

The MESA-YAKUSHEV DUO
Thomas Mesa, Cello and Ilya Yakushev, Piano

Repertoire

Duo Sonatas and Variations

Barber - Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 40

Beethoven - Seven Variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen," WoO 46

Beethoven - Sonata for Cello and Piano in A major, Op.69

Brahms - Sonata for Cello and Piano in E minor

Debussy - Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor

Prokofiev - Sonata for Cello and Piano in C major, Op. 119

Rachmaninoff - Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor

Shostakovich - Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 40

Other works

Lera Auerbach - Prelude for Cello and Piano No.12, Adagio (from Op.47)

Claude Bolling - Suite for Cello and Jazz Piano Trio (selections)

Brahms - Sapphische Ode, Die melodien zeit es mir

Debussy - Beau soir, Ariettes oubliées

Massenet - Meditation on Thaïs

Jessie Montgomery - "Divided" for cello and orchestra (cello & piano version; original version commissioned for Thomas Mesa & Sphinx Virtuosi by Sphinx, Carnegie Hall, and New World Symphony)

Joaquin Nin - Vieja Castilla and Murciana, from Suite Española

Saint-Saëns - The Swan

Schumann - Five Folk Songs

Carlos Simon - Lickety Split

Tchaikovsky - Pezzo Capriccioso

Tchaikovsky - Sentimental Waltz, Op.51 No.6

Program notes:

Lera Auerbach:

Lera Auerbach (b.1973) is a polymath in the original sense of the word, as defined and defended by Renaissance writers and thinkers; but she is also very much an artist of her time. Apart from being a successful composer and concert pianist, she's a painter, sculptor, librettist and author of several books of poetry and prose; all art forms are, for her, interconnected and designed to nourish and sustain each other.

Auerbach is the youngest composer on the roster of Hamburg's prestigious international music publishing company Hans Sikorski, home to Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Schnittke. "Her music is lyrical, passionate, and often seems to straddle the past and present," observed the host of a recent Canadian Broadcasting Corporation program devoted to Auerbach's multi-faceted career.

The composer writes: "Re-establishing the value and expressive possibilities of all major and minor tonalities is as valid at the beginning of the 21st century as it was during Bach's time, especially if we consider the aesthetics of Western music in its regard — or disregard — to tonality during the last century. In writing this work I wished to create a continuum that would allow these short pieces to be united as one single composition. The challenge was not only to write a meaningful and complete prelude that may be only a minute long, but also for this short piece to be an organic part of a larger composition with its own form. Looking at something familiar yet from an unexpected perspective is one of the peculiar characteristics of these pieces — they are often not what they appear to be at first glance."

Combining intense lyricism with fierce sonic clashes, the *Preludes* demand extreme virtuosity from the performers and explore both instruments' extreme ranges. The score contains an abundance of unusual sonorities and extended techniques: for the pianist, tone clusters, prolonged pedaling, and complex layering of passages. The cellist is constantly changing from *arco* (bowed) to *pizzicato* (plucked) motives and often playing harmonics: faint, whistling tones produced by a finger only partially depressing the string. There are constant *glissando* passages (sliding through a quick succession of notes) for the cello and frequent directions to play *sul ponticello*, on the bridge, the small piece of wood that separates the bottom of the strings from the resonating body of the instrument. Drawing the bow close to the bridge creates a harsh and unreal sound that dramatically contrasts with the smooth tone we're accustomed to hearing from this instrument. Many of the preludes end quietly, echoing the line from Auerbach's poem, *Fugue*: "that moment of infinite loneliness when sound dies."

