

**ISU Department of Music
Faculty Recital
Sunday, April 11, 2021
7:30 p.m. via Webcast**

**Jonathan Sturm, violin and viola
Michael Banwarth, piano**

Program

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Sonata for Viola and Piano (1919) | Rebecca Clarke
(1886-1979) |
| I Impetuoso | |
| II Vivace | |
| III-IV Adagio—Agitato | |
|
 | |
| Suite for Violin and Piano (1943) | William Grant Still
(1895-1978) |
| I Suggested Richmond Barthe's "African Dancer" | |
| II Suggested by Sargent Johnson's "Mother and Child" | |
| III Suggested by Augusta Savage's "Gamin" | |
|
 | |
| Sonata for Violin and Piano, opus 34 (1896) | Amy Cheney Beach
(1867-1944) |
| I Allegro moderato | |
| II Scherzo: molto vivace | |
| III Largo con dolore | |
| IV Allegro con fuoco | |
|
 | |
| Viennese Rhapsodic Fantasietta (early 1940s) | Fritz Kreisler
(1875-1962) |

Notes on the Program

The selections on this evening's recital culminate a long-standing desire of mine to break with my past traditions featuring traditional European music and to feature important repertoire for violin, viola, and piano by women and African American composers. I hope you will agree that these pieces are powerful musical statements, with great structural and musical integrity, and that they should hold a place alongside the best music of their time

by any composer. Each of these composers was an American citizen for at least a part of their life as well.

Rebecca Clarke was an esteemed violist for a substantial part of her life before retiring from public performance after moving to America and marrying. She lived and composed, unfortunately, at a time when women typically took a back seat to men, and that impacted the quantity of works she composed over her lifetime, though not the quality, as this masterpiece proves. At college, she suffered what would now be classified as a #MeToo experience when her professor proposed to her (causing her parents to withdraw her from the school), and at its premiere this viola sonata was considered by some critics to be a piece that must have come from a man as they considered it too good for a woman to compose.

In spite of these obstacles and injustices, this piece in particular forms one pillar among the best repertoire for the viola. Composed in 1919, it begins unabashedly with one of the boldest openings in the viola literature. As the movements progress, one hears the distinct tinge of French Impressionism blended expertly with the flavoring of an English country style that so easily identifies music by turn-of-the-century British composers such as Clarke, Delius, Holst, or Vaughan-Williams. The uninhibited power of the opening, and its return later in the sonata, trades places eloquently across the sonata with passages of sublime tenderness, mystique, and playfulness. Clarke understands perfectly the process of building a phrase to a point of climax, evidenced perhaps most clearly in the slow movement that builds from a place of deep introspection to an apogee of passionate expression.

This sonata, like Amy Beach's on this program, places a playful scherzo as the second-movement followed by the slow movement. In Clarke's sonata, however, the third movement proceeds to the fourth without pause via a transition that has the viola playing a tremolo pedal tone while the piano reminisces on the third movement's theme before reintroducing the principal theme from the first movement. This first movement theme then plays a central role in the finale as well. A jaunty British dance appears midway through the movement before a quasi-improvised moment leads into the final statements of both the first and third movement's themes to conclude the piece in a classic arch form.

William Grant Still holds the unique honor of being the first African-American composer to have a symphony performed by an important American orchestra—in this case the Rochester Philharmonic conducted by American composer/conductor Howard Hanson in 1931. Known as the “Dean of Afro-American Composers” for many years, W.G. Still was also the first African-American composer to have an opera performed by the New York City Opera and the first African-American to conduct a major American orchestra—the Los Angeles Philharmonic—in 1936. His life prior to these successes was deeply involved with some of the leading African-American musicians of the early 20th century, including W.C. Handy (“Father of the Blues”), Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake (composer/producers of the first all-black musical on Broadway in 1921), and he also played for a time as a member of the Fletcher Henderson Big Band. While his music and his timing were right for America in the 1920s and later, the fact that he was a trailblazer

at such a late date in American history is indicative of the insurmountable hurdles faced by earlier generations of African-American musicians on this continent.

This suite for violin and piano derives its overall style—melodies, harmonies and rhythms—from blues, spirituals, and the African-American musical legacy that built from the first arrivals until Still's lifetime. Filled with syncopated rhythms and soulful melodies, the feeling in each movement leaps off the page.

This suite connects, perhaps unintentionally, to another masterpiece of music that originated in Russia—Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Both pieces derive their inspiration from works of visual art—in the case of this suite, from two sculptures (the outer movements) and a drawing, images of which I have included below.

The individual movements of the suites are untitled, yet have as subtitled the art works that suggested them. Movement one trades visceral and bold melodies with an internal slower section. Movement two reverses this, in a manner of speaking, opening with a tender lullaby before shifting to a more nervous and intense central section. The opening melody returns in a tender, then ecstatic version before the movement concludes. Gamin, the third movement, plays with rhythms in a jaunty, almost cocky style, just as one might expect from a youth who has experienced life, but not too much.



African Dancer
(Richmond Barthe)
Movement 1



Mother and Child
(Sargent Johnson)
Movement 2



Gamin (Boy)
(Augusta Savage)
Movement 3

Amy Beach (1867-1944) held pride of place during her life as the “grand dame” of American classical composition. She was the first American female composer to have a symphony performed by the Boston Symphony—it was her only symphony, subtitled “Gaelic.” It received high critical acclaim at its premiere that continues to this day to place it as one of the great symphonies by an American composer. Amy Beach was also the first female to solo as a pianist with the Boston Symphony.

Amy Beach's violin sonata, in four movements, heralds from the same year as the "Gaelic" symphony (1896, when Amy was 29 years old), and is evidence not only of her desire but also of her absolute ability to write in the great European romantic tradition of composers like Johannes Brahms, Edvard Grieg, and Richard Strauss. It is a bold, powerful sonata with moments of concerto-like virtuosity for each instrument.

Listeners may be particularly interested to note passages in the first movement that are reminiscent of Brahms' violin sonata in A major and Grieg's piano concerto or, in the playful scherzo second movement, a central trio section in which the piano takes the melody against a sustained violin G (not unlike the second theme from Mendelssohn's violin concerto). The third movement projects a mournful mood from the beginning, yet builds upon an underlying nobility to a dramatic climax before returning to reminisce upon its principal theme, first elegiacally, then concluding softly with an angelic statement. The finale, beginning stridently, conjures contrasting ideas of romance—one assertive and dominant, the second gentle, yielding, before offering a fugue and concluding in the virtuoso style of its beginning.

The *Viennese Rhapsodic Fantasietta* is a less-frequently heard "apotheosis of the waltz" by the great Viennese violinist and composer **Fritz Kreisler**. It combines dazzling virtuosity with the subtle nuances of fin-de-siècle Viennese dances within a richly chromatic context. Beginning with a violin cadenza orienting to the key of E, it drops a ½-step to E-flat for its first section in a gentle retrospective, almost a memory of Vienna's past glories. Then a series of trills notch the key back up to E major for a return in time to the actual waltz era, rising to a triumphant conclusion that nearly boasts of Vienna and its inextinguishable joie-de-vivre.

This program is one I have longed (and planned) to perform for years. It is a privilege and a pleasure finally to be able to bring it to life and to feature the music of Rebecca Clarke and Amy Beach as well as William Grant Still, one of this country's most respected African-American composers in the classical tradition. The rhapsodic *Fantasietta* at the end of the program is a piece I have admired for years and finally had the opportunity to learn to the level of performance I feel it deserves. And it has proved a total pleasure and privilege to work this program up with Michael Banwarth—a current ISU senior who manifests, as so many of our ISU students do—true potential!