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Mihkel KEREM

Violin Sonatas Violin Sonatas Nos. 1-3 Sonata for solo violin

Mikk Murdvee, violin
Sten Lassmann, piano

FIRST RECORDINGS



MIHKEL KEREM ON HIS VIOLIN SONATAS

Allow me to begin with a whistle-stop biographical outline. I was born in 1981 in Tallinn into a family of musicians. At the age of six I started studying violin at the Tallinn Music High School with my mother and I soon began to win diplomas and competitions, in Lithuania and the Czech Republic as well as at home. Since childhood, I have performed as a soloist around the world and as leader of a number of orchestras, roles I continue to fill in London and elsewhere in the UK. I began composition studies at the age of twelve with Estonian composer Mati Kuulberg¹ and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music with Jaan Rääts.² After that I studied with William Mival³ at the Royal College of Music while I completed my master's degree. I have written over one hundred compositions to date, including three symphonies, a concerto for two cellos and orchestra, nine string quartets and these three sonatas for violin and piano. Among the musicians who have played my music are The Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, the Oulu Sinfonia in Finland, Camerata Nordica in Sweden and The Chilingirian String Quartet in the UK.

My relationship with this project is very personal. Not only did I go to school with both of the performers, both of whom are very close in age to me, but I also shared my first composition lessons with Mikk Murdvee.

¹ Estonian composer, 1947–2001. A professional violinist for the first eight years of his career (1966–74), Kuulberg wrote five symphonies, four concertos (for violin, flute, trombone and double-bass), three ballets and a good deal of chamber and instrumental music, including a number of sonatas.

² Born in Tartu in 1932, Rääts is a prolific composer, in an essentially neo-classical style, with – among much else – eight symphonies, nearly thirty concertos, seven piano trios, six string quartets, three piano quintets and ten piano sonatas to his credit.

³ Born in 1959 in North Wales, William Mival studied with Anthony Milner, Robert Saxton and York Höller and is now Head of Composition at the Royal College of Music. His compositions include works for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Belcea String Quartet, the virginalist and harpsichordist Sophie Yates, the Welsh Chamber Orchestra and the choirs of Salisbury Cathedral.

Concert Hall in Milan and the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing. In 2010 he toured Beethoven's Fifth Concerto, and in 2003 Prokofiev's Second Concerto, with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, and in 2008 played the Estonian premiere of James Macmillan's Second Concerto.

His solo repertoire includes works from the Baroque to the modern. Since 2008 he has been engaged on a project to make the first-ever recording of the complete piano works of Heino Eller, which is also his PhD project at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He is also a keen chamber musician, with a large repertoire of duo works for violin, cello and clarinet, piano trio and piano quintet.

Sten Lassmann was born in 1982 in Tallinn, into a family of musicians. He started his musical education at the Tallinn Central School of Music in 1989, studying piano with Ell Saviauk and Ira Floss, and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (BMus, MMus with Distinction) with Ivari Ilja. He later studied at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris with Brigitte Engerer and at the Royal Academy of Music in London (MMus, Dip RAM) with Ian Fountain. Sten has played in master-classes with such musicians as Boris Berman, Konstantin Lifschitz, Victor Merzhanov, Michael Roll, Alexander Satz, Howard Shelley and Maxim Vengerov. An important influence also comes from his father Peep Lassmann, an eminent pianist and professor, who studied with Emil Gilels at the Moscow Conservatoire.





Mikk Murdvee has long been a champion of Mihkel Kerem's music, initiating and premiering many of his works, among them, as conductor, the Third Symphony, *Divertimento*, *Restless Night* for strings, *Small Concerto for Small Strings* and *Fanfare*; as violinist the Third Violin Sonata, Sonata for Solo Violin, *Aria for Mikk* for violin and piano and *Four Dances and Epilogue* for piano trio; and as violist the *Lamento* for viola and strings, the String Sextet and Viola Sonata in their Estonian and Finnish premieres.

Murdvee began his musical education at age six in the Music High School in Tallinn, studying violin with his mother Niina Murdvee and Harald Aasa. Thereafter he studied at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre before taking a master's degree at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, where he studied violin with Mari Tampere-Bezrodny and gained his violin diploma in 2005. He joined the conducting class in 2002, studying with Leif Segerstam, Jorma Panula and others, and took his conducting diploma with the Sibelius Academy Symphony Orchestra and Estonian National Opera in 2007.

In the same year he became conductor of the Helsinki University Symphony Orchestra, a position in which many prominent Finnish conductors (among them Leif Segerstam, Esa-Pekka Salonen and John Storgårds) began their careers. He has taken the orchestra on tour to Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Poland and Sweden.

He is a frequent visitor to a number of professional Finnish and Estonian orchestras and in London has conducted the Southbank Sinfonia and the Royal College of Music Symphony Orchestra. Since January 2011 he has been assistant to Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Philharmonia Orchestra on several projects. He also continues his career as a violinist and violist, both as soloist, chamber musician and orchestral leader.

