

## About this Recording

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Henry Vieuxtemps (1820-1881)  
Music for Viola and Piano

The son of a weaver, amateur violinist and violin-maker, Henry Vieuxtemps was born in the Belgian town of Verviers in 1820 and had his first violin lessons at the age of four from his father, followed by study in his native town with a locally respected teacher. At the age of six he appeared as soloist in a concerto by Rode and after further success at home he embarked with his father and teacher on a concert tour of the Low Countries. A successful appearance in Brussels led the violinist Charles de Bériot to offer lessons there and the boy later accompanied his new teacher to Paris, making his first concert appearance there in 1829, again in a concerto by Rode. With the revolution of the following year and de Bériot's marriage and departure on tour, Vieuxtemps, following his teacher's advice, returned to Brussels, where he worked on his own, developing his technique and his musical knowledge and taste, not least through the duets he played with de Bériot's sister-in-law, Pauline García, later Viardot and mother of the violinist Paul Viardot. A year younger than Vieuxtemps, she was a piano pupil of Liszt, although, like her sister, she made her later career as a singer.

A concert tour of Germany in 1833 brought friendship with the violinist-composer Louis Spohr and in Vienna acquaintance with those who had worked with Beethoven, whose Violin Concerto he performed in Vienna in March 1834, after a mere two weeks of study. In Leipzig he was acclaimed by Schumann, who compared the boy to Paganini, whom he had met in London in 1834. In Paris once more he took composition lessons from Antonín Reicha, who directed his attention to the composition of concertos, resulting in the Violin Concerto in F sharp minor, Opus 19, of 1836, later published as Violin Concerto No.2.

Vieuxtemps made his first visit to Russia in 1837, returning there the following year and appearing in concerts, after prolonged recuperation from an illness contracted in the course of the journey. It was in Russia that he wrote the innovative work published as Violin Concerto No.1 in E major, Opus 10. Concert tours continued in the following years. In 1844 Vieuxtemps was in America, wooing audiences with variations on Yankee Doodle. In Vienna and London he appeared in Beethoven quartets and in concerts there and elsewhere in Europe. In 1846, however, he accepted an invitation to move to St Petersburg as court violinist and soloist in the Imperial Theatre. He remained there until 1852 and it was during this period that he wrote the fourth of his seven completed violin concertos. In a busy career, he continued to compose, appeared as a soloist in concerts, gave lessons and took part in chamber music recitals. In particular, he added a more classical dimension to violin repertoire. Beethoven's Violin Concerto was now part of his repertoire, and he also gave a performance of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, which was still a novelty. With Anton Rubinstein he was able to play Beethoven's Violin Sonatas and appeared together with him in concerts in Paris, after leaving Russia in 1852 to resume a largely peripatetic career as a virtuoso. He was eventually prevailed upon to accept a teaching position at the Brussels Conservatoire, where his own teacher de Bériot had taught, settling in Brussels again in 1871, but continuing to give concerts.

It was in 1873 that Vieuxtemps suffered a stroke that paralysed his right arm. He moved to Paris and his violin class was taken over in 1875 by Wieniawski. Composition was still possible and gradually he found himself able to play chamber music again, at least in private. In 1879, finally giving up any hope of resuming his career in Brussels, he moved to Algeria, where his daughter and son-in-law

had settled. Here he continued to compose, although frustrated by his inability to play what he had written or, in general, to hear it played. He died in June 1881.

Vieuxtemps was undoubtedly one of the greatest violinists of his time, combining superb technical command with deeper musical understanding. He may be seen as representative of the Franco-Belgian school of players, the successor of de Bériot, while those who were taught by him or fell under his direct influence include his pupil Eugène Ysaÿe, Jenö Hubay and Leopold Auer. He excelled also as a viola player, leaving a small group of compositions for the instrument and three string quartets, a mark of his own fondness for the genre, in which he joined, sometimes taking the viola part.

The Sonata in B flat major, Opus 36, was published in Leipzig in 1863. It opens with a pensive Maestoso that at first explores the lower register of the viola. This is contrasted with the rapid scherzando, with its triplet figuration, that follows, in dialogue with the piano. After the recapitulation a short recitative re-introduces the music of the opening, before an emphatic closing passage. The G minor Barcarolle, with the direction *con melancolia*, has the necessary lilting accompaniment, leading to a major key Allegretto tranquillo, with the direction *con molta delicatezza* and a brief animato section in which a new rhythm is heard, providing the basis of the accompaniment to the return of the opening melody, followed by a final reminiscence of the tranquil G major section. The piano introduces the principal melody of the last movement, followed by the viola, in a movement that brings concluding demands for virtuosity.

The Elégie in F minor, Opus 30, scored for viola or cello and piano, was published in 1854. The opening piano chords suggest a mood later familiar from Fauré, an accompaniment to a poignant singing melody, after which a viola cadenza ushers in an A flat major passage of greater activity, followed by the return of the opening, leading to a bravura ending.

The Capriccio in C minor for unaccompanied viola concludes a set of six pieces for unaccompanied violin, issued posthumously under various opus numbers between 1881 and 1887. The mood is caught in the opening direction, Lento, *con molta espressione*, its substance woven from the opening material and leading to a climax, before the final hushed plucked chords.

Vieuxtemps transcribed for viola and piano a short excerpt from the Saint-Simonian French composer Félicien David's programmatic and very successful pictorial ode-symphonie of 1844, *Le désert*. *La Nuit* is gently evocative in feeling.

The Allegro con fuoco and Scherzo were first published in 1884, described as movements of an unfinished sonata, although there is no clear evidence that Vieuxtemps had such a sonata in mind when he wrote the two movements. The first theme of the B flat major Allegro is characteristic of the composer in its singing quality. This begins a sonata-form movement that makes significant technical demands on the viola, the full range of which is explored. This is coupled with an F minor Scherzo, its initially sinister principal theme introduced by the viola, framing two trios, the first in B flat major, and the second, with its semiquaver viola figuration, in F major.

Keith Anderson

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