Beethoven:

Of Beethoven's three collections of variations for cello and piano, two were written on themes from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute). One of these is the set of variations on the duet "Bei

Männern, welche Liebe fühlen" ("In men, who feel love"), dating from 1801. Here the music is laid out in such a way that the two instruments are in essence equal partners. It is especially delightful to follow the dialogue of the duet, with the piano in the role of Pamina and the cello answering it as Papageno. In the ensuing variations Beethoven once more demonstrates his gift for structural clarity, producing extremely attractive exchanges which combine the instruments in both light-hearted play and dramatic rivalry. A strong contrast is provided by the mysterious minor-key variation, which presents the cello in its low register but conserves transparency of texture thanks to the sensitive piano writing. In the coda to the final variation Beethoven springs the surprise of letting the opening theme blossom anew before the brilliant conclusion on two imperious chords. Here is yet more evidence of the mastery Beethoven deployed in his outstanding contribution to the cello repertoire. Adapted from a note by Daniel Müller-Schott (tr. Charles Johnston)

Beethoven wrote five sonatas for cello and piano. The Op.69 Sonata was completed in 1808, midway through the years of dynamic stylistic development known as Beethoven's "middle period." The autograph score of the A-Major Sonata shows Beethoven still experimenting with various ways of allocating thematic material between the two instruments. His solution to the problem was to exploit the full range of the cello's sonority. The Allegro ma non tanto opens with a richly baritonal cello solo, but quickly climbs high as the music picks up momentum. Similar contrasts of register and tempo are explored in the sparkling A-minor Scherzo, with its halting, syncopated theme bandied back and forth between the players. A meltingly beautiful but oddly truncated Adagio cantabile serves as a preamble to the bravura finale, in which the piano and cello share equally in the sparkling figuration. —Harry Haskell

Claude Bolling:

Claude Bolling is a French jazz pianist, composer, arranger, and occasional actor. He has written music for over one hundred films, and is noted for a series of "crossover" collaborations with classical musicians including cellist Yo-Yo Ma, flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal, violinist Pinchas Zukerman, among others.

Suite for Cello and Jazz Piano was composed for Yo-Yo Ma in 1984. As the name suggests, *Galop* evokes a fast-running horse. The movement starts off in 3/4 time and changes constantly to 2/4 and back. It has a concerto-like cadenza. *Cello Fan* is the most exciting movement of the six. In one section, Bolling writes out the chord progression for the music as in a jazz standard. (This is the only place in the suite where Bolling does this.) During this part, the melody stops, and the piano and cello outline the harmonic progressions—as if Bolling is showing the foundation of the music before adding the fancy, dazzling melody and beat. The entire piece ends in a rather classical way for the cello—an ascending C major arpeggio—while the piano continues with its jazzy harmonies, a fitting end to this crossover piece.

Debussy:

"Beau Soir" ("Beautiful Evening") was written by Debussy when he was 15 or 16 and studying at the Paris Conservatory. It has been successfully arranged for various instruments, including violin and piano by Jascha Heifetz (recorded by Midori), and cello and piano by Julian Lloyd Webber. The song is a setting of a poem by Paul Bourget:

Lorsque au soleil couchant les rivières sont roses
Et qu'un tiède frisson court sur les champs de blé,
Un conseil d'être heureux semble sortir des choses
Et monter vers le coeur troublé.
Un conseil de goûter le charme d'être au monde
Cependant qu'on est jeune et que le soir est beau,
Car nous nous en allons, comme s'en va cette onde:
Elle à la mer, nous au tombeau.

When the setting sun turns the rivers pink,
And a mild breeze makes the wheat fields shiver,
A call to joy seems to come from all things,
And rises toward the troubled heart.
It tells us to taste how sweet is life
While we are young and the evening fine,
For we pass on, as does this wave,
It to the sea, and we to the grave.
(trans. Lisa Sapinkopf)

Jesse Montgomery:

www.jessiemontgomery.com

(program note forthcoming)

Joaquín Nin:

Pianist and composer Joaquín Nin y Castellanos was born in Cuba in 1879 and taken to Spain as a child. After studies in Barcelona, he went to Paris in 1902 to continue piano studies with the Polish-German composer-pianist Moritz Moszkowski. Returning to Havana in 1910 to start a concert society and music periodical, he then left for tours of Europe and South America as a pianist. In 1939, a long period in Europe was interrupted by World War II. Eventually, he returned to Cuba, where he died in 1949.

