

PROGRAM NOTES

Le 9 mai 2023 à 20 h / May 9, 2023 at 8 pm

Matthew Chan, alto / viola

Classes d' / of André Roy, Frédéric Lambert

These program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their course. Ces notes de programme sont écrites par l'étudiant-interprète et sont présentées en tant que réalisation partielle des critères de leur cours.

Dialogue is defined as “an exchange of ideas and opinions.”¹ The repertoire on this recital explores musical conversations between performers and within one instrument. Devices composers use to evoke dialogue in music include fugues, canonic imitation and overlapping of ideas, and call-and-response, to name a few. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), and Gregor Piatigorsky (1903-1976) lends itself well to the active exchange and synergy of ideas to create an engaging listening experience.

Often performed by both violists and cellists, **J. S. Bach's Sonata No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1027** was originally written for the viola da gamba and harpsichord. Unsure of its exact compositional dates, Wolff and Emery believe that it was written before 1741. The mid- to late-1720s marked a change in role for the harpsichord, from a member of the continuo to a “true partner in the sonatas” as seen in the sonatas with harpsichord and violin (BWV 1014-19), viola da gamba (BWV 1027-29), and flute (BWV 1030-33).² Bach also arranged this viola da gamba sonata (BWV 1027) for two flutes and continuo (BWV 1039), as he further developed his compositional style which did away with the traditional trio sonata style.³ In this sonata, the viola and both hands of the keyboard part join forces to create an intricate three-voice contrapuntal texture. Each voice takes turn imitating each other – engaging in an active dialogue – whether it is the entirety of the musical idea or a small fragment.

The sonata opens with peaceful first movement (Adagio) with the main thematic idea based on five descending notes, which fill out the notes of a triad. Though peaceful, this movement also explores larger peaks and valleys in its lines, allowing for wider gamut of colours and expression. Intertwining and overlapping gestures (displaced by one eighth note) create a series of peaks and valleys. As the movement winds down, the main theme is one last time in its G major appearance, before Bach turns the “lights out” morphing the theme into minor mode.⁴ Ending on a half cadence in G minor, this movement can be interpreted as a prelude to the quick second movement.

¹ Merriam-Webster, Online, s.v. “dialogue.”

² Christoph Wolff and Walter Emery, “Bach, Johann Sebastian,” in *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed April 5, 2023. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-6002278195>.

³ Wolff and Emery.

⁴ James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 142.

The second movement (*Allegro ma non troppo*) is joyous and light-hearted quasi-rondo form with the modulatory episodes as the contrasting sections. The highly contrapuntal main sections are comprised of the main theme (first announced by the keyboard), and other important accompanying motives become clearer as they are passed through the different voices. The episodes feature longer lines for both performers in a call-and-response style.

The third movement (*Andante*) is a short interlude that focuses on the exploration of different harmonies, with intertwining lines and parallel voices. Slow and solemn, unrelenting sixteenth notes are heard throughout the movement. The keyboardist's right hand and the viola part each have a turn at being the leader; meanwhile, the left hand of the keyboard part lays out a stable bass line. This movement begins with the thematic material in the treble voice of the keyboard, with the viola displaced by two beats; once we reach D major, the viola takes charge. Continually searching, this interlude eventually finds its way to a cliff-hanging half cadence in E minor. This *Andante* is another case of an entire movement acting as a prelude to another movement; the resolution is given to listeners as the last movement begins.

The jaunty fourth and final movement (*Allegro moderato*) features running scale passages and broken chords. The main theme (first heard in the keyboard) is heard in both major and minor mode iterations, all with a different combination of materials accompanying it. The flow of eighth notes keep momentum throughout the movement and add a virtuosic flare. The constant dialogue of musical material being exchanged between voices create an exciting game of tag for the performers. Building towards the end, the viola plays a series of eighth notes in sequences while the keyboard states the theme one last time before the final cadence in our friendly, home key of G major.

There lie many mysteries with **Ralph Vaughan Williams's Romance for Viola and Piano**. There have been letters exchanged between Vaughan Williams and legendary English violist Lionel Tertis which showed a great friendship.⁵ This melancholic yet passionate piece highlights the singing quality of the viola and explores its range fully. The following words from English violist Bernard Shore, who studied with Tertis, can be found on the 1962 Oxford University Press edition of this piece:

“There is no information about the approximate date on which this work was written. The manuscript was discovered with others, without any clue, among the composer's papers after his death. All that can be said is that it was probably intended for the great virtuoso Lionel Tertis, for whom Vaughan Williams had composed his two major works for the viola - *Flos Campi* in 1925 and the Suite in 1934.”⁶

This piece is in ternary form (ABA). The A section is centred around an undulating figure in the piano, reminiscent of a distant memory, creates a foggy atmosphere and is maintained throughout this section. The viola enters unassumingly in the middle of a measure and imitates the opening figure of the piano, until the fog clears and the viola breaks free of the rocking accompaniment pattern. Returning to the dreamlike texture and unsure of where the A section

⁵ John White, *Lionel Tertis: The First Great Virtuoso of the Viola* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 158-159.

⁶ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Romance for Piano and Viola* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 2.

leads, the B section snaps into a depiction of the distant memory, as if one was reliving it again. The viola presenting a recitative-like melody decorated with rolled chords, over tremolos in the piano. This section involves a dialogue between the voices (viola and piano) where thematic material is passed back in forth and surrounded by virtuosic flourishes. Recalling the grand gesture which announced the opening of the B section, it returns much broader as the music finds itself back remembering to the distant memory.

Ukrainian-American cellist and composer **Gregor Piatigorsky** is regarded as “a leading cellist of his generation, combining an innate flair for virtuosity with an exquisite taste in style and phrasing.”⁷ His arrangement of the **Divertimento (1944)** is his romantic showpiece reinterpretation of a set of **F. J. Haydn**’s baryton trios.⁸ Originally arranged for cello and piano, this suite in its transcription for viola shows off the rich and lush timbre as well as the agility of the performer. An absolute joy to play, this work demands poise and elegance, all while exploring playfulness with a twinkle in your eyes.

This suite begins with a pensive first movement (Adagio) which showcases the lush and velvety sound of the viola. In a simple ternary form, the A sections contains lyrical themes with the viola, and B section highlights the piano part. The second movement (Minuet) is an elegant yet humorous minuet and trio that evokes an evening dancing at the ball. The *subito* dynamic changes tease the listener and poke fun at the poised nature of a minuet. The contrasting trio is more lyrical. This minuet and trio contains a perfect balance of lilt and sweep. The third movement (Allegro di molto) is a flashy finale with moments of joy and mischievousness. The sparking sixteenth notes passages are contrasted by bouncy eighth note gestures. The piano part in this showpiece suite adds to the viola part: sometimes it acts as a new voice offering new ideas, sometimes interjecting and responding to an idea, or sometimes commenting on what has been said.

The repertoire explores each composer’s take on musical dialogue. Bringing together this programme of works in a variety of styles, the active back-and-forth of ideas between performers makes music-making inspiring and exciting.

⁷ Boris Schwarz, "Piatigorsky, Gregor," in *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed April 7, 2023. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000021650>.

⁸ Laurence Vittes, “Tribute to a Legend,” *Strings* 30, no. 9 (2012), 38. <https://proxy.library.mcgill.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/tribute-legend/docview/1774332683/se-2>.

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