

Nevada Chamber Music Festival 2024

"Cello Celebration"

Monday, December 30, 2024, 2:00 p.m.

Program notes by Chris Morrison

György Ligeti: Sonata for Solo Cello

(1948-53, 8 minutes)

Ligeti is generally acknowledged as one of the most important composers of the post World War II years. Born in Transylvania, his early works were heavily influenced by the folk music of his birthplace. But he soon made a turn to more modernist techniques, studying and eventually teaching at bastions of the avant-garde like Darmstadt and Cologne's Electronic Music Studio. Made known to the general public through its use in the famous film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ligeti's music involves variations of what he came to call "micropolyphony," in which densely packed chords, lacking conventional melody or rhythm, evolve through gradual changes in texture and atmosphere.

While the Sonata for Solo Cello is an early work and not nearly as radical as his compositions were to become, it was still considered quite modern in the Soviet Union-dominated Hungary in which it was written, where it was broadcast on the radio once but banned from public performance. The slow and lyrical first movement, composed in 1948 (while Ligeti was a student at the Academy of Music in Budapest), creates the illusion of its titled "Dialogo," or dialogue, by having the cellist quickly alternate between different playing styles and between high and low notes. Written five years later, the "Capriccio" second movement is a virtuoso *perpetuum mobile* with a bit more of a modernist edge.

Gabriel Fauré: *Romance*, Op. 69

(1894, 4 minutes)

Gabriel Fauré: *Sicilienne*, Op. 78

(1893/1898, 4 minutes)

Gabriel Fauré: *Papillon*, Op. 77

(1884/1898, 3 minutes)

Gabriel Fauré received early training as both organist and choirmaster. Encouraged by the famous French composer Camille Saint-Saëns, Fauré studied at the Ecole Niedermeyer until 1865. The following year, he took up the first of several posts as church organist. He devoted increasing time to composing, while also teaching and playing organ to support himself and his family. Later he became a professor at the Paris Conservatoire and, in 1905, its director.

These three miniatures for cello and piano all date from the years just before and just after his employment at the Paris Conservatoire. The *Romance* started life as a piece for cello and organ, with the cello-piano arrangement coming out in published form in 1894. The *Sicilienne* was composed in 1893 for a theatrical production of Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. Five years later, Fauré adapted it for cello and piano, dedicating his arrangement to the English cellist W.H. Squire, while also creating an orchestral version for his incidental music for Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande*. *Papillon* (Butterfly) was perhaps composed as early as 1884, although it was not published until 1898. The butterfly seems to flutter about in a fast-paced *perpetuum mobile*, with a contrasting second theme that temporarily calms the mood.

Enrique Granados: *Intermezzo* from *Goyescas*
(1911/1916, 6 minutes)

The Spanish composer and pianist Enrique Granados studied music in both Barcelona and Paris. By the 1890s he had become well-known as a pianist, and performed for a time in a trio with the young Pablo Casals. In 1911, he completed what became his most famous compositions, the piano pieces of *Goyescas*, inspired by scenes of Spanish life by the great eighteenth-century artist Francisco Goya. *Goyescas* proved so successful that Granados used the music as the basis of an opera of the same name, premiered at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1916. The opera is the source of the *Intermezzo*. Best-known in its arrangement for orchestra, versions for solo piano and for cello with piano have also gained some currency. Its tone is largely lyrical, even a bit melancholy, in its outer sections, growing more passionate and dance-like in its central interlude.

Benjamin Britten: Cello Sonata, Op. 65
(1961, 22 minutes)

Thought by many to be the greatest British composer of the twentieth century, Britten wrote for some of the most prominent musicians of his day, among whom was cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. They met at a concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London, and shortly thereafter Rostropovich implored Britten to compose a piece for him. The result was the Cello Sonata, which became the first of five major pieces that Britten wrote for him. Planned during a trip to Greece in the autumn of 1960 and completed over the following Christmas, the Sonata was premiered by Rostropovich and Britten in July of 1961 at the Aldeburgh Festival, which Britten and his partner, tenor Peter Pears, had founded back in 1948.

