

The University of Chicago Presents | Performance Hall | Logan Center

October 15, 2013, 7:30 PM

Jean-Guihen Queyras, cello

BACH Suite No. 1 in G Major for Unaccompanied Cello, BWV 1007
Praeludium
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Menuet I and II
Gigue

BRITTEN Suite No. 1 in G Major for Cello, Opus 72
Canto primo (sostenuto e largamente)
Fuga: Andante moderato
Lamento: Lento rubato
Canto secondo (sostenuto)
Serenata: Allegretto pizzicato
Marcia: Alla marcia moderato
Canto terzo (sostenuto)
Bordone: Moderato quasi recitativo
Moto perpetuo e canto quarto: Presto

Intermission

KODÁLY Sonata for Solo Cello, Opus 8
Allegro maestoso ma appassionato
Adagio (con gran espressione)
Allegro molto vivace

Suite No. 1 in G Major for Unaccompanied Cello, BWV 1007

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

b. March 21, 1685, Eisenach

d. July 28, 1750, Leipzig

Bach's six suites for unaccompanied cello date from about 1720, when the composer was serving as *Kapellmeister* at the court of Anhalt-Cöthen, about thirty miles north of Leipzig. Bach did not play the cello, and it may well be that he wrote these suites for one of the cellists in the small professional orchestra that Prince Leopold maintained at court and which Bach conducted. Bach may not have played the cello, but his knowledge of that instrument appears to have been profound: the writing for cello in these suites is idiomatic and assured, and he makes full use of

the instrument's lower register. These suites are also extremely difficult and demand a topflight performer: like the sonatas and partitas for solo violin, written at this same period, they represent the summit of the music written for these unaccompanied instruments. Bach's suites for solo cello remained for years the property of a handful of connoisseurs—they were not published until 1828, over a century after they were written.

Bach understood the term “suite” to mean a collection of dance movements in the basic sequence of allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue, which is the same sequence of movements of his instrumental partitas. But Bach added an introductory prelude to all six cello suites, and into each suite he interpolated one extra dance movement just before the final gigue to make a total of six movements. All movements after the opening prelude are in binary form.

Bach's cello suites have presented performers with a host of problems because none of Bach's original manuscripts survives. The only surviving copies were made by Bach's second wife and one of his students, and—lacking even such basic performance markings as bowings and dynamics—these texts present performers with innumerable problems of interpretation. In a postscript to his edition of these suites, Janos Starker playfully notes that one of the pleasures of going to heaven will be that he will finally be able to discuss with Bach himself exactly how the composer wants this music played. In the meantime, individual performers must make their own artistic decisions, and these suites can sound quite different in the hands of different cellists.

The noble *Prelude* of the *Suite No. 1 in G Major* rides along a steady pulse of sixteenth-notes, and it is the responsibility of the performer to breathe musical life—manipulation of tempo, contrasts of dynamics within phrases, the gradual building to a great climax—into these otherwise bare sequences of steady notes. Bach makes full use of the resonant sound of the cello's open G-string that underlies so much of this movement, and—in a nice touch—the movement's concluding line is effectively an inversion of its opening line. The *Allemande* moves along a similar sequence of steady sixteenths, though here the tempo feels slower and more dignified; in this and the other binary movements, the performer has the option to take or ignore the repeat of the second section. The *Courante* (French for “running”) sails along somewhat harder-edged rhythms, while the *Sarabande* dances with a grave dignity; Bach makes effective contrast here between the resonance of great chords and the steady flow of the melodic line. The interpolated movement in the *First Suite* is a pair of minuets. Their sprightly rhythms remind us that the minuet had its origins in a quick dance rather than the stately tempo we have come to associate with the court dance; the second minuet is the only section in the suite not in G major—Bach moves to D minor here, though even this continually edges back toward the home tonality. The concluding *Gigue* is an athletic and quite brief dance in 6/8 that flows smoothly to its brisk close.

Suite No. 1 in G Major for Cello, Opus 72

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

b. November 22, 1913, Lowestoft

d. December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh

Friendships between composers and virtuoso performers have often proven fruitful. Mozart wrote some of his greatest music for the Austrian clarinetist Anton Stadler, and a century later Brahms wrote his finest violin music for Joseph Joachim and a series of very moving late clarinet pieces for Richard Mühlfeld. In the twentieth century, Benjamin Britten had important collaborations with two artists: tenor Peter Pears and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. Dmitri Shostakovich introduced Britten and Rostropovich in September 1960, when the cellist performed Shostakovich's *First Cello Concerto* in London. The close friendship that developed between composer and cellist led Britten to write five works for Rostropovich: a sonata, a cello symphony, and three suites for unaccompanied cello. The *First Suite* was composed in November and December 1964, and Rostropovich gave the premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival on June 27, 1965.

