

My Journey with **Miriam Gideon's**


Sonata

for Viola and Piano

by

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It was the hunt for repertoire by American women composers of the twentieth century that led me to perform, record, research, and write about Miriam Gideon's *Sonata for Viola and Piano*. When I came across a mention of the work online, I didn't know who Miriam Gideon was. Not much information could be readily found about the composer except for a short biography via the online Jewish Women's Archive. After listening to available recordings of Gideon's other works, I requested the manuscript of her viola sonata through interlibrary loan. I asked a collaborative pianist at The Hartt School to read through the work with me, to get a better idea of the music. As I recorded our read-through for later listening, I felt as though I might have bitten off more than I could chew. However, I could tell it was interesting music, and worth further study. I decided to make Gideon's *Sonata for Viola and Piano* part of my doctoral research and made a goal to record the work and release it.

The wonderful pianist and composer Liliya Ugay ended up partnering with me to perform and record Gideon's *Sonata*. We first met as faculty members at the Neighborhood Music School in New Haven and spent about a year rehearsing and performing the work. The capstone of our project was a recording produced at Yale University, *Cracking the Glass: Music for Viola and Piano by 20th Century American Women Composers*, which is available for listening on Spotify.

In terms of my biographical research, Gideon was a puzzle. It was difficult to find detailed information about her life and career. Even less information was available about her *Sonata for Viola and Piano*. In an effort to discover more about her life and work, I made a foray to the "Miriam Gideon Papers" at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. This was a collection of Gideon's scores, sketches, press clippings, and personal documents donated to the NYPL by Alexander Ewen, the grandson of Gideon's husband Frederic Ewen. Getting into these documents was like being submersed in Gideon's life. The collection of materials captured her passion for her work and her generosity towards other musicians. Enthusiastic about what I had found at the NYPL, I decided to make another trip to the ACA archives at Special Collections in Performing Arts (SCPA) at the University of Maryland, and to the nearby Library of Congress music division in Washington, DC. The ACA archives contained a trove of information on Gideon's activities through the American Composers' Alliance as well as many newspaper clippings, concert programs, and so on.

Miriam Gideon: Life and Background

Miriam Gideon was born in Greeley, Colorado in 1906. Her family moved several times before settling in Yonkers, New York. Gideon's first formal opportunity to study music occurred at the conservatory in Yonkers. She took piano lessons there with Hans Barth, the inventor of the quarter tone piano.¹

At age fourteen, Gideon went to live and study in Boston with her musician uncle. Henry Gideon was



Composer Miriam Gideon. Undated.

a pianist, organist, and the music director of Temple Israel. He supervised Gideon's music education until age eighteen, when she attended Boston University. She graduated in 1926 with a degree in French literature, minoring in mathematics and taking all the music courses the university offered. She then moved to New York City with the aim of obtaining a teaching certificate at New York University. Not liking that pathway, she turned toward studies in composition instead.²

Gideon's formal education in composition occurred in private studies with Lazare Saminsky, whom she studied with from 1931-1934, and Roger Sessions, whom she studied with from 1935-1943. She also worked with Marion Bauer, Charles Haubiel, and Jacques Pillios during her time at New York University. Her first public premiere occurred in 1933, but it was not until 1945 that Gideon said

she felt one of her compositions was truly "hers." This occurred with a commission from her then-former teacher Lazare Saminsky for the 100th anniversary of the founding of Temple Emanu-El. Gideon's composition, *The Hound of Heaven*, written in 1945, was scored for voice and a chamber group of oboe and strings. Gideon later described this work as a turning point for her career.³

Gideon began her academic teaching career around the time she wrote the *Sonata for Viola and Piano*. She worked as an adjunct professor starting at Brooklyn College in 1944 and at City College of New York in 1947. She also completed a master's degree in musicology from Columbia University in 1946. In 1949, she married Frederic Ewen, a professor of English at Brooklyn College.⁴

The *Sonata for Viola and Piano* (1948) was written only shortly after *The Hound of Heaven* and was premiered in November, 1948 at Times Hall by violist Abram Loft and pianist Alvin Bauman. This concert included Gideon's *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, *Sound Piece for Viola and Piano* by Frank Wigglesworth (also a premiere), Hindemith's *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, op. 11 no. 4, and the Brahms *Sonata in E flat major*, op. 120 no. 2.⁵ A lukewarm review of the performance stated that "Both Miss Gideon and Mr. Wigglesworth look at music through the window of atonalism, and the view is - as nearly always - one of dreariness. . . Mr. Loft played the new works finely. . . discovering a somber beauty in parts of Miss Gideon's angular and dissonant sonata. His tone is not large, but it has a variety in color that is used with taste and intelligence."⁶ The *Sonata* was played at least a few times in the years after its premiere, including as part of the WNYC broadcast from the American Music Festival at Princeton University and in recital by violist Walter Trampler and pianist Douglas Nordli at the Music School Settlement in New York.⁷

