

The Violin Sonatas of Frederick Shepherd Converse and Daniel Gregory Mason

Classical music as it developed in America in the nineteenth century was largely inspired by Beethoven and the German symphonic tradition that he represented. This fact has sometimes been used, unfairly, as an indictment against the composers who worked with energy and talent to create an American concert music, on the grounds that it lacked originality. But a moment's thought will show clearly the deficiency of the charge. After all, composers all over Europe as well were inspired and challenged by Beethoven, even in places that had long-established native musical cultures. Indeed, one could easily view the entire Romantic era as a series of responses to the example of Beethoven. And in the youthful United States, the challenge was so much the greater because underpinnings of an established concert life—symphony orchestras, opera companies, permanent chamber music ensembles, conservatories, and music publishers—were still just making their appearance.

For philosophical as well as musical reasons, Beethoven's German tradition appealed to Americans. In New England—the birthplace of both of the composers represented here—some of the leading Transcendentalists had recognized in Beethoven a new kind of music, one with an ethical component celebrating triumph over adversity, exactly the kind of story that Americans saw in their own history.

John Knowles Paine (1839–1906), who is counted more than any other single individual as the father of American symphonic music, and who became a teacher of both Frederick Shepherd Converse and Daniel Gregory Mason, actually roomed in Berlin with the American scholar Alexander Wheelock Thayer while he was researching his famous Beethoven biography. And when the Boston Symphony Orchestra was created in 1881, its founder, Henry Lee Higginson, requested of his conductor, Georg Henschel, that he mark Boston's musical coming-of-age by presenting, during the inaugural season, all nine Beethoven symphonies in order.

By this time both Converse and Mason, as young boys, were beginning their own musical education in towns neighboring on Boston and could not fail to be bathed in the constant presence of Beethoven and German romantic music.

Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871–1940) was born into a long-established Yankee family in Newton, a suburb of Boston. Although there is no evident history of musical talent in his family background, he himself developed an early passion for the art, one that his family supported. From the very beginning he expressed an interest in learning to be a composer. Quite possibly this enthusiasm developed because, by the time he was out of grade school, Boston had made room for a growing number of highly regarded composers who could serve as role models for a young enthusiast. Among these were Paine himself, now a professor of music at Harvard, and George W. Chadwick (1854–1931), who had heard Paine's First Symphony and decided that to be a composer of that kind of music would afford the greatest possible happiness to him.

Converse entered Harvard in the class of 1893 and graduated with highest honors, offering his **Sonata for Violin and Piano, Opus 1** as a graduation piece. Converse's father then insisted that he join the family business, but it took only a few miserable months to demonstrate that his role was not to be played in the commercial world. Instead he chose to continue his composition studies with Chadwick at the New England Conservatory; Chadwick in turn sent him on to Munich for study with Josef Rheinberger, who had been Chadwick's own teacher some fifteen years earlier. The course of study there was rigorously "classical"—which is to say, determinedly not modern.

When Converse returned to Boston in 1898, however, he began an active study of newer musical trends, particularly those emanating from France. He taught for a time at the New England Conservatory and at Harvard, but by 1900, enjoying independent means, he moved to an estate in Westwood, Massachusetts, where he raised his family and concentrated on composition.

During the most fruitful years of his career, Converse composed a large body of colorful orchestral works, including a series of tone poems inspired by Keats's *Endymion* and another based on Walt Whitman's *The Mystic Trumpeter* (possibly his finest orchestral work). He also became the first American composer to have an opera performed at the Metropolitan Opera. This was *The Pipe of Desire* (1910), and he followed it up with three more operas, of which only *The Sacrifice* (1911) reached performance. Two later operas, *The Immigrant* and *Sinbad the Sailor*, fell victim to the financial collapse of the short-lived Boston Opera Company, of which Converse was a founder. One of the most striking of his later works is the humorous tone poem *Flivver Ten Million*, inspired by the production of the ten millionth Model T Ford; its celebration of American factory production and Americans' love of the open road made it perhaps his most strikingly American work. In his later years Converse joined the faculty of the New England Conservatory and ultimately became the dean of the school, retiring in 1938 for health reasons.

As this summary indicates, Converse was best known for large orchestral works and for opera. Nonetheless his chamber music is effective and attractive. Even though his musical language came to be seen as conservative by the time of his death in 1940, his career traced an extended path from the very classical violin sonata that he wrote at the end of his Harvard years to the relatively modernistic tone poems, with their refined sense of orchestral color and rich harmonies.

The Violin Sonata is the springboard for this career, a work that Converse himself later denigrated—though only in the manner of an ambitious composer who hopes to progress in his art. In 1910 he told the *Christian Science Monitor*: “Today [the sonata] seems very young, yet it has enthusiasm and freshness. . . . Now I consider the sonata pretty bad, but it is still played a little.” Indeed, the firm of G. Schirmer found the sonata worthy of publication in 1900, and its attractive qualities can still prove engaging, while also marking a departure point for Converse's art.

