

Sonata L.148 (140)

The only violin sonata that Debussy wrote was at the end of his life. It was meant to be a sonata out of the set of six sonatas for various instruments, of which he only completed three, with the violin sonata being the third. He initially intended this sonata to be for Violin, Horn and Piano but changed his mind and made it for just the Violin and Piano.

Even though the sonata was premiered in 1917 by the violinist Gaston Poulet, it was not written for him. The premiere, in Salle Gavot (Paris), on the 5th of May, was a benefit concert for the victims of the first world war. The piece, with Debussy at the piano, was not very welcomed by the public, though in recent years it became one of the major pieces in the repertoire for violin-piano. It was criticized as being not as imaginative as other works and people disliked the form. (Debussy *The Quiet Revolutionary*, Victor Lederer, Amadeus Press, New York, 2007 p140)

The main motivation and inspiration that he had were from a violinist which had Hungarian roots, Arthur Hartmann. Debussy met this violinist in 1910 and admired his 'gypsy-style' playing very much.

In the period that Debussy wrote this piece, at the end of his life, he was very ill from cancer. It took him approximately one year to compose this 3-movement work. In comparison to the other two sonatas in this set, Debussy had to make a tremendous effort to complete it, as we can see from the letters or notes that he made during this period.

In 1915/16 during the first world war, which is known as 'The great war' in France, Debussy tried to avoid any Germanic influences in his compositions. It is suggested that Debussy went back to the old French composers, such as Leclair, Couperin and Rameau.

The first movement is written in a free-style based upon the main melody that he introduces in the beginning of the piece with the violin. One can easily make metaphorical pictures in one's mind. One of the things that seem to be avoided is a clear metre or rhythmic structure with the many hemiolas. The piece is quite restless in character and has many sections that can be interpreted very freely. One should perform this movement as an improvisation.

The second movement has a very different character. It is very uncommon to start a second movement 'Ad libitum quasi cadenza'. With this, beginning of this movement hints back, in its free form, of the first movement but changes rather quickly in a stable rhythmic structure. The movement is quite fragmented. It always comes back to the main theme, with repetitive notes, and makes a big contrast with the Scherzando which liberates from the metric picture of the main theme.

The third movement, which took Debussy around seven months to write (since he was struggling with completing the Sonata), consists mostly of the thematic material of the first movement. Many sketches and drafts of this movement exist, but it is interesting that he returned to the first draft and decided, in the end, to take that draft to finalize the sonata. He called this movement 'Napoleonian'.