It is important to note that soon after Gideon completed the *Sonata*, her life and career were much affected by investigations and accusations of

¹ *Miriam Gideon Retrospective Concert* (New York: The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, April 5, 1992), box 8, folder 25, Official Records of the American Composers Alliance (ACA), Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries (henceforth cited as *Miriam Gideon Retrospective*).

² Lesley Valdes, "Miriam Gideon among the Most Honored," *Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 1981, 105.

³ Mary Robb, "The Music of Miriam Gideon during the McCarthy Era, Including a Complete Catalogue of Her Works." PhD Diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2012. 126.

⁴ Sigrid Karlstrom, "Three Women Composers and Their Works for Viola and Piano: Marion Bauer, Miriam Gideon, and Vivian Fine and the Trajectory of 'Female Tradition' in American Music." PhD Diss., University of Hartford, 2018.

⁵ P G-H, "Sonata Recital Is Given by Violist and Pianist," in *The Music Reporter* (New York: Music Reporter Inc., November 22, 1948), 100.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Report of Broadcast Performances" (unpublished document, March 30, 1950), box 8, folder 23, Official Records of the American Composers Alliance (ACA), Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

SONATA for VIOLA and PIANO

I

MIRIAM GIDEON

ALLEGRETTO
MARCATO

Miriam Gideon: *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, facsimile score, page 1. Measures 1-8.

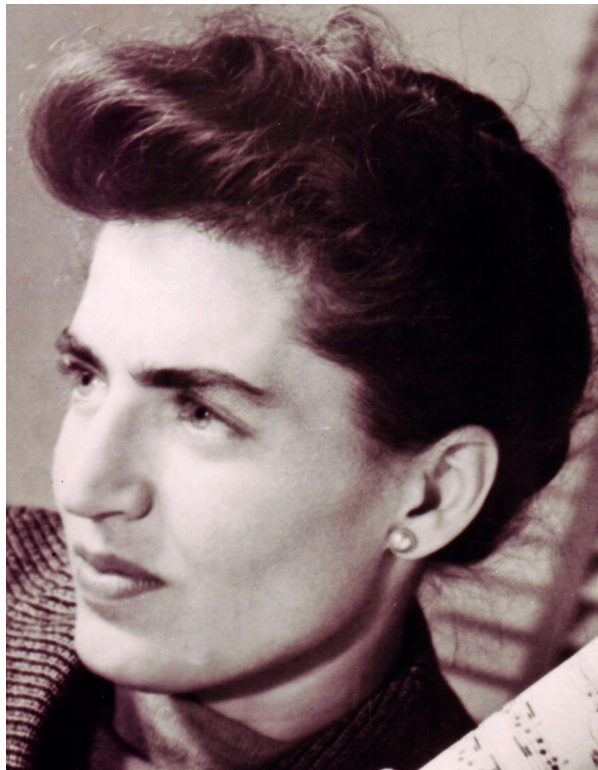
communism related to the McCarthy Era. She was targeted mostly because of her husband, who came under suspicion for communist tendencies. The two had only been married three years when Ewen received a subpoena to appear before a congressional committee. He was subsequently forced to take early retirement from his professorship at Brooklyn College. Gideon was assumed to be guilty by association and was forced to resign from her teaching posts as well. For a time, she earned a living by taking private piano students. After a year without any formal academic appointment, in 1955 Gideon was offered an opportunity to become part of the faculty at the Cantors Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. In 1970, she earned a Doctor of Sacred Music degree from that institution.⁸

Gideon received numerous honors during her career. These included the Ernest Bloch Choral Prize and awards from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) and the National Federation of Music Clubs. In 1975 she became the second woman composer to be inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. An honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters was awarded to her from Brooklyn College in 1983. Her compositional output includes over fifty works. She received commissions from the New York Camerata, Da Capo Chamber Players, the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City, and a composer's grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.⁹

above and right:

Theme 1 from
Sonata for Viola and Piano,
score, movement 1.
Measures 1-29.

⁸ Robb, "The Music of Miriam Gideon during the McCarthy Era."



Composer Miriam Gideon. Undated.