The clarity of the sonata-form structure in the first movement and the balance of violin and piano both suggest a careful study of the Beethoven violin sonatas during Converse's Harvard years. The wide leaps of the secondary theme appear in a lyrical guise, but during the course of the development they form an increasingly dramatic return to the home key for the recapitulation. The gentleness of the *Romanze* turns momentarily darker and more chromatic in its middle section. The *Menuetto* has suggestions of historical pastiche in the main section, evoking the old dance of a century or more earlier, while the broadly lyrical trio flows with romantic gestures. The energetic finale opens with a tense, subdued 6/8 theme in A minor. Then, following transformations through various keys (and into 4/4 time), the return of the original material builds to an exuberant, dynamic close in A major.

Daniel Gregory Mason (1873–1953) was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, only a few miles from Converse and two years later. In contrast to Converse, whose family had no particular musical antecedents, Mason could hardly have avoided becoming a musician. His grandfather was one of the leading figures in the development of church music and of music education in the schools early in the nineteenth century. His uncle William Mason was a distinguished pianist. His father Henry Mason was a founder of the Mason & Hamlin piano company.

Mason overlapped with Converse at Harvard (1891–95), where he studied with Paine and then later with Chadwick at the New England Conservatory. For some time he was more renowned for his writings about music, including the early books *From Grieg to Brahms* (1902), *Beethoven and His Forerunners* (1904), and *The Romantic Composers* (1906). In 1905 he began an association with Columbia University which lasted until his retirement in 1942.

Mason's music on the whole is more conservative in its language than that of Converse. He was generally unsympathetic to modern trends in program music and completely opposed to modernistic harmonic styles. It can hardly be surprising that a man who wrote a fine book on *The Chamber Music of Brahms* (1928) should himself compose chamber music of a particularly Brahmsian cast.

Like Converse and some of his older colleagues, including Chadwick and Arthur Foote, Mason's later years coincided with one of the most dramatic changes in American music. From World War I on there were an increasing number of immigrant composers (like Ernest Bloch) or the offspring of immigrants (like Aaron Copland) who were making their way in the musical world with a more dissonant style that was opposed to everything Mason stood for. On a few occasions he wrote polemical essays that bordered on anti-Semitism (since it happened that the majority of the new composers were Jewish), such as his attack on an immigrant such as Ernest Bloch having the nerve to win a competition with a work titled *America*. The older generations of American composers—Paine, Chadwick, Foote, Converse, and Mason himself—had all come from family lines that had lived in New England for generations, even for centuries. They found the sudden change of the pace and character and focus of musical life following World War I to be disorienting and threatening.

Ultimately Mason came to grips with this change and recognized that many elements were contributing to the stream of American music. He wrote a richly evocative string quartet that used elements of French impressionistic harmony in treating tunes drawn from Negro spirituals. And perhaps his last major score was his third symphony, *A Lincoln Symphony*, which evoked traditional American tunes (with few actual borrowings) in suggesting various aspects of the Great Emancipator.

Still, it is Mason's chamber music that remains the most successful of his works. The **Violin Sonata in G minor, Opus 5**, composed in 1907–08, opens with the solo violin on its lowest note with a theme that grows in the darkly subdued manner of Brahms. The reticence of the material sometimes erupts into passionate outbursts, yet they are always contained, reserved. The most striking movement, certainly the most adventurous, is the *Andante tranquillo*, which begins with a warmly expressive and eloquent main section and moves to an increasingly restless middle section, filled with disjunct gestures and more complex harmonies. The opening material returns, but now thoroughly reconsidered in the light of the recent passionate experience. Having reined his horses in, so to speak, through two movements, Mason lets them race off into the finale. A poignant contrasting theme offers respite from the vigorous race, which finally ends in majestic climax.

The **Sonata in C minor, Opus 14** was actually composed for clarinet and piano, at the urging of Burnet C. Tuthill. The impetus for the work came about when Mason had asked the violinist Edouard Déthier, who was on the faculty at Juilliard and for whom he wrote the Opus 5 sonata, to locate a clarinetist for a private reading of his *Pastorale* for violin, clarinet, and piano, which he was then completing. Tuthill was Déthier's choice, and ultimately he played the clarinet part at the premiere of the piece. He was so taken with the *Pastorale* that he urged Mason to write a clarinet sonata. The first movement came easily during Mason's summer stay in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1912, but it took him three more years to compose the other two movements (unusually, there is no slow movement). Tuthill later expressed his conviction that it was the finest clarinet sonata in existence after the two by Brahms. And as if bowing to the connection with Brahms, Mason chose to offer an alternative version of the sonata (perhaps on the theory that there were not enough clarinetists who would buy the challenging score). But unlike Brahms, whose alternate version was for viola and piano, Mason chose to make his for violin and piano. The actual publication was the very first work to appear in the series of the Society for the Publication of American Music, which Tuthill had helped found to make this work (and other American chamber compositions) available to the public.