When he started writing music, he mainly produced short pieces in the typical Spanish style, often making use of folk music from the various regions of the country. In the tradition of Spanish characteristic music of this type, going back to Isaac Albéniz, Nin used folk music from different parts of the country as the basis of this suite and named each movement after its folkloric source.

The first movement, "Vieja Castilla" (Old Castille), has a relaxed feeling that brings back the age of chivalry in Spain or at least as imagined, since the melody originated in the sixteenth century (the time of Cervantes). The second movement, "Murciana," is a dance from Murcia, a southern province whose main seaport is Cartagena. This is a strong, stamping dance and the cello uses strummed strings to imitate the guitar.

Rachmaninoff:

Around the turn of the 20th century, Sergei Rachmaninoff was still going through the serious crisis of confidence which had been triggered by the disastrous 1897 premiere of his Symphony No.1. The composer was unable to write almost anything in the following three years, until he began a course of hypnotherapy which eventually helped him overcome his block.

Among the first major works to emerge after his recovery was the Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor Opus 19, completed in November 1901. Unfortunately for this piece, Rachmaninoff had only just premiered his mighty second Piano Concerto the month before, and that work's huge success eclipsed the less ambitious sonata that followed soon afterwards.

Rachmaninoff dedicated the sonata to the eminent Russian cellist Anatoliy Brandukov, who gave the first performance in Moscow with the composer himself playing the terrifyingly difficult piano part. Brandukov, some 14 years older than the composer, was Rachmaninoff's best man at his wedding and the two of them gave numerous concerts together.

In four movements, and like the Piano Concertos, the sonata is filled with the character so typical of Russia's Romantic era. Few composers before Rachmaninoff could have so deeply explored the cello's capacity for expressive tenderness and intensity. And doubtless Brandukov's playing brought every nuance and feeling out of the page.

When he wrote this marvellous sonata, Rachmaninoff surely could not have known that this would be his last chamber music work. From that time on, however, he would only dedicate his skills to solo piano pieces, and the larger scale orchestral and choral pieces. So this is a piece to be discovered and treasured as representing both a beginning and an end to a phase of Rachmaninoff's career—and a testimony to a musical friendship.

Schumann:

The winter of 1848-49 was a most prolific period for Schumann following some years of poor mental health which made composing extreme difficult. Among the works that poured forth over the next five months were the Fünf Stücke im Volkston (Five Pieces in the Folk Style) for cello and piano. These are small lyrical works in Schumann's most characteristic style. The title tells us at once that Schumann is basing his work on melodies that are created to sound folklike—simple and immediately

accessible. They play to Schumann's greatest strength as a composer, a fresh and unabashed lyricism. At the same time, Schumann's unusual phrase structures and the interaction between the two parts prevents the music from ever becoming predictable. It is fresh and enlivening.

The cellist Steven Isserlis writes, "The first piece is subtitled 'vanitas vanitatum', a favourite saying of Schumann's; it may owe something to a poem of that name by Goethe, which tells the tale of a drunken, one-legged soldier. The second movement, in F major—Schumann's happiest or most consoling key—sounds like a lullaby, rocking gently between three- and four-bar phrases. The heart of the work lies in the central third movement, its sparse, tragic accompaniment recalling a song from *Dichterliebe*: 'Ich hab' im Traum geweinet' ('In a dream I wept'). The fourth piece is joyous, carefree—even triumphant. But we are not given a happy ending: the finale is positively fierce—a portrait of a monster, perhaps? A good German monster, who will drag off to a grisly end any child who misbehaves in any way. Quite right."

Carlos Simon:

bio: <http://coliversimon.com>

The composer writes:

"As young boy, I worked with my grandfather during the summers paving driveways in Rocky Mount, Virginia. He was a task master. Things had to be done the right way and with haste when he asked for it in his own playful way. He would say, 'Pull those weeds up likety split!' or 'Shovel that dirt lickety split!' It was tortuous work during the hot summer days but ultimately proved quite lucrative at the end of the day when my grandfather paid me for the days work.