Sonata for Viola and Piano: Analysis and Commentary

I want to share here a broad overview of the *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, including a rough formal analysis and commentary on the work.

The first movement, **Allegretto marcato**, is angular and dissonant and yet also playful. It is in sonata form, with large-scale formal divisions of exposition, development, and recapitulation (see Table 1). These divisions are delineated by short rubato sections featuring the solo violist. The rubato sections provide great challenges for the performer. Large leaps between positions abound, along with dissonances in the viola's highest registers.

In the exposition, theme 1 and theme 2 contrast in a number of ways. Theme 1 changes meter every few measures. It is marked by accents in viola and piano, which serve to emphasize the movement's character marking of *allegretto marcato*. Theme 2 is smooth and connected, with a smaller melodic range in the solo viola part. The meter remains in 2/8 throughout.

The first movement's development section begins with four accented, marcato measures and a solo piano

interlude. After about sixteen measures, rhythmic and melodic elements of theme 1 and theme 2 from the exposition appear in both instruments and continue in their development until the movement's climax occurs. This is just before the recapitulation, with a thicker texture and fortississimo dynamic in both instruments. A final solo rubato phrase occurs in the viola before the theme 1 returns in the recapitulation, now in a piano dynamic. Material is repeated and then varied, the movement ending with the opening viola motive.

The second movement, **Andante teneramente**, is my favorite as a performer. It brings out the best of the viola sound while at the same time being written in beautiful and atonal harmonic language. In terms of thematic material, the movement is through-composed. However, there is a background harmonic structure comprising the formal divisions ABCA (see Table 2).

Structure of Movement I: Allegretto marcato

Large-Scale Structure	Themes	Smaller-Scale Phrase Structure
Exposition	T1	mm. 1-16 (16 m.)
		mm. 17-29 (12 m.)
	T2	mm. 30-55 (15 m.)
		mm. 56-77 (21 m.)
		mm. 78-105 (27 m.)
	Rubato section	mm. 106-116 (10 m.)
Development		mm. 117-142 (25 m.)
		mm. 143-162 (19 m.)
		mm. 163-181 (18 m.)
		mm. 182-223 (41 m.)
	Rubato section	mm. 224-232 (8 m.)
Recapitulation	T1	mm. 233-245 (12 m.)
		mm. 246-259 (13 m.)
	T2	mm. 260-286 (26 m.)
		mm. 289-341 (52 m.)

(Table 1)

Structure of Movement II: Andante teneramente

Thematic Structure (through-composed)	Harmonic Structure	Prominent Set Classes
mm. 1-15 (15 m.)	A	(016), (0147)
mm. 16-34 (18 m.)		(016), (013), (0135), (014)
mm. 35-50 (15 m.)	B	(013), (0135), (0136), (01356)
mm. 51-63 (12 m.)	C	(012), (0123)
mm. 64-73 (9 m.)		(01234), (0147)
mm. 74-93 (19 m.)	A	(014), (024)
mm. 94-104 (10 m.)		(01457), (016)

(Table 2)

⁹ Minuetta Kessler, "Miriam Gideon: Doctor of Sacred Music in Composition," *The Pen Woman*, June 1985, box 17, folder 24, Miriam Gideon Papers, JPB 04-13, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

The second movement begins with piano and viola conversing with each other, establishing a syncopated repeating rhythmic motive of eighth notes and quarter notes. The first two measures are written in 6/8 time. In the third measure, the meter changes to 4/8. The eighth note pulse continues after the meter change, and moving eighth notes are passed between the two instruments until a third phrase begins. Here, the piano begins playing triplet sixteenth notes, creating a feeling of triple meter against the viola in duple meter. The climax of the movement occurs in its sixth phrase, with both instruments building toward a *molto appassionato* section. Rhythmic values diminish, the texture thickens, and higher registers occur in both instruments. A diminuendo from *ff* to *p* occurs over three measures. The viola finishes some eleven measures before the end of the movement, with the piano completing the movement in a similar character as it began.

The third movement, **Allegro furioso**, was the most technically difficult for me as a violist. It is in a modified rondo form, although the large-scale form can be labeled as ternary (ABA'). Four rondo themes recur, interrupted by rubato and meno mosso sections (see Table 3, next page).

