

Ruiz: *Venus & Adonis*

R. 10

Programme notes by Stephen Rodgers
(adapted from the album liner notes)

I remember vividly when I first heard Rodrigo Ruiz's music. I was listening to a randomized playlist of new classical releases on Apple Music and happened upon a movement from a sonata for piano and violin. It began with a plaintive, minor-key introduction, followed by a glowing theme in F major, like the sun peering through clouds after a rainstorm. The piece sounded a little like Felix Mendelssohn to me, but that couldn't be, because Mendelssohn only wrote three violin sonatas, and this wasn't one of them. Maybe it was Dvořák? Or perhaps a hidden gem from the Romantic era that I didn't know?

I was surprised to discover that the music was written in 2019; it was the first movement of Ruiz's Violin Sonata, R. 6, from *Behold the Stars*, his album of chamber music (released by Signum Classics). I devoured his music after that. **I listened to it on loop on long walks**, I taught it in my music theory classes, and I devoted an episode of my Resounding Verse podcast to one of his songs. I even had the chance to meet him on Zoom in 2021, when we had a delightfully free-ranging conversation about his music—and also about poetry, our mutual love of Schubert songs, and our experience at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, where (as fate would have it) we both got undergraduate degrees, he in 2011 and I in 1998.

Rodrigo Ruiz's music, I came to understand, is no mere imitation of Mendelssohn or Dvořák. Yes, it sounds like the music of these composers—and also, by turns, like Beethoven, Bach, Schubert, and Brahms. But he isn't trying to mimic their styles, as a fledgling painter might mimic the work of earlier artists to master a technique. He is just writing what comes naturally to him. **This isn't model composition; it's composition, pure and simple.** Ruiz grew up in Tijuana, Mexico, listening to his father's records of Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms, and he internalized their music to such a degree that once he began improvising at the piano, and writing down those improvisations, he produced music that breathed with the same spirit. He learned their style the way a child learns a native language.

Yet, as with any native speaker, **he also speaks with his own voice**, and that voice is clear in this cycle of seventeen songs based on William Shakespeare's narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, about the unrequited love that a goddess feels for a mortal man. (Ruiz judiciously chose only certain portions of the 1194-line poem, creating a dramatic arc with texts distributed evenly between three characters: Venus, Adonis, and the Poet.) **What strikes me most** about the cycle, and about Ruiz's music in general, **is his ability to move effortlessly between turbulence and tenderness; no matter the emotional extremes, the music flows.** (It's the same trait I sensed in the opening of his violin sonata, where quiet unrest opens up into warmth and light.) **You can hear these deftly managed transitions across songs**, especially when one song proceeds without pause to the next, **which creates a strong narrative through-line.** But distinct and separated songs are joined in subtler ways. Song II ("Frosty in desire")—in which the "glowing fire" of Venus's passion meets Adonis's cold disinterest—ends tenuously, with a quiet F-major chord in the middle register of the piano, and Song III ("This countless debt") starts *Allegro vivace* with sixteenth notes evoking Venus's determination to get her man—frost is followed by fire. But the emotional shift sounds natural because even though "This countless debt" is in a different key (B-flat minor), its first phrase prolongs the dominant chord in that key (F major). This single chord is like a keyhole separating two rooms.

Even more remarkable is how turmoil and sweetness, frustration and hope, anxiety and joy blend seamlessly within individual songs. Song IV (“A spirit all of fire”) begins with Venus’s tender entreaty to Adonis, set as a soaring aria; then adds a note of pity, the music turning more dissonant as she wonders why Adonis thinks love is so “heavy”; then modulates to anger as she tells Adonis he should just woo himself; and finally returns to tenderness as she invites him to “touch but my lips with those fair lips of thine” and her hopefulness pours out in a piano postlude that could come right out of Robert Schumann’s pen. Song xv (“The foul bear’s conquest”), in which Venus searches for Adonis in the woods, expresses her determination, her mounting anxiety, and her shock at encountering wounded hunting dogs and a boar whose mouth is “bepainted all in red.” Even Adonis, arguably more one-dimensional than Venus, gets a full range of musical expression. In Song VIII (“So he will kiss her still”) he seems at first to laugh when Venus faints—the music is marked *Allegro giocoso* (fast and playful), and the piano plays staccato arpeggios. But then, fearing she has died, Adonis grows fretful as the music shifts into a minor key, and finally kisses her gently as the playful opening material returns but then diminishes into a quiet cadence. You can hear Adonis softening to Venus, letting his guard down.

In the foreword to the score Ruiz mentions his fondness for “madrigalisms,” referring to the kind of word painting characteristic of Renaissance madrigals. In word painting, what is “painted” is often something you see or hear—a storm, a bird call, a cry of pain, etc. Ruiz’s piece contains many of these sight-and-sound madrigalisms: the best example is the horn call that appears throughout the cycle, evoking Adonis’s love of hunting; Ruiz also captures the sound of barking hounds in Song xv (“The foul bear’s conquest”) and the sound of a bird singing in Song XIV (“The gentle lark”). **Yet the more I listened, the more I realized that his greatest feat is his ability to “paint” the slightest fluctuations of emotion.** We hear what Venus and Adonis feel from moment to moment; the music tracks their feelings like some kind of emotional barometer. This is an immense challenge for a song composer: how to use music to capture the emotions behind the words without being too obvious or overwrought, without turning characters into caricatures. I have composed enough songs to know how hard it can be to do this, and to know how often I have failed. **Rodrigo Ruiz succeeds every time. In each song, there is at least one passage that induces a sigh of astonishment, a gasp, a chill—a moment that makes me think there can be no better way to set these words and express this emotion.** I started writing exclamation points in the score every time I encountered one of these moments, and soon my score was covered with them.

One of my favorite moments is the beginning of Song IX (“In earth of heaven?”), a song that lies at the expressive heart of the cycle. Venus awakes after fainting, uncertain where she is. **Ruiz evokes a range of feelings—drowsiness, uncertainty, momentary blissfulness—with the simplest of musical means.** The piano introduction, starting tentatively with eighth notes that alternate between the right and left hands and then blossoming into rolling thirty-second notes, sounds almost improvised, and the true key of the song (A-flat major) only becomes clear after the voice enters. This is music coming into being, finding its orientation just as Venus does.

Another favorite moment appears in Song XVII (“Here was thy father’s bed”), the final song. Adonis has died, and a flower grows from the earth beneath him. Venus picks the flower and sings

Lo, in this hollow cradle take thy rest,
my throbbing heart shall rock thee day and night;
there shall not be one minute in an hour
wherein I will not kiss my sweet love’s flower.

Ruiz writes a lullaby, performed with poignant restraint. On the final word of the poem, the vocal melody and the piano lead to a dominant harmony that wants to resolve, but instead of a resolution we hear a measure of

silence... and then a delicate piano postlude that returns to a melodic motive we have heard throughout the song—just three notes, moving up slowly by semitones—and then dissipates. When I listen to this passage, I imagine Venus carried off in the sky by her silver doves, I sense her reluctance to leave her beloved and his place of earthly rest, I hear a love song that stops (because the song cycle must end) but also seems to extend beyond the final bar line, and I think of those in my own life whom I have lost—the silence that follows their departure but also the memories of them that linger. Above all, **I marvel at how Rodrigo Ruiz has managed to take this mythological tale about a goddess and an idealized man and make it deeply human.**