

Fast Off the Mark: The Parnas Sisters & Franz Schubert

by Philip Ehrensaft

Few listeners would imagine, if they listened to the new *Parnas Double* CD without looking at the cover, that they were listening to two teenagers playing at a level of mastery well beyond their years. Violinist **Madelyn Parnas**, 17, is entering her second year at Albany's College of Saint Rose, combining private mentoring by top virtuosos with Saint Rose's pace-setting Music Industry program. Few conservatories offer much in the way of training students for the tough classical music market that awaits them. Cellist **Cicely Parnas**, 15, will join her sister at Saint Rose, enrolling in a special program that enables exceptional students to merge their final years of high school with their first years at college.

The Parnas sisters choice of Saint Rose's Music Industry program is indicative of how they look forward, and move forward quickly, with both feet on the ground. The program will both give them a knowledge of the music market that they must negotiate, plus training in recording technology that will serve them well when they enter the studio to cut CD's.

In parallel, the Parnas sisters' choice to play an all-Schubert concert at the **Grand Montgomery Chamber Music and Theater Series** in September is a choice of a kindred early-starter spirit.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) started composing at the age of 13, and was one of the fastest composers on record. Between the composition of his first piece, *Fantasia in G for Piano Duet*, and his untimely death, Schubert composed another 997 works. He really hit his stride in 1812 with his first string quartet. During the next sixteen years, he composed nine symphonies and three movements of a tenth that death cut short, a plethora of chamber music in all sub-genres of the art form, choral music, several operas with great music but quite awful librettos, and, of course, over six hundred *Lieder*: poetry set to music that established the art song as a modern musical genre.

In an all too brief span of 16 years, Schubert was composing roughly five lasting works per month. Like Mozart, he produced great pieces at a breathtaking pace. If a poem inspired him, he was capable of creating a score in mere minutes.

On another dimension, Schubert and the Parnas sisters could not be more different. He was an eccentric bohemian who had few pennies in his pocket. The generosity of friends and admirers provided him with the modest means that enabled him to compose quietly every morning then go off to cafés in the afternoon, and God knows what in the evenings (it was syphilis that cut Schubert down). A smallish network of musicians and admirers were aware of Schubert's genius, but it took four decades after his death for the classical music world to take proper note and absorb the insights of his melodic genius.

So, if Schubert were alive today, he would not be wise enough to get himself enrolled in the Music Industry program at St. Rose. Most likely he would be eking out a life in the East Village, working hard and playing hard in relative obscurity, and composing great music that would gain recognition in the mid-twenty-first century.

That mid-twenty-first century will hopefully find the Parnas sisters at the flourishing height of careers earned by innate talent, hard work, and smart planning.

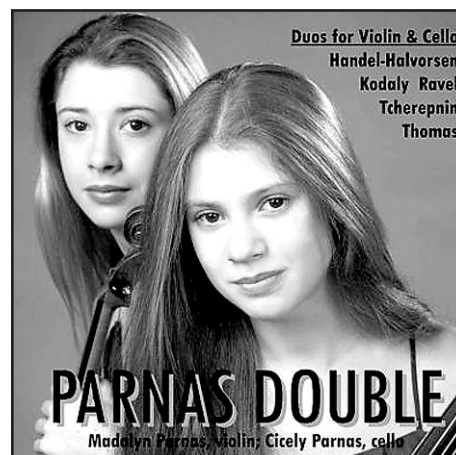
The Parnas Duo is, in reality, a quartet. Exceptionally talented young artists are unlikely to rise to their potential if they don't have parents who are behind them. That is certainly the case in the Parnas family: their mother, **Lea**, is an engineer by training, and the sisters' music manager by trade. To rise to the top, a young musician needs a top instrument, and that costs a bundle. As **Marcel Parnas** explained, a talented youngster needs a top instrument in order to reach his or her potential. Madalyn plays a violin created in 1687 by **Gioffredo Cappa**. Cicely plays a violoncello crafted by **William Forster** in 1790.

And that means a bushel basket of bucks that go into a violin and cello respectively, rather than into paying off the mortgage or building up a retirement fund. In this case, the bushel comes from Marcel's work as a software engineer. And the bushel has to also cover things like expensive lessons from eminent virtuosos, or gallons and gallons of gasoline spent on getting the girls out from their rural location in the Hudson Valley.

