George Work
cello

with

Mei-Hsuan Huang
piano

Sunday, March 3, 2024
7:30 pm
Martha-Ellen Tye Recital Hall
Program

Suite #2 in D Minor, BWV 1008
  Prelude
  Allemande
  Courante
  Sarabande
  Minuet 1 & 2
  Gigue

Sonata for Solo Cello
  I. Fantasia
  II. Tema pastorale con variazioni
  III. Toccata

Intermission

Sonata in A minor, Op. 36
  Allegro agitato
  Andante molto tranquillo
  Allegro

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)
George Crumb (1929-2022)
Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)
Unlike the Bach solo violin Sonatas and Partitas, the six Suites for solo cello all have nearly identical forms. Each Suite opens with a Prelude, some of which are free and fantasia-like, while others (including the most famous, the G major) are motoric. In each Suite, the prelude is followed by five dance movements: an Allemande, a Courante, a Sarabande, a set of Minuets, Bourrees, or Gavottes, and finally a Gigue. The distinctive characteristics of each dance impart a certain external similarity to the corresponding movements of each Suite. The Allemandes, for example, all exhibit a dignified, stately character, with “false” cadences at the end of each half; the Courantes are all fast and furious; the Sarabandes are all slow triple meter pieces, generally with stressed first and second beats in each bar; and the Gigues are all energetic dances in compound meter.

Despite these similarities, however, the Suite #2 is set apart in several ways. It is perhaps the most introspective of the six, serious without being somber, and almost mystical in places, notably the Prelude and the Sarabande. The Prelude shares the Sarabande’s stressed first and second beat pattern, establishing a certain kinship between them. Elsewhere, the Suite displays great rhythmic drive, particularly in the Minuets and the Gigue. The tension between these disparate elements gives rise to an overall drama which makes this Suite especially satisfying.

George Crumb’s Sonata for Solo Cello is his first published piece, having been written while he was studying in Berlin. It is dedicated to his mother Vivian and was first performed in 1957 by Camilla Doppmann.

Cast in three movements, the Sonata opens with an improvisatory-feeling Fantasia, in which strummed chords alternate with a theme based on a falling minor third. This is followed by a whimsical theme and variations, in which a gentle Siciliano rhythm vanishes amid asymmetric mixed-meter writing only to reappear as the movement ends. The Sonata closes with a driving and virtuosic Toccata, in which the opening falling minor third reappears, sometimes incorporated into arpeggiated triads strung together to create a “moto perpetuo” feel.

Grieg’s only cello sonata was composed at a difficult time in his life. Marital problems and poor health combined with a compositional impasse (he had recently abandoned an attempt to write a second piano concerto) to give rise to a general malaise. “I am both spiritually and bodily unwell,” Grieg wrote at the time, “and decide every other day not to compose another note, because I satisfy myself less and less.”

Whether because of these circumstances or not, the Sonata is notably self-reminiscent. The outer movements strongly recall the harmonic and melodic language of the Piano Concerto, while the second movement theme is extremely like the Triumphal March from Grieg’s incidental music to Sigurd Jorsalfar (where it is played by four cellos.) But the fact that it isn’t especially groundbreaking does nothing to detract from the soaring lyricism and dramatic effectiveness of the piece, which have made it a perennial favorite with audiences. As one critic wrote, “...the truly organic development of the beautiful subject-matter, which rises at times to a lofty height, would do credit even to Brahms.”
Upcoming Events

Kim Garcia Senior Recital
Saturday, March 23, 2024 at 1:30 pm
Martha-Ellen Tye Recital Hall

Oboe Studio Recital
Sunday, March 24, 2024 at 1:30 pm
Martha-Ellen Tye Recital Hall

Lyrica and Cantamus
Sunday, March 24, 2024 at 7:30 pm
Martha-Ellen Tye Recital Hall

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