"This piece, in its whimsical character, draws on inspiration from that colloquial phrase, Likety Split, coined in the 1860s. It meant to do something quickly or in a hurry. I used the rhythmic syllabic stresses of the phrase as a main motif for the piece. (li-ke-ty split) To create a playful mood, I used bouncing pizzicato lines in the cello part over wildly syncopated rhythms played by the piano. Harmonically, the central idea moves in parallel motion in thirds between the voices. As the piece develops to an agitated state, both instruments relentlessly rhythmically drive to a climatic ending - done so in a lickety split fashion . . . "

~Carlos Oliver Simon Jr. (2015)

Elizabeth Start:

Elizabeth Start holds bachelor's degrees in mathematics and cello from Oberlin, master's degrees in cello and theory/composition from Northern Illinois University, and a Ph.D in composition from the University of Chicago. She spent 15 years living and free-lancing as a cellist, composer and teacher in the Chicago area, teaching at institutions including DePaul University and Columbia College. As a performer, she has premiered over 100 works. As a composer, she has received numerous grants and commissions and over 300 performances of over 140 works in the U.S. and abroad. While living in Chicago, she performed on many concerts with Ralph Shapey's Contemporary Chamber

Players, chamber concerts of new music at Orchestra Hall with members of the CSO, for American Women Composers, CUBE, and New Music Chicago.

She is a cellist with the Kalamazoo Symphony and continues her activities with the Elgin Symphony, Chicago Philharmonic, Access Contemporary Music, and Chicago Composers' Consortium. She has recently been commissioned by the Kalamazoo Symphony to create a piece for their 100th anniversary season in 2020-21.

The composer writes: "This piece was the result of the first Elgin (IL) Symphony fund-raising auction, of three thus far, where I offered a 'custom' solo cello piece composed for the highest bidder. It was written for Ramona 'Monie' Burns, who told me she wanted a 'theme song' for her life, and is greatly influenced by what I know of her life and the bi-cultural world in which she lives. It begins and ends with misty, sometimes throbbing harmonics, giving a sense of a formative void, or a fantastic landscape, where wisps of melody can be heard. The initial wisps of melody, which also come back as reminiscences at the end, are inspired by Native American melodies of the Paiute. Their occurrence at beginning and end refer to ancestors, as well as creating a sense of return, a round dance, perhaps even referencing a Ghost Dance.

The melodic fragments grow into longer lines, often accompanied by throbbing beats of left hand pizzicato—a drum or heart beat. The music transitions from one mood to another, until arriving at a more active and complex section, which combines the Native American-influenced melodic elements with a more Western European development and figuration. After this integration establishes itself, the music drifts off again, remembering the opening melodies and evaporating in harmonic glissandi: a reverie of things felt, perhaps, more than remembered. In addition to my presentations of this work, it has a resonance for and has thus enjoyed many performances by cellist David Peshlakai, also of Native American ancestry."

Tchaikovsky:

The "Sentimental Waltz" is the last of Tchaikovsky's *Six Morceaux (Six Pieces)*, Op. 51. It was composed during a very difficult period in the composer's life. From the late 1870s until 1885, the composer felt restless, somewhat disoriented, and unsure of his creative powers. As a result, he led a nomadic existence, constantly traveling, without a home he could call his own. Composed in the summer of 1882 at a cottage where Tchaikovsky was able to work in peace, the Six Pieces are all dedicated to women. The "Valse sentimentale," which is the best known work of the set, is dedicated to Emma Genton, the governess to the children of Nikolai Kondratyev and his wife Mariya, who were family friends of Tchaikovsky.

Walker:

George Theophilus Walker (1922- 2018) was the first African American *composer* to have won the Pulitzer Prize for Music.

“In playing his Cello Sonata, you’re engulfed in a state of beauty and episodic turmoil,” observes Seth Parker Woods. “One of the things I love is that its amazing melodic lines fit perfectly in the hand, as if they were molded all along for a cellist. It’s a brilliant work that I really would love to see more and more younger and older cellists performing. George Walker’s music is of monumental status and importance.”