Listeners who happen to know the clarinet version well will perhaps be aware of a few melodic changes in the violin version—different choice of octave for certain passages (such as to emphasize the dark richness of a theme played on the G-string), a few special violinistic effects, and so on—but for the most part the sonata is the same in both versions. The sonata-form opening movement moves from the darkly expressive C-minor to a bright and serene close in the major. The second movement is

lively scherzo with a slower and more lyrical middle section. The return to the scherzo exploits whole-tone harmonies that are among the most advanced of Mason's harmonic explorations. The finale begins quietly but soon builds to a dialogue between the violin in cadenza-like figures and the piano in marching chords. These materials develop into a vigorous and thoroughly satisfying climax.

—*Steven Ledbetter*

Kevin Lawrence's assertive violin style and strong musical personality have received critical acclaim throughout the United States and Europe. His solo performances have included appearances at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Merkin Hall and Lincoln Center in New York, and in Houston, Cleveland, Chicago, London, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Dresden, Sofia, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. Lawrence's recitals and master classes focusing on American music draw continuing interest from audiences in Russia and Bulgaria. His performances are frequently aired on the National Public Radio and Voice of America broadcasting systems. Kevin Lawrence received his professional training at The Juilliard School as a scholarship student of Ivan Galamian and Margaret Pardee. While at Juilliard he also studied chamber music with Felix Galimir and continued his training with Josef Gingold at the Meadowmount School in Westport, New York. He is currently string chair at the North Carolina School of the Arts, and since the summer of 1997 has served as artistic director of the Killington Music Festival in Vermont.

Pianist **Phillip Bush** made his New York recital debut at the Metropolitan Museum in 1984, and his Carnegie Hall concerto debut as soloist with the London Sinfonietta in 2001. He has performed and recorded with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, appears frequently on New York's Bargemusic Series, and has collaborated with many of today's outstanding artists in recitals across the country, from Boston's Gardner Museum to the Ambassador Auditorium in Los Angeles. Bush has performed as a guest artist at the Grand Canyon, Bridgehampton, Sitka (Alaska), Cape May, Chateau D'Ainay (France), Blair Atholl (Scotland), and Bahamas music festivals. He appears frequently with many of New York City's best-known contemporary music ensembles, and has been a member of the Milwaukee-based group Present Music since 1996. Phillip Bush is a graduate of the Peabody Conservatory, where he studied with Leon Fleisher. Since 1999 he has been on the piano faculty at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Frederick Shepherd Converse

Endymion's Narrative. Louisville Orchestra, Jorge Mester conducting. Albany Records 30.

Flivver Ten Million. Louisville Orchestra, Jorge Mester conducting. Albany Records 30.

Sonata No. 1 for Piano. M. L. Boehm, piano. Albany Records 293.

Daniel Gregory Mason

Chanticleer (Festival Overture). Albany Symphony Orchestra, Julius Hegyi conducting. New World 80321-2.

Quartet on Negro Themes in G minor. Budapest String Quartet. Bridge Records 9077.

Sentimental Sketches (4). Rawlins Piano Trio. Albany Records 305.

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano. D. Wright, clarinet; G. Davis, piano. Centaur Records 2067.

Other titles by composers of the "New England School" available on New World Records:

George Chadwick

Symphony No. 2. Albany Symphony Orchestra, Julius Hegyi conducting. New World 80339-2.

Arthur Foote

The Violin Music of Arthur Foote. Kevin Lawrence, violin; Eric Larsen, piano. New World 80464-2.

John Knowles Paine

Mass in D. Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Gunther Schuller conducting; Saint Louis Symphony Chorus, Thomas Peck conducting. New World 80262-2.

Selected Piano Works. Denver Oldham, piano. New World 80424-2.

Symphony No. 1. New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta conducting. New World 80374-2.

Symphony No. 2. New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta conducting. New World 80350-2.

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FREDERICK SHEPHERD CONVERSE (1871–1940)
VIOLIN SONATAS
80591-2

Kevin Lawrence, violin; Phillip Bush, piano

Daniel Gregory Mason

Sonata in G Minor for violin and piano, Opus 5 (1907)

1. I. *Allegro moderato* 10:41
2. II. *Andante tranquillo, ma non troppo lento* 9:10
3. III. *Allegro vivace* 6:44

Sonata in C Minor for violin and piano, Opus 14 (1915)

4. I. *Con moto, amabile* 8:30
5. II. *Vivace ma non troppo* 6:38
6. III. *Allegro moderato* 7:42

Frederick Shepherd Converse

Sonata in A Major for violin and piano, Opus 1 (1900)

7. I. *Allegro giocoso* 5:17
8. II. *Romanze: Andante* 3:27
9. III. *Menuetto* 3:01
10. IV. *Finale: Poco agitato* 5:20

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