Program Notes

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Classe de/Class of: *Elizabeth Dolin*

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3 pièces pour violoncelle et piano/3 Pieces for Cello and Piano — Nadia Boulanger

Often remembered for her contributions in shaping a generation of 20th century composers, Nadia Boulanger's own compositional voice is preserved in relatively few existing works, with her *3 Pieces* being among them. Though she often prized her sister, Lily Boulanger, as the compositional genius of their family, the pieces represent a post-impressionistic style and harmonic language all Nadia Boulanger's own. They were originally written for organ in 1911, and published in 1914 in their current instrumentation, though the composer later withdrew the second piece. The first piece opens with a dreamy, oscillating figure in the piano and equally dreamy melody from the muted cello. Continuing this way with growing intensity towards a passionate middle section in the cello's higher range, the original melody and mood is restated as the piece reaches a peaceful resolution. The second piece, despite the composer's hesitancy over its inclusion, is a beautiful, yet succinct song that compliments the other pieces well. The use of the Aeolian mode easily accomplishes its folk-song aesthetic, and this short song provides a brighter beauty than the first piece's dreamy lament. The third and final piece provides welcome contrast, with its lively and energetic mood, as well as its more balanced roles between cello and piano. Opening with a fiery run from the piano, and equally fiery pizzicato strums from the cello, the instruments trade off fast passage work and short, energetic bursts of accompaniment. After a brief section in uneven 5/4, the fast-paced energy is broken up by a '*trés lent'* passage, which transforms the fast passagework into something more sensual and calm. This calm is short lived, however, as the cello leads us once again back to the exciting passagework from before and continues at full-speed until the piece's ending flourish. Boulanger officially quit composing in 1920 in favor of teaching, performing and conducting, but regardless of her faith in her own music, these three pieces represent her compositional voice well and have made a place for themselves in the repertory.

Nocturne — Jennifer Higdon

Nocturne finds its origins in Jennifer Higdon's *String Poetic,* written for violinist Jennifer Koh and debuted on the recording of the same name by Koh. In the composer's program notes for *String Poetic,* the composer only writes of this movement: "Nocturne…that piece of night-night of peace." Rewritten and reworked for cello, the *Nocturne* for cello and piano benefits from a larger range, with more octave jumps and, of course, a darker lower range that provides new colors to the lullaby-like nocturne. *Nocturne* unfolds slowly at the start, as the piano offers pensive chords broken over slow quarter notes and the cello joins with a solitary note. Higdon utilizes rhythmic variation and syncopation as the primary agents of momentum, but harmony

and range are also important instruments of energy and motion throughout the piece's development. Tri-tones, especially, provide a harmonic theme in this nocturne and their prevalence in the melody allows them to contribute both a dark tension and beauty to the piece, harkening to Higdon's description of "night and peace" for her *Nocturne*. Despite its static start and gradual incorporations of momentum, the climax of the piece sends the cellist soaring through energetic, nearly virtuosic passagework and utilizing the full range of the instrument. Following its most energetic moments, the piece retreats far less gradually back to the calmer mood of the beginning and eventually fades to the same nothingness from which it came.

Nocturne represents one of the smaller works in Higdon's repertory, but as many of her works are informed by nature and poetry, I find this piece to be a good representation of her compositional voice. Higdon's music, though firmly contemporary and innovative in nature, shows that contemporary does not have to be abrasive, and *Nocturne* exemplifies her musical language as forward-thinking and innovative yet still wondrously lyrical and beautiful.

undanceable — David Lang

David Lang's goals for *undanceable* were likely more philosophical than specifically musical, as his own program notes for the piece include the following statement:

> "A strange paradox about dance music in a concert hall is that it has to be rhythmic enough to make you feel like dancing, but not so catchy you become frustrated that you can't jump up out of your seat and dance down the aisles. My solution to this paradox was to write a kind of tango whose rhythms I then intentionally hobbled. This, I thought, would keep us in our seats. Its original impulse comes from dance music, but it isn't dance music anymore."

This quote captures the heart of *undanceable's* intrigue. Lang accentuates all of the elements of dance music that might inspire a listener to movement: a steady, consistent pulse (however uneven), the groovy bassline kept by the piano, the percussive elements of both instruments working together (the cellist utilizes pizzicato throughout) and clear rhythmic interaction between cello and piano. Despite this, downbeats and a sense of danceable pulse are always evaded, and so the music has achieved its un-danceable quality.

What drew me to *undanceable*, at first, was the composer's philosophizing on the nature of dance music not intended or performed for dance purposes. Something the composer did not explicitly relay in his program notes for the work, but which piqued my interest in performing this piece was the nature of dance music as communication between two people. Though Lang's music attempts to evade elements of dance music that allow for an easy relationship between physical movement and music, he has not been able to disrupt the communicative 'dance' that happens between the performing pianist and cellist. The instruments' parts interlock perfectly, regardless of unevenness and mixed meter. Therefore, the dance is preserved, in part, by the performers alone and the intimacy of their communication is strengthened by Lang's removal of the possibility of this third "dancer" role, which was an experience I was interested in recreating myself.

Sonate pour violoncelle nº 5 en ré majeur, opus 102, nº 2/Cello Sonata No. 5 in D Major, Op.102 No. 2 — Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven's Opus 102, which includes both the fourth and fifth cello sonata, is seen by many scholars as a turning point in the composer's career. In his private life, the composer had been plagued by illness and ever-progressing deafness, the death or financial decimation of several friends and patrons, and a lengthy legal battle for guardianship of his nephew, who would attempt to take his own life soon after it was finally granted. During this compositional period, however, Beethoven showed a relentlessness in the increasingly progressive masterpieces he produced and an unrivaled transformation of musical thought. The late string quartets, which would be written shortly after the fourth and fifth cello sonata, solidified Beethoven's musical language with unique counterpoint approaches, improvisatory elements and increasingly complicated harmonies. The first movement of the *Cello Sonata No. 5* opens with a somewhat typical and concise gesture from the piano, but one which Beethoven might view as a blank canvas to transform and manipulate throughout the piece. This gesture provides the transitional material to the sweeter, more lyrical second subject and is used throughout the development as well. Throughout this energetic movement's evading harmonies and highly modified development, Beethoven prioritizes rapid changes of character and an impressive balance between grandeur, lyricism and spirit. The second movement contrasts the first's energy and excitement; the opening minor chorale unfolds, a stark melody that favors gorgeous harmony over a lyrical melody to supply its emotional impact. This starkness moves into a more lyrical major middle section in which the two instruments trade off ornamentation of their melodies, but it returns to its solemn starting place in the recapitulation. The coda solidifies the unearthly beauty and musical spirituality that Beethoven mastered in his later period, as it resists development or dynamic change in lieu of unfurling its ethereal sonic landscape even further. The final movement, which emerges hesitantly from the second, presents a fugue whose counterpoint is not only uniquely progressive in its harmony, but also expressive. One can see the similarities between this fugue and that of the *Hammerklavier* sonata and the *Grosse Fuge* which would follow. As well, this fugue represents Beethoven's bold exploration of new developments of the keyboard instruments itself, which can be observed in the piano's uncharacteristic extremes in range throughout this movement. Unexpectedly, Beethoven incorporates elements of the first movement in the final function, perhaps belying not only the genius of its composer but his interest in reminiscence and self-expression through his musical language.