

WHAT MAKES BEETHOVEN BEETHOVEN?

Claude and Pamela Frank explore all 10 violin sonatas with their students

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

“I used to think my father *was* Beethoven,” said violinist Pamela Frank about Claude Frank, who champions and has recorded the 32 piano sonatas. With him, she frequently performed the 10 sonatas for piano and violin, and, in 1992 and ’95, recorded them on the MusicMasters Classics label. “Beethoven has always been a staple of the family diet. That’s music that’s really close to our hearts, and that’s music that I grew up with.”

As she learned the pieces with her father — who had played them with his older brother, an amateur violinist, among other musicians — they spoke little about the sonatas. They communicated instead by playing the music, sensing how to respond to each other. Last year, though, the Franks talked about the Beethoven violin sonatas in great detail, as teachers of a seminar devoted to the cycle.

The class was open to all Curtis violin and piano students. At the beginning of the year, some signed up to demonstrate a particular sonata for the class. Those performances would become the starting point for exploring what makes Beethoven Beethoven. Movement by movement, the class discussed and demonstrated dynamics, phrasing, tension, voicing, balance, harmony, articulation, structure, themes, collaboration and more — how the sonatas might be interpreted and, more important, why.

MAKING DISCOVERIES

On the final day of classes in the spring semester, with warm air and sunshine filling the Tabuteau Room through windows open onto Rittenhouse Square, the Franks and about 12 students examined the first two movements of Sonata No. 10 in G major, Op. 96. Violinist Jung-Min Amy Lee and pianist Amy Jiaqi Yang performed, with the aim to offer a live demonstration of the score, not a recital-level performance. The other students followed along, using scores owned by Curtis.

The Franks appeared to have grown accustomed to talking about, as well as

playing, the sonatas. Their observations and recommendations emerged in an overlapping dialogue as they responded to each other’s ideas, elaborated on them and applied them to the way the students might play the piece next time. The teachers also seemed to be learning.

“Well, to quote a famous cliché, one discovers new things in every great piece all the *time*,” Mr. Frank said earlier that day. “One discovers new twists of melody, new beauties of harmony, new varieties of rhythm, and very often one discovers things that one is not even sure the composer knew.”

As an example, Mr. Frank told about one of his own lessons with Artur Schnabel. “One of his pet theories was structure in music,” he said, explaining that Schnabel emphasized the predictability created by four-measure phrases. “And that’s one thing he had against Chopin, whom he loved as a young man and got a little bit away from as an old man. But I played a Chopin sonata for him, and he was *happy* to have *discovered* that there was an irregular period measure in a phrase.

“And he said, ‘How do you phrase that?’

“And I hadn’t thought about it, frankly, and I said, ‘Well, I have to count it. It’s four and four.’

“He said, ‘Not at all. Not at all. It’s three and five.’ So he played it for me how he structured it — three, five — and he said, ‘You didn’t know this?’ with a twinkle in his eye.

“And I said, ‘No, I didn’t, frankly, I didn’t know it. Do you think Chopin knew it?’

“And he became very serious. He wasn’t angry. He said, ‘It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. We are allowed, in fact we are requested, we are *expected* to find beauties in music, which even the composer at that moment of writing it didn’t know.’ And it’s a very profound thought, and really a wonderful thought. And this is what happens in the Beethoven sonatas, in Beethoven even more than in most other composers.”



Beethoven was inconsistent, revolutionary and risky. In the Sonata No. 10 class, the teachers and students examined why the first time a theme occurs he labeled it “dolce” in the third measure, but when it recurs it has no marking. The difference must, the Franks said, be for a reason. So they looked at the score to figure out why, and Ms. Frank provided a theory relating to Beethoven’s use the second time of pizzicato and trills, decorative elements that, to her, imply a scherzando interpretation. That possible explanation then led to a specific performance style.

The lesson was not only in playing a passage but also in making choices. “When you play something a lot and record it, you have to come to some conclusions,” Ms. Frank said about the inconsistencies. “In a classroom situation, you don’t have to necessarily come up with the final solution. I’m always asking for answers, and the great thing about having my father there is, he says, ‘I don’t know if there is an answer. It can be done either way.’ So the benefit of experience and wisdom can leave things up in the air.

“My father and I have offered different ways of approaching these questions to the students,” she said. “I’m interested in teaching them principles and being really faithful to the score. I tell them, ‘Don’t start interpreting until you’ve *really* tried what’s there.’ And then he always says on the train, afterwards, ‘Well, we don’t do that in reality. There’s room for more subtlety and more interpretation.’ So, in a way, the best result might be a combination of both approaches.”



