Piano prodigy Ernst Levy, born in Basel in 1895, was only six when his performance of Haydn's Concerto in D caused a sensation. This early debut evolved into an enduring pianistic career that took him to Paris, where he settled in 1921. After political events forced him to emigrate to the United States, he added to his pianistic activities a brilliant career as a college professor of music.

While during the first half of the 20th century Levy was considered one of the major pianists – spoken of in the same breath as Schnabel, Backhaus, Kempff, etc. – as well as a musical theorist and philosopher comparable to Busoni, his output as a composer met with an atonishing lack of response. For lack of a performance, Ernst Levy never even heard some of his works, and hardly any were printed. While this was hard to bear, he went on creating until the end, composing during his final years works of large format such as the lively sonata for viola and piano, written in 1979 at the age of 84. Levy wrote for every genre, yet his major contribution has to be the colossal 15 symphonies, up to one hour long and usually in one movement. Nonetheless, many chamber and piano works, as well as lieder, demonstrate his originality and quality awareness.

Levy himself considered it a "stroke of luck" that his career as college lecturer in the U.S.A. meant that he did not have to conform to market forces, nor accept any creative limits as a composer. He did not see music as a means of communication, but rather as a kind of "communion" through which he could express his philosophical and spiritual convictions. This explains why he expended little effort on getting his works performed or published.This resulted in a perfectly grotesque situation: at the moment just a single work by possibly one of the most original (and surely one of the most important) Swiss composers is officially available in print – his Flute Sonata (Amadeus BP 2803). This makes it all the more gratifying that Amadeus ventures to publish a further work.

It is an interesting fact that several great composers did not turn to the viola until their last years. This obviously includes Dmitri Shostakovich, his last work being the wonderful viola sonata op. 147. Bartók's last, unfinished work is devoted to the viola: his concerto for viola and orchestra. Schumann, Brahms, York Bowen, Aaron Yalom (in his touching work "Die Sonne sinkt" for mezzo soprano, viola and piano), and many others have dedicated late works to the viola. Ernst Levy composed his only viola sonata in 1979 at the age of 84.

Intriguingly, Levy's son, composer Frank Ezra Levy (1930–2017), composed his first viola sonata, "Sonata Ricercare", seven years previously. Could the father have been inspired by his son?

In any case, the tremendous vitality in Ernst Levy's work totally belies his age. Comprising four movements, lasting around 20 minutes, this is a "grand" work, whose musical substance surely makes it one of the 20th century's more important pieces for these two instruments.

The absence of movement headings is typical of Levy: the performers are given only approximate tempo indications. Time signatures are absent; this too is a frequent characteristic of Levy's works.

From the beginning, a lengthy piano solo, we sense the sonata's significance: in the lowest range, like a funeral march, a sublime melody is heard, twice subsiding before the viola answers with an unaccompanied recitative. The movement remains dramatic and serious throughout, until the viola's last four bars offer a luminous conclusion.

The following movement, the longest, is in strong contrast. In virtually 5/8 time, the piano introduces a fanfare-like dancing motif that runs through the movement. The viola answers boisterously with a 9/8 phrase. Constant changes of meter are a feature of the movement. A middle section adds drama, then the music quietens (Levy writes "calmo"). The ending, leading to D major, is a triumphant augmentation of the initial motif.

The third movement returns to the gloomy theme that launched the sonata. The two instruments play canonically in strict three-part harmony, a contrapuntal master stroke. Without pausing for breath, the music heads towards a climax before it returns to the resigned mood of the beginning. As in the first movement, the very last bars suddenly lighten. It is now the piano's turn to close with a Lydian turn of phrase.

The last movement is the shortest, under 3 minutes long. But it confounds all expectations. The music is gloomy, rushed, fevered. Constant changes of rhythm, duplets against triplets and sharp dissonances abound, the tension remaining unabated until the end. The conclusion is a conciliatory, heroic return to the life-affirming major key.

It is to be hoped that such an important and effective sonata will be widely welcomed by viola players.

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This edition was made possible thanks to the support of the Amadeus Foundation, Winterthur/Switzerland.