

**SIROTA:** *Violin Sonata 2; Summertime; Pange Lingua Sonata*

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Albany 1531—62 minutes

A native New Yorker born in 1949 (who now lives much of the year in rural Maine), Robert Sirota is a prolific composer with a long career as teacher and administrator at several prominent East coast universities. The three works for violin and piano on this new Albany release all date from the current century.

Most recent, most substantial, and most affecting is Sirota's 2013 Second Violin Sonata. Subtitled *Farewell*, this is written in memory of parents and grandparents of both the composer and the two violinists who play here. The sonata's four movements total 25 minutes and embody an inner drama that, like so much music (or at least good music), enacts the way our inner lives are shaped by memory: how it haunts us, how it arouses our deepest emotions, how it shades all we see and do. Music is the most purely temporal art, its very existence an interpenetration of past, present, and future, ever returning to what came before even as it evolves and fades away.

The valedictory nature of Sirota's *Farewell* Sonata arises from its pervasive use of a single motive: a five-note, tenderly lyrical phrase sung by the unaccompanied violin at the very beginning of the work. This motive is immediately mimicked by the piano, retaining its easily recognizable shape while subtly changing the intervals between the notes. The motive is thus the same, only not the same, shifting just as memory both recalls and distorts the past. (Such "stretching" of motives for expressive purposes, I should add, has a long and venerable history. Listen to the very beginning of Schubert's Piano Sonata in A minor D845 for a classical-era example of how affecting a slight change in the intervals of an echoed motive can be.)

The mostly pensive first movement of Sirota's sonata—though with some faster, turbulent outbursts—is nicely contrasted by the following scherzo, where clever rhythmic variants of the opening motive are tossed around in jabbing, acrobatic exchanges between the two instruments. III shows Sirota at his most impressionist, evoking a snowy night with fast, whispery sul ponticellos and slow, ultra-high whistling in the violin set off by calm, richly harmonized chorales in the piano, along with yet more disguised reminiscences of the open-

ing motive. An apparently new element is added, too: a brief phrase from what sounds like an old sentimental tune. In the elegiac last movement the opening motive appears yet again, easily recognizable though again shifting through different guises. To these are added more expansive phrases from III's sweetly sentimental song over gently dissonant harmonies: another memory, a long-forgotten tune once sung by the composer's mother, perhaps? In any case its old-fashioned character immediately reveals it as something from "long ago"—yet it also somehow feels akin to the sonata's main motive. This nostalgic melody drifts off into a serene, lovely coda with final echoes of the opening motive concluded by the piano's slow, softly chiming chords.

*Summertime*, from 2000, presents a more stylized and picturesque recreation of memory (here of the composer's travels through Southern France with its ancient cities rich in history). Adopting a quasi-medieval harmonic language, with parallel fourths and fifths spiced with chromatic clashes, I is a plangent, droning pavane embellished with quotations of the *Dies Irae* theme and some period-style senza vibrato playing from the violin. II is a summertime nocturne, its uncluttered array of outdoorsy tweets, trillings, chitterings, and grumblings again displaying Sirota's impressionist streak as in the third movement of his Second Sonata. III is a "round dance" that gradually builds up momentum, delayed by the recurrence of the *Dies Irae* and a quotation from Saint-Saens's *Danse Macabre*, only in its last moments finally achieving some real verve and energy.

Finally, there's *Pange Lingua Sonata*, all three of its movements based on the traditional 11th Century hymn by St Thomas Aquinas, which has the salient virtue of being fresher than the hackneyed *Dies Irae*. The movements are a mixed-tempo 'Apologia', a slower and more richly harmonized 'Ballade', and a variation-finale on the Aquinas melody that boasts some vigorous and brilliant contrapuntal episodes. This is in my view a more persuasive and imaginative product of the composer's drawing on an "ancient" inspiration than *Summertime*, and though not as emotionally involving as Sonata 2, easy to enjoy and admire.

Performances by violinists and pianists are expert and unstinting; and Albany's recording is clear, detailed, and immediate.

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