When Britten initially sent the score to Rostropovich in Moscow, he included a short message: "I hope you can make something of it. I have put some suggestions of bowing, but I haven't had much first-hand experience of the cello and may have made some mistakes. The *pizzicato* movement (second movement) will amuse you; I hope it's possible!"

The Sonata is in five movements, each with a descriptive title. The opening Dialogo is in a brief sonata-allegro form, its halting main theme described by Britten as the “tiny motive of a rising or falling second.” Quickly the music becomes more dramatic, calming only for the second theme, marked tranquillo. This music is developed, leading to a quiet coda culminating in a series of high harmonics for the cello. That Scherzo-Pizzicato second movement that Britten hoped Rostropovich would find amusing is mostly based on the short opening motif, with the cello using frequent slurs in its plucked notes. Opening and closing with a heartfelt song from the cello over piano chords, the solemn Elegia grows more passionate in its central section. The short but powerful, vaguely ironic Marcia soon breaks the Elegia's spell. In the concluding Moto perpetuo, Britten employs the motif that Dmitri Shostakovich created as a personal musical signature, DSCH, as a tribute to a composer whom both Britten and Rostropovich greatly admired.

Luigi Boccherini: Cello Sonata in C major, G 17
(c. 1770?, 13 minutes)

Luigi Boccherini was probably the most important Italian composer of instrumental music of the late eighteenth century. He was born into an artistic family including musicians, poets, and dancers. After several years of touring as a cello virtuoso, in his late twenties he moved to Madrid, where he took a post as music director for Don Luis, younger brother of King Charles III. He remained in Spain for the rest of his life, working for the Benavente-Osuna family in Madrid and serving as court composer for Friedrich Wilhelm, the nephew of Frederick the Great. Boccherini composed hundreds of chamber works, including over ninety string quartets and almost 140 quintets.

Many of his works, composed either for himself or one of his patrons – like Friedrich Wilhelm, an amateur cellist – to play, feature the cello in a prominent role. That includes around a dozen concertos as well as over thirty cello sonatas. The latter are hard to date precisely, aside from a set of six, probably Boccherini's most famous sonatas, published in London in 1771. The Sonata in C major begins with a graceful Allegro in sonata-allegro form, in which the composer takes advantage of the singing higher register of the cello. For the melancholy slow movement, Boccherini moves into the minor mode. This leads directly into the sprightly Rondo allegro finale, in which the main theme calls for the rapid alternating of strings and the contrasting episodes include one brief, further dramatic excursion into the minor.

Gabriel Fauré: *Pavane* in F-sharp minor, Op. 50
(1887, 7 minutes)

Gabriel Fauré only started to make a name for himself as a composer around the age of forty with works like his *Requiem*. In 1897 he started teaching at the Paris Conservatoire – where he worked with many of the great young musicians of his day, including Maurice Ravel – and from 1905 to 1920 served as its Director.

The *pavane* was originally a stately dance common during the Renaissance and thereafter. Fauré remains true to that model in his *Pavane*, which was originally for solo piano but is also often heard in a variety of other arrangements, including cello with piano, orchestra, and orchestra with choir. Cello and piano initially take turns in spinning out the lovely, languorous main theme of the work. A darker central section introduces a note of anguish, but, after another lovely contrasting idea, the main theme returns to conclude this meditative work.

Giacomo Puccini: "O mio babbino caro" from *Gianni Schicchi*
(1918, 3 minutes)

The operatic works of Giacomo Puccini continue to be a mainstay of stages around the world. An exponent of *verismo*, or operatic realism, Puccini produced a string of revolutionary masterpieces like *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *La fanciulla del west*, and *Turandot*. "O mio babbino caro," one of his most famous and beloved arias, comes from *Gianni Schicchi*, the third work in a trilogy of one-act operas, *Il Trittico*, that also includes *Il Tabarro* (The Cloak) and *Suor Angelica* (Sister Angelica).

