

The viola works of Bohuslav Martinů
Notes by Kenneth Martinson

Bohuslav Martinů (b. Polička, Bohemia Dec. 8, 1890; d. Liestal, Switzerland, Aug. 28, 1959) ranks among the this century's industrious composers, and is widely regarded as, after Janáček, the most important Czech composer of the 20th century. Like Hindemith and Milhaud, Martinů possessed an incredible facility in composing music, and wrote for almost every instrumental and vocal genre. He was an accomplished violinist, having played the violin since the age of 7, and for his beginning years as a professional musician, Martinů played in the 2nd violin section of the Czech Philharmonic at the age of 23. Martinů held his love for string instruments deeply throughout his career, as seen by his output which the majority of contains string instruments, including 7 string quartets (and some earlier string quartet works), 3 piano quintets, and numerous works for violin-piano and cello-piano combination.

The three works on this disc (*Three Madrigals*, *Duo No. 2*, *Viola Sonata*) were all written because of Martinů's affection for the playing of violinist Joseph Fuchs [1900-1997] and violist Lillian Fuchs [1902-1995] (siblings), who he maintained a friendship throughout his life, especially that of Lillian. The first meeting between Martinů and the Fuchs siblings occurred in New York City on January 20, 1947 at the Musicians' Guild chamber music performance. The Musicians' Guild was an organization of musicians co-created by Kneisel students, Joseph Fuchs and William Kroll [1901-1980] whose intention was to bring together students trained by Kneisel for performances where there would be at least one contemporary work per program. The group was not so interested in giving 1st performances as they were in giving 2nd performances, and they traditionally always played the contemporary work twice during the concert. The very first concert of this new organization on January 20 included the Martinů Sextet performed by the Kroll Quartet (William Kroll, Louis Graeler violins; Nathan Gordon viola; Avron Twerdowsky cello) with Carlton Cooley viola and Frank Miller cello. The second work on the concert was the Mozart Violin-Viola Duo No. 2 in B-flat with Joseph and Lillian Fuchs performing. Martinů was in attendance to the concert that night and being an exceptional violinist himself, he was very impressed by the performance of the Fuchs's Mozart Duo, and this performance inspired Martinů to present three weeks later to the Fuchs's his new composition written for them, *Three Madrigals (Madrigaly)*.

The *Three Madrigals* received its premiere performance on the first concert of the Musicians' Guild's 2nd season on December 22, 1947. The initial response to the new work was of high approval from the audience and critics. The Fuchs's continued to perform this duo often along with the Mozart Duos with continued approval from the audiences and critics. Virgil Thomson reviewing for the New York Herald Tribune called the *Three Madrigals* "a delight for musical fantasy, for ingenious figuration [and] for Renaissance-style evocation". Another reviewer found this work "satisfying in a mysterious manner". The Fuchs's continued performing the work throughout their career and was found performed in a program done in Alice Tully Hall on February 10, 1971. Today this work is probably the next most played violin-violin duo after the Mozart Duos and the Handel/Halvorsen Passacaglia.

Martinů throughout his career had a fascination with “Madrigals” (Songs from the Renaissance set to poetry) and wrote several other works with the word “Madrigal” in the title [4 *Madrigals* (1937) for oboe, clarinet and bassoon, 8 *Madrigals* (1939) for voice and piano, *Madrigal Sonata* (1942) for piano, flute and violin, 5 *Madrigal Stanzas* (1943) for violin and piano, and 5 *Czech Madrigals* (1948) for voice and piano]. This work seems to be drawing from Elizabethan viol music as well as the classical Mozart duo of which Martinů was so inspired by the Fuchs’s performance. In the last movement, there is a quote from Scarlatti.

The *Duo No. 2*, composed while he was teaching at Princeton, was also written to be premiered by the Fuchs’s on the Musicians’s Guild concert series. The original premiere date was set for January 15, 1951, but it had to be postponed to February’s concert because Joseph became ill. The Fuchs’s recorded both duets for the Decca Label, and the recording was released in January 1951 before the actual first premiere performance was given. This recording received many favorable reviews as did the eventual live performance premiere of which the following is an excerpt of the review of the *Duo No. 2* from that performance:

It is a work of fine quality... [and] has two fairly swift movements that flank a gravely thoughtful adagio. One of its finest features was the way it interwove the melodic strands of the two instruments, which were enough alike in sound to be wonderfully mated, yet sufficiently different for their separate parts to be heard distinctly.