We'll hear the fruits of the Parnas sisters' innate talent, plus their very hard work and their parents' determination to have them realize their talents, in three Schubert pieces that will be performed at the Montgomery chamber music series: the *Sonata in A Major* (duo for violin and piano); the *Sonata in A Minor* for Arpeggione (the arpeggione was a bowed guitar that enjoyed popularity in the early nineteenth century: in our time, this sonata couples a cello and piano); and then the magnificent *Trio. No. 1 in B-flat major* for violin, cello and piano.

Listening to these three gems in live performance can be enhanced by listening to some choice recordings in advance. For the flagship *Trio No. 1*, I'm seized by the Naxos Historical label's high tech alchemy in restoring the famous 1926 recording by one of the great trios in the history of the genre: **Pablo Casals** (cello), **Alfred Cortot** (piano), and **Jacques Thibaud** (violin). Plus there's the bargain prices that have made Naxos a rare growth mode in the troubled classical recording sector.

U.S. copyright laws are much more restrictive for historical recordings than is the case of, well, the rest of the world. But one can still find Naxos Historical titles either via the independent sellers associated with Amazon, or via a fine classical music and Jazz record shop in



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Canada, Atelier Grigorian (www.grigorian.com). The Naxos disk (catalog no. 8.110188) also includes trios by Beethoven and Haydn. It's a treasure.

Continuing in the vein of high tech restoration of landmark historical recordings, the *Sonata in A Major* performed in 1928 by **Sergei Rachmaninov** on piano and **Fritz Kreisler** on violin - !!! - is also available from Naxos (catalog no. 8.110968). For the Arpeggione Sonata, we can continue with the Naxos bargain prices, this time in a modern recording by **Maria Kliegel**, cello, and **Kristin Merscher**, piano, (catalog number 8.550654).

Back to Montgomery: the impressively versatile pianist **Lincoln Mayorga** will join the Parnas sisters for the all-Schubert program. Mayorga is adept at popular music and Jazz as well as classical music. He has sixteen recordings under his belt, including two duo recordings with violinist **Arnold Steinhardt** of **Guarneri Quartet** fame. Steinhardt is not about to join forces with another musician unless the latter is an exceptional performer.

Mayorga is also the executive producer for the *Parnas Double* CD on the Sheffield Lab label, and is also the artistic director for TownHall Records, which now distributes Sheffield titles. TownHall, based in Hudson, NY, has a rich, diverse catalog which is well worth investigation. (www.townhallrecords.com, or call 732-726-0819).

The Parnas sisters' choice of repertoire for their premier CD is adventuresome. The disk begins with a violin-cello duos by **Zoltan Kodaly** (1882-1967) and



Madalyn & Cicely Parnas

Alexander Tcherepin (1899-1977) respectively. Both pieces are less known than the standard warhorses, and both deserve a greater presence in concert halls. They are engaging, and a technical challenge, as are the Ravel and Haydn selections. The Parnas sisters play with evident excitement, elegance and technical proficiency. It is exactly the kind of calling card that young artists need to catch the attention of the people running performance venues.

Parnas Double can be purchased on the Parnas Music website: www.parnasmusic.com, from Town Hall, or, best of all, at their concert in Montgomery on Sunday, September 14, which begins at Montgomery's **Senior Center** (36 Bridge Street) at 3:00pm.

Two further CD's are in the Parnas sisters' plans: disk two will focus on the composers of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century: **Martini**, **Honegger**, **Milhaud**, and **Glière**. Disk three will focus on the "five B's": **Bach**, **Beethoven**, **Bartok**, **Barab**, and **Bolcom** - a nicely diverse set of choices from the eighteenth century through our own time.

Imaginative and thoughtful are the first words that come to mind when I looked at the tentative track list for each of the future Parnas sisters CD's. Their trajectory is going to be very, very interesting.



On September 7 at 4:00pm, you can hear the Classic Choral Society led by Janiece Kohler.

They will sing many of the Oscar-winning songs from 1935 on, starting with *Lullaby of Broadway*. The choral will be accompanied by piano, drums and bass.

The concert is free, with donations accepted at the Grand Montgomery Chamber Music & Theatre Series, Senior Center, 36 Bridge Street.