Gianni Schicchi tells of a family in thirteenth century Florence that wishes to know the contents of a will left by the wealthy Buoso Donati. Rinuccio, a relative of the family, is expecting a bequest that will allow him to marry his beloved Lauretta. But Buoso has actually given his entire fortune to a monastery. Gianni Schicchi, Lauretta's father, impersonates Buoso and rewrites the will so that Rinuccio can receive his fortune and marry Lauretta. In "O mio babbino caro" (Oh my dear Papa), Lauretta sings of her "beloved father" while also insisting that she'll either go to Porta Rossa to buy a wedding ring, or to the Ponte Vecchio "to throw myself in the Arno!"

Domenico Dragonetti: Duet for Cello and Double Bass in B-flat major
(after 1794, 8 minutes)

Domenico Dragonetti was born in Venice, and largely taught himself to play both the double bass and the guitar. By the age of thirteen, he was already serving as principal bass in the orchestra of the Opera Buffa in Venice, and five years later he joined the orchestra of St. Mark's. He quickly became very well-known throughout Europe for his virtuosity, even impressing Beethoven when they played one of his cello sonatas together – and influencing Beethoven's subsequent writing for the bass. In 1794 Dragonetti moved to London, where he performed regularly and met celebrities like Franz Josef Haydn.

He is remembered for being among the first to write for the double bass as a solo instrument, including concertos and a number of pieces for bass and piano. The Duet or Duo for Cello and Double Bass was probably composed after Dragonetti moved to London, where he began a lengthy musical partnership with cellist Robert Lindley. The work opens with a short, solemn, but songful Adagio in which the two instruments largely play in harmony with one another. The

Rondo second movement alternates playful and contrasting interludes, moving into the minor key briefly. That music moves without pause into the short concluding Finale, with sprightly passages for both instruments.

Johann Strauss I: *Jellacic-Marsch*, Op. 244
(1849, 3 minutes)

The father of the better-known Johann Strauss, Jr., Johann Strauss I was himself famous as a composer and orchestra leader. Making his living early on playing viola in a dance orchestra, Strauss Sr. became a friend of Joseph Lanner, joining him in a dance trio that grew into a couple of orchestras. Strauss soon took over leadership of one of those orchestras. In 1825, he formed his own orchestra, conducting and starting to compose his own dances for it. Strauss Sr.'s compositions, which number over 250, include waltzes, polkas, marches, and galops. The *Jellacic-Marsch*, or *Jelačić March*, was possibly Strauss's last work, probably composed for one of the concerts he led in August and September 1849, mere weeks before his death from scarlet fever. The march celebrates Count Josip Jelačić, who with his troops, fought on the side of the Habsburg central power against Hungary, including in the 1848 Vienna Revolution. Jelačić was hailed as a hero, and Strauss employs melodies and dance rhythms, including that of the *kolo* dance, from Jelačić's Croatian homeland in this lively piece.

John Philip Sousa: *The Liberty Bell*
(1893, 3 minutes)

John Philip Sousa, the "March King," started his career as a violinist. In 1868, his father enlisted him in the United States Marine Band. After seven years with them and further training as a conductor, Sousa left the band for a few years, then returned as their director, holding that position for twelve years. Then in 1892, he formed his own Sousa Band, and for the rest of his life, aside from a brief period with the Naval Reserve Band during World War I, he focused on composing and conducting, leading the Sousa Band in some 15,623 concerts. His compositional output included over 130 marches, 15 operettas, and scores of other dances and arrangements.

"The Stars and Stripes Forever," "Semper Fidelis" (the official march of the United States Marine Corps), "The Washington Post," and "Hands Across the Sea" are among the most popular of Sousa's marches. Another is "The Liberty Bell," originally composed for his unfinished operetta *The Devil's Deputy*, which gained additional exposure when it was used as the opening theme of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.