The performers played it beautifully, giving it animation without roughness, and bringing intensity to the climax of the slow movement without spoiling the sense of continuous linear flow.

Ross Parmenter, “Musicians’ Guild in the 3rd Program of Season,” *The New York Times* (February 6, 1951):24

The work was dedicated to Mrs. Rosalie Leventritt, of New York City whose late husband Edgar Leventritt (1873-1939) was a lawyer, amateur pianist, patron of young pianists, and founder of the musical prize bearing his name. While Martinů was teaching his once-a-week course at the Mannes School of Music, in the Fall of 1949, he would make visits to Mrs. Leventritt where he and his wife Charlotte met numerous artists including conductor George Szell and pianist Rudolf Serkin. The Leventritt’s were good friends with the Fuchs’s and more than likely, it was Lillian who introduced Martinů to Mrs. Leventritt. The Leventritt’s were actually responsible for Lillian Fuchs’s switching from violin to viola. In 1927, three musical families interested in supporting the arts (the Pereras, the Robesons, and the Leventritts) got together to pool funding to support the creation of a new string quartet. At the auditions for this ensemble, there were many violinists and cellists, but no violists. They chose the winners for the other instruments (Joseph Coleman and David Mankovitz violin; Julian Kahn cello) and from the remaining violinists, they chose one who they thought would switch over to viola very well- this choice they made was Lillian Fuchs! The resulting quartet took on the name the “Perolé

String Quartet”, a name derived from the first two letters of each of the above named patron families.

The *Viola Sonata* [published as No. 1, but it is the only one Martinů wrote (perhaps he was planning to write another if it weren't for his premature death due to stomach cancer in 1959)] was premiered by Lillian Fuchs with pianist Artur Balsam on March 12, 1956 in Town Hall on the Musicians's Guild series. Martinů wrote this while he was on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music, having just returned to the USA again after spending two years in Nice, France. His living in the USA quickly became increasingly uncomfortable for him as he became more and more consumed with dreams of returning to his homeland. However because of his being blacklisted by the Nazis, this intangible dream of returning made him increasingly more depressed, and it was during this cloud of darkness in his life when he composed the *Viola Sonata* between November 22 and December 16, 1955. The following is an excerpt from the review of the premiere performance of which Martinů was in attendance:

The sonata drew generously on Martinů's vein of lyricism. It is composed with special affection for the viola, providing it with a wealth of flowing cantilena. Martinů's music, particularly in the first of the two movements, has a rhapsodic quality that reminds one of folklore without forfeiting a personal identity. In the second movement, there are alternations of lyrical and busy passages, with the former thoroughly effective and the later just as convincing.

Fuchs and Balsam played this agreeable and accessible music with skill and taste. The viola's tone glowed and sang, and Balsam kept the piano part in neat balance.

Howard Tubman, "Music: Martinů Sonata," The New York Times (March 13, 1956): 31

Lillian went on to also perform this work numerous times throughout her career, including a performance at the Aspen Music Festival whose recorded performance can still be heard in the Aspen Public Library. She also performed on a few occasions Martinů's *Rhapsody Concerto for Viola and Orchestra* (1952) which was commissioned by conductor Georg Szell (who Martinů met at the Leventritt's) and violinist/violist Jasha Weissi of the Cleveland Orchestra and premiered at Severance Hall on February 19, 1953, which helped to appease the large Czech community Cleveland had at the time. Weissi was assistant concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra 1924-29, and he later embarked on a career as a violist, later becoming principal violist of the San Francisco Symphony and also the Kolisch and Coolidge String Quartets. Szell's admiration for Martinů resulted in at least seven more Martinů works entering the Cleveland Orchestra's repertoire, including a world premiere of symphonic prelude *The Rock* and the American premiere of *The Frescoes of Piero della Francesca*. Lillian Fuchs gave her first performance of the work in New York City's Carnegie Hall with the National Orchestra Association on March 6, 1962 (NY premiere), being her first performance of a Martinů score without the composer present.