tower of the Church of St James in Polička where he had grown up as a sickly child, rarely able to descend from the family home. When, like many of his compatriots, Martinů was cut off from the Czech lands in 1939, following the Nazi invasion, he was often left hankering for this mythic space. His three sonatas for cello and piano are doubtless testament to a unique fusion of the homesick soulfulness that derives from that experience and a contrasting worldliness reflecting his peripatetic life.

The First Cello Sonata was composed directly against the backdrop of 1939, when Martinů was based in Paris. He had first visited the French capital as a deputising second violinist with the Czech Philharmonic during the spring of 1919. The following year, he was made a full member of the orchestra, until 1923, when he decided to move to Paris full-time in order to study with Albert Roussel. The experience proved hugely beneficial and marked a significant change from Martinů's sequestered upbringing in Polička, thanks both to Roussel and the incredible range of musical experiences offered by Paris during the period, including jazz, Stravinsky and Les Six.
By the end of the 1930s, Martinů had embraced and sublimated many of these elements, though the world itself had, likewise, changed, with much of the composer's attention taken up with assisting Czech artists in their escape to Paris as refugees. 1939 was, accordingly, marked by very few original compositions, apart from the *Fairy Tales* for piano, which Martinů dedicated to his pupil and (soon-to-be former) lover Vítězslava Kaprálová, and the First Cello Sonata.
Dated 12 May 1939, two months after the Nazi invasion of the Czech lands, the Sonata is unsurprisingly brooding. Its first movement, couched in an empurpled B-flat Minor, sounds like an intemperate *danse macabre*, the triple-time pulse constantly undermined by two forced beats in the bar. And even when the music's terpsichorean vein lightens, it is often countered by the cello's double-stopping, as if weights had been placed on the dancers' feet.
A different brand of intensity is apparent in the central Lento. Beginning sparely, with the piano alone, the music turns more hymnic at the entry of the cello. Whether pining or mourning, this remains a chorale of great uncertainty and will only be answered by the furiously motoric Finale.

At last, the Sonata's minor mood begins to clear, with joy flaring high at the edge of sorrow. Yet for all Martinů's claims that the work's premiere, given by Pierre Fournier (its dedicatee) and Rudolf Firkušný, another Czech exile, 'came as a last greeting, a beam of light from a better world', his music also reveals it would not be long before the composer had to flee.

Nine days before that first performance, on 19 May 1940, the Germans had begun their attack on the French. Soon, Firkušný was urging Martinů to follow his example and leave Paris. The French government had done just that by 10 June, with the Wehrmacht marching down the Champs-Élysées four days later. Luckily, Martinů and his wife, Charlotte Quennehen, were safely in Limoges, from where, in September, they moved to Aix-en-Provence, awaiting news of a potential passage out of Europe. Six months later, thanks to the support of the Basel-based conductor and philanthropist Paul Sacher, as well as the Czech diplomat Miloš Šafránek, the Martinůs finally sailed from Marseilles to Lisbon, before leaving Portugal on 21 March 1941.

The Second Cello Sonata was one of the first works Martinů wrote on the other side of the Atlantic. Like Bartók, who had similarly fled Europe, the composer found life difficult in the USA and was often considered a rather anti-social figure. Having stayed at first in the Great Northern Hotel at 118 West 57th Street, close to Carnegie Hall and Central Park, Martinů came to feel a much greater affinity with the city's suburbs, as well as enjoying the summer trips he and Charlotte made to Vermont, Connecticut and Massachusetts. Of particular interest was Jamaica Estates in Queens, home to the Czech-born cellist and former Janáček pupil Frank Rybka. The two became close friends, with Rybka and his wife Doris often performing Beethoven's cello sonatas for Martinů. As a result, the composer was duly inspired to write and dedicate a work to Rybka.

Martinů completed the Sonata in late 1941. Although Rybka's son later described 'a sensitive, lyrical piece that is evenly balanced to display both instruments', reflecting 'the quiet atmosphere of Jamaica' and 'the composer's joy at being safely transplanted', he admitted that 'Martinů found it strenuous to work on this Sonata'. The first movement certainly seems to speak of that struggle, even if the piano introduction is more outward-looking than at the beginning of the First Cello Sonata. A sense of contrast is also sharper here, with Martinů offering a beguilingly lyrical foil to the strident opening.
The second movement, like its counterpart in the Sonata for Fournier, is, once again, hymnic, with inky harmonies suggesting Martinů's uncertainty about life in the New World while simultaneously looking back to the Old. Often, the sense of homesickness turns to unbridled anger, with a harmonic palette that similarly shifts from ink to blood, before a whirling Finale draws the strands together, with Czech folk dances sounding within a very different cultural context.

There followed a sizeable gap before Martinů wrote another sonata for cello and piano. Orchestral works governed the composer's thoughts for the rest of the war years, thanks to Serge Koussevitzky, as well as the composition of the Second Cello Concerto in 1945 — its premiere following twenty years later. Only the Variations on a Theme of Rossini, written in 1942 for another Russian, Gregor Piatigorsky, employed the combination of cello and piano that Martinů had previously found so inspiring and to which he would return ten years later.
The Third Cello Sonata was written in memory of another cellist, the Dutch-born Hans Kindler, who had also been the conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC. Martinů had first known Kindler in Paris and he became something of an advocate of the composer's work in the USA — not least the fizzing orchestral scherzo *Thunderbolt*

— *P47*, which was dedicated to Kindler — before he died from stomach cancer in August 1949. Three years later, and now back in Europe, specifically at Vieux-Moulin outside Paris, Martinů penned his tribute to Kindler's life and work.

Unlike its ruminating predecessors, the Third Sonata is dazzlingly extrovert, a celebration more than a threnody. The piano, again, takes the lead, now with much greater bravura. When the cello enters, the gaiety increases, with the intemperate rhythms of the earlier sonatas becoming clanging bells, as if Martinů were recalling the sounds of his childhood — and which would likewise ring out at the opening of *The Greek Passion*, the opera that would soon dominate his attentions. With the minor home key of the First Sonata fully transformed to the major, the bells unleash vivid tonal juxtapositions and, in turn, the motifs are developed and challenged, before turning down a more neoclassical path. The contrasts and helter-skeltering music eventually reach such a fever pitch that the movement can only collapse on itself, with one last ring from the belfry during the final bars.

Pert neoclassical accents again characterise the middle movement, which Martinů marked Andante, though it suggests something much spryer, more playful. If anything, this Scherzo is even more manic than the first movement, here paving way to another hymn for cello and piano during the Trio. As in the middle movements of the two preceding sonatas, this is manifestly emotional music, and again evoking home, especially in the *Vltava*-like purling at the close of the movement.

The Finale is delivered with more winning panache. There are hints of Rachmaninoff's quasi-orchestral writing in his own Sonata for cello and piano of much earlier in the century. Yet for all Martinů's embrace of heart-on-sleeve Romanticism, he is far from done with the neoclassicism of earlier in the Sonata. Indeed, the combination of these facets is the goal of this richly pleasing work.

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Acknowledgements

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Johannes Moser performs on an Andrea Guarneri cello from 1694, on generous loan from a private collector.

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