Since winning first prize in the Sixth Estonian National Piano Competition in 2002, **Sten Lassmann** has been regularly appearing as soloist and chamber musician. Concerts and competitions have brought him all over the world, to play in some of the most prestigious venues, such as the Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, Purcell Room in London, the Large and Small Halls of the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow, the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatoire

I did not write my first composition down since I was still unable to read music fluently. I was only six years old, having recently started to learn the violin, and the piece was for solo piano. I had little understanding of what I was doing, but somehow a piece started to take shape. My father, Jaan, who has been principal violist of the Estonia Opera Orchestra for 34 years, came and sat next to me with a piece of manuscript paper and a pencil and started to write down what I was playing. And so my first composition was born. The piece was called something along the lines of *Spooky Mountain* and the year was 1987. It was not until a few years later when I had started writing down more music that Mikk's mother thought we should have lessons with Mati Kuulberg. We began our composition lessons in autumn 1991 and spent an hour every week during that school year in a kind of composers' union in Mati's studio. As the time passed and our compositions grew larger, it became impractical to share lessons and so our compositional paths went their separate ways.

As a child I never really understood why I was writing – it was just something I did, like homework that I actually enjoyed. Gradually it grew into something that I had to do and could not live without, just as playing music had also become by that time. Writing sonatas has become a form of rehabilitation that I need to go through every now and then: it is a combination of meditation, reaffirmation of belief, spiritual cleansing and the marking of a milestone in my life. I find sonatas to be the most personal form of making music as they allow me to tell a story as well as exchanging ideas and emotions. Although within a symphony I could make bigger, bolder statements, in a sonata I am able to be more intimate and explore feelings more deeply.

I finished my first sonata for violin and piano in February 1994. I had already written six sonatinas for solo violin plus a piano sonatina, but those works were on a much smaller scale. I was then thirteen and in some ways perhaps my music was more pure than it is now. I was not able to analyse everything the way I do as an adult and so my music came directly from my heart – sometimes sounding a little awkward, perhaps, but nevertheless open and honest. My First Sonata was inspired very much by the First Sonata by Eduard Tubin,⁴ the structure and musical material of

⁴ Tubin (1905–82) was the most important Estonian symphonist; his First Violin Sonata was written in 1934–36 (and revised in 1968–69).



which are closely echoed in my work. Starting with a *Nocturne* [1], an element of flowing water in the piano and a lonely violin voice on top, I move to a fiery second movement Scherzo [2], exactly like Tubin. Even though the third movement of my First Sonata and Tubin's First Sonata both have a strong ostinato feel to them, and we both use material from the first movement in the middle of the third movement, they are very different in character. Whereas Tubin's third movement is immediately quite aggressive in its ostinato, my ostinato is much calmer which gives the movement [3] a more retrospective feel. Tubin's last movement provides a climactic end to his sonata, whereas my final movement merely peters out, another of the obvious differences in our works.

Even though my Second Violin Sonata starts off with a gentle *Commodo* [4] (like the Second Violin Sonata by Brahms), it very soon turns into an inferno. As I wrote the second movement (*Presto* [5]) and, even more so, the third (*Grave* [6]), I become so absorbed in my writing that for a while I no longer noticed the world around me. The music became all-encompassing until I finally put my pencil down again, happy that I had transferred my thoughts to paper for all to hear.

I wrote the solo-violin sonata in 2002, shortly before I left Estonia to study in London. It consists of four movements. Each one starts with the same signature-phrase, and the last movement ends with it, too. The first movement, 'Introduction and March' [7], was first written as a virtuoso piece for Mikk and was to be played in a recital immediately before Ysaye's sixth solo sonata. The Introduction is cadenza-like and, after trying to find its way through a maze of arpeggios and chords, the piece finally reaches the March. This is where I used some elements from Ysaye's piece so that it could be performed as a complementary prelude to his sonata. After a few performances I had the idea of developing the 'Introduction and March' into a solo sonata. The second movement, a *Fantasia* [8], starts with the phrase familiar from the beginning of the first movement. It soon develops into a world of fantasy that is full of mist and sharp outbursts of anger. The movement ends quietly, as though in a slow ascent to the heavens. The third movement, a *Siciliana* [9], is the most serious of the whole sonata. After the signature phrase comes a passacaglia-like short melody in D minor that is repeated through two variations. The Finale [10], is a stormy passage that climaxes in a shortened version of the initial phrase but with a definite ending on a G-minor chord.

It was not until 2006 that I wrote my Third Sonata for violin and piano. By a happy coincidence,

I was ready and eager to go through the process of sonata-writing again when Mikk and Sten asked me to write them a piece for a concert they were going to give. In comparison to my other two violin and piano sonatas, I decided to start this one with a furious Scherzo [11]. Its angry opening was not meant simply to be shocking: it was also intended as the start of a relentless movement that gives in only at the very end. It is at this point that the music for both violin and piano climbs to high registers in a scale passage and then disappears into oblivion. The second movement, 'Sonata' [12], is a long processional that grows from whining clusters of dissonance to frenetic passages of percussive chords and fast runs over the entire range of both instruments. Nevertheless, there are some moments where the two can take time off from each other in preparation for the next argument. In this movement I feel I was best able to demonstrate why the genre of sonata is so important to me. It is like an exchange of ideas between two personalities in one being: in a schizophrenic way they listen and yet ignore or argue yet support each other, eventually reaching a mutual conclusion of sorts. The last movement, 'Polyphony' [13], is a descriptive title as there are three independent voices that move together to create harmony, but it also makes the point that there does not always have to be a clash of ideas, and that different realities can function together. This movement is meditative in the same way as the last movements of my other two violin and piano sonatas also were. But, unlike those two, this one does not have a conclusive ending: the train of thought gets cut off mid-sentence. Six years (and over twenty compositions) later, I still feel that this piece is one of my best works. I finished it knowing that within those notes I had expressed my true self.