The first rondo theme is introduced at the beginning of the movement, with driving sixteenth notes in the viola. Theme B begins at a much softer dynamic and slower rhythmic motion. The motion feels stagnant throughout theme C, until the sixteenth note motor begins again with the return of the original rondo theme. After themes A and B are heard for a second time, the pianist begins a short, solo interlude marked rubato. This is followed by a return to the driving rhythms of the rondo theme. The meno mosso section that follows is significant in length (about thirteen measures) and contrasts greatly with the rest of the movement. Rhythmically, it is a reminder of the second movement. Excitement builds again toward the end of the movement with a virtuosic broken octave passage for the violist and a return to the original motor material.

My Current and Future Projects

It was a dream fulfilled to find Gideon's *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, uncover archival material related to her life and the *Sonata*, and perform and record the work. I've performed the sonata several times in public along with viola music by American women, especially Marion Bauer and Vivian Fine. (This trio of composers is unique because they represent almost a

Structure of Movement III: Allegro furioso

Large-Scale Divisions	Rondo Themes	Measures Numbers
A section	A	mm. 1-10
	B	mm. 10-20
	C	mm. 21-28
	A	mm. 29-37
	B	mm. 38-49
	<i>Rubato</i>	mm. 50-55
	A	mm. 56-75
B section	<i>Meno Mosso</i>	mm. 76-89
	D	mm. 90-111 mm. 112-124
A' section	B	mm. 125-143
	<i>Rubato</i>	mm. 144-151
	D	mm. 152-165
	A	mm. 166-176

(Table 3)

century of efforts and struggles by American women to establish themselves in their field.) I've also given public lectures related to Miriam Gideon's life and work for the University of São Paulo (Brazil), the Norwalk Youth Symphony, and The Hartt School.

My work as a musician has always been a smorgasbord of projects, never solely performance-related but dealing also in music education and research. Researching Miriam Gideon and other American women composers inspired me to search for overlooked women pedagogues, specifically individuals who made outside contributions for their expected societal roles and also those who made a significant impact on music in their community. This led me down a rabbit hole and a resultant article about Maia Bang, Josephine Trott, and Natalia Baklanova was recently accepted for publication in the American String Teachers' Association Journal.

At present, my biggest project is unpacking boxes and organizing music. I recently moved most of the way across the country from Connecticut to New Mexico. A vibrant contemporary music culture is alive and well in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, and I'm looking forward to giving the Land of Enchantment premiere of Gideon's *Sonata for Viola and Piano*.

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Andante teneramente

p (sord)

9

poco cresc.

17 **1** *lontano*

sempre p

25

32 **2** *senza sord.*

p

Miriam Gideon: *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, viola part. Movement I: Andante teneramente (measures 1-42).

Miriam Gideon: *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, viola part. Movement III: Allegro furioso (measures 1-28).

Allegro furioso

f

7 **5**

p

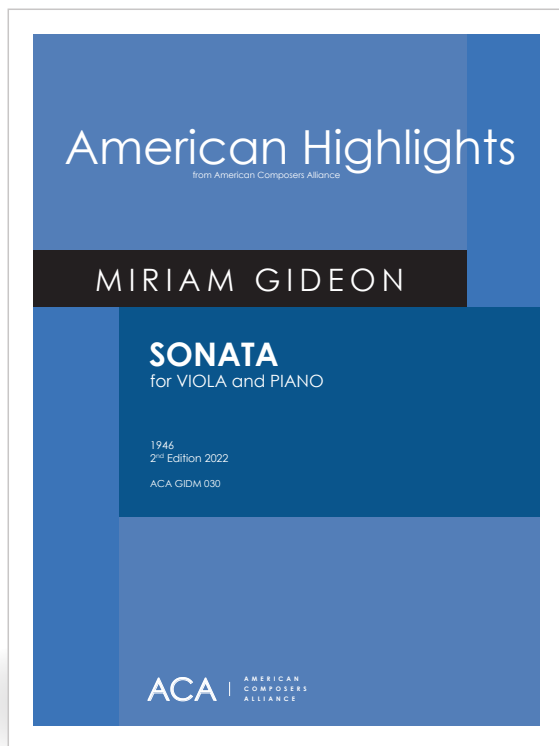
12 **6**

mf

7

piu f

22



MIRIAM GIDEON
SONATA for VIOLA and PIANO

1946 - 2nd Edition 2022
with an introduction by Dr. Sigrid Karlstrom

Miriam Gideon's rich and darkly lush *Sonata for Viola and Piano* is now available in this newly-engraved edition, including a composer biography and introduction to the work from violist Dr. Sigrid Karlstrom. This edition has been designed for scholastic use in its clarity and standardization of layout.

The work will also be featured in the upcoming American Composers Alliance anthology *Twentieth Century Sontas for Viola and Piano*.

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