Claude and Pamela Frank, recently and in the 1970's.

SO MUCH TO TEACH

Mr. Frank adjusts his teaching to balance the needs of the students with the music itself. He admires his daughter's work as a teacher. "She manages to balance physical help to the violinists with musical ideals, the striving for ideals, bringing out the inaccessibility of the piece, bringing out the fact that the piece is always better than it can be played, and yet not frustrating them at the same time. It's quite extraordinary. Also, she manages to balance a lot of humor and a lot of human element with the task which, of course, is superhuman and terribly serious."

Ms. Frank, who graduated from Curtis in 1989, teaches her students how to explore the idea behind every mark in a score, then to present them in support of a primary idea, like a thesis. Her approach connects the potential effect of a piece to the fundamentals of music theory. She asks what the students feel when they listen to a certain passage. "Any words are allowed," she says to them. "There are no wrong answers but you have to say something, because music is about communication."

If, for example, the word is "tragic," she then tells her students, "Go take the score and show me all the elements that make it tragic. Is it the slow hairpins? Is it the key? Is it the meter? Is it how the voices move? Is it the texture?"

Ms. Frank's aim as a teacher is to push the students to maximize the music and their enjoyment of playing. She encourages them to take greater risks, instead of focusing

THE HUMAN BEETHOVEN

At the beginning of the seminar, Pamela Frank placed the sonatas within the context of Beethoven's musical language and psychology. "I tried to get everybody to figure out what makes Beethoven Beethoven. Because otherwise, why do this? The whole point is to take him and set him apart from everything that came before and everything that came after."

One distinctive trademark is Beethoven's dynamic scheme. "In layman's terms, there's no warning for anything new. Everything is sudden," she said. "And it lends itself to the schizophrenic quality and the 'heart-attack factor.' Nothing is expected. He sets you up for something, then he denies you. He turns corners so quickly, you're never ready for anything. And what I'm really trying to reinforce is to not advertise what comes next, because that is truly unique."

"I think Mozart came from heaven and Beethoven came from the earth," Ms. Frank said. "There's something so primal and so human that we should allow ourselves the liberating feeling of playing radical music in a radical way. So I tell my students, 'Don't play Beethoven safe.' There was nothing in the middle about him. And the perfect example of that is that on the fingers of one hand I can count the number of mezzo markings he wrote in his entire *oeuvre*. So that's already a clue into the psyche."

Claude Frank's affinity for Beethoven is deep. "I have four musical gods. In chronological order, they are Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert," he said. "If I really had to distinguish between those four as far as their godliness is concerned, Bach and Mozart are probably the most inexplicable to me, because they are totally inhuman as far as their gift and their resourcefulness and their infallibility and their everything, inventiveness — that's too prosaic a word as far as that's concerned."

"Schubert, I would say, is probably the most touching and the most beautiful and somehow the most personal of those four. Schubert is a particular favorite. Of course, he is much less worldly and much less universal than Bach and Mozart."

"Beethoven, I would say, is a little bit sort of in between. That is, he is not quite as inexplicable as Bach and Mozart. One can tell how hard he worked, how uncompromising he was, humanly speaking, as well as artistically speaking. There is much more *human* element entering into Beethoven's composition. And maybe that's what attracted me very much. He's not quite as inexplicable as Bach and Mozart, and yet, in an artistic way, he is also totally superhuman."

on technical challenges and striving to play perfectly. She often tells her students, "Everybody, if they practice enough, can play their instruments well. But can you make the hair stand up on end? That's your job."

While she emphasizes how fortunate her students are, and tells them to not waste a single note, her father places the efforts into the perspective of a long life filled with music. He doesn't expect instant results but knows they will be seen in a year or more. The Beethoven seminar was a luxury because it allowed concentrated study of one composer, of what makes his music distinctive and how it should be played differently than others'.

Mr. Frank said, "Whatever we do, our whole approach to music, everybody's, always ends up being superficial because we have deadlines to meet, we have concerts to think about, we have lessons to think about. Somewhere there is always compromise."

There is compromise here [at Curtis], too, of course, but at least there is more time."

Even so, class always ends with more to be said. "That's, of course, partly due to Pamela's youth," said Mr. Frank, "because at her tender age she hasn't quite yet learned that there is *never* enough time, no matter what. And even if you run over by a half-an-hour, it's still not enough time. So in my own work, I stick to the time because I know it's abbreviated no matter what."

"My tendency is to err on the side of thoroughness," Ms. Frank said, "and my father is getting on my case about that." Spoken like a daughter — or a teacher who knows there's always more to learn. ☺