The obvious model for Britten's suite was Bach's set of six suites for solo cello, and in fact Britten was inspired to write this music after hearing Rostropovich play Bach. The baroque suite was usually a collection of dance movements, and to these Bach added a prelude. In his *First Suite*, Britten adapted the general shape of the Bach cello suite, but introduced some variations of his own. The most important of these is the use of a *Canto* movement to frame and separate the six movements of his own suite. The *Canto*, double-stopped throughout, opens the suite, followed by a fugue full of spiky accents. This is in turn followed by a *Lamento*, a grieving, melodic movement played without harmony (that is, with no multiple-stopping). A brief reappearance by the *Canto* leads to the *Serenata*, played entirely pizzicato. The *Marcia* (march) makes stunning use of string effects, alternating harmonics, open-string chords, and col legno passages (bowed with the wood of the bow rather than the hair). The third *Canto* leads to the *Bordone*, a very interesting—and, for the performer, extremely difficult—movement. *Bordone* is Italian for “drone,” and throughout this movement sounds the steady ring of the cello's open D string; against this, Britten sets pizzicatos from the left hand and bowed passages from the right. The final movement is a blistering perpetual motion. Within the rush of sixteenth-notes, the shape of the *Canto* theme begins to re-appear, and the return of this theme drives the suite to its powerful close.

Sonata for Solo Cello, Opus 8

ZOLTÁN KODÁLY

b. December 16, 1882 Kecskemet

d. March 6, 1967, Budapest

In 1909 two young Hungarian musicians—violinist Imre Waldbauer and cellist Jenő Kerpely—organized a string quartet dedicated to advancing the music of their countrymen Kodály and Bartók. In March of the following year, after more than 90 rehearsals, they gave premieres of quartets by both composers and over the next several decades championed their music at a time when it was not popular with audiences. The quartet remained intact until 1946, when both Waldbauer and Kerpely came to the United States. Waldbauer taught at the University of Iowa, and Kerpely was, at the time of his death in 1954, Professor of Cello at the University of Redlands.

It was for Kerpely, a virtuoso cellist, that Kodály wrote his *Sonata for Solo Cello* in 1915, and it

was Kerpely who gave the first performance in Budapest on May 7, 1918. Except for some works by Reger, Kodály's *Sonata* was the first for solo cello since the six great sonatas of Bach, and it has rightfully taken its place as one of the cornerstones of the cello literature and one of the greatest challenges for the virtuoso cellist.

Faced with the restricted resources of a single instrument and the unlimited resources of a virtuoso performer, Kodály produced a sonata that is both very beautiful and spectacularly difficult to play. In one of his most novel touches, he asks the cellist to tune the two lower strings—G and C—down a half-step to F-sharp and B; this extends the range of the cello and makes new chords possible. Kodály also stretches the resources of the cello to their limit—the sonata extends through a range of five octaves and makes use of virtually every known string technique: multiple-stopped chords, pizzicato, ponticello, complex harmonics.

Like Bartók, Kodály was interested in folk music, particularly of his native Hungary. While the *Sonata for Solo Cello* makes no direct quotations of Hungarian folk tunes, the entire sonata seems steeped in Hungarian folk music. The *Allegro maestoso ma appassionato* opens with two sharp chords before sailing into the main theme. This soaring, rhapsodic movement glides easily throughout the cello's entire range, alternating declamatory sections with quieter passages before it concludes with the same two chords that opened the movement.

The *Adagio*, which Kodály specifies should be played *con grand espressione*, sounds the most folk-inspired. At one point the music grows so complex that Kodály writes it on two staves: the treble line for the bowed passages, the bass clef for the complex pizzicato accompaniment. An animated middle section, marked *Con moto*, leads to the return of the opening material and a close on three quiet pizzicato strokes.

The finale, *Allegro molto vivace*, is the most virtuosic of the three. From the steady dance rhythms of the beginning to the blazing finish, it swirls brilliantly forward. In this dash of color and rhythm, it is easy to forget how difficult such music is to perform, particularly the passages that require simultaneous bowing and pizzicato, the complex chording, and the swirling arpeggios that drive the *Sonata* to its exciting close.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger