



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Alexi Kenney, violin & Renana Gutman, piano

April 27, 2021 – 7:30 p.m.

Saint Paschal Baylon

Sonata No. 3 in E major for Violin and Keyboard, BWV 1016

Johann Sebastian Bach

Born: Eisenach, 1685

Died: Leipzig, 1750

Composed: Before 1725

Bach's six sonatas for violin and *obbligato* harpsichord (BWV 1014-1019) are the earliest duo sonatas in the true sense of the word, where both instruments are fully equal in importance. Paradoxically, the contemporaries often thought of these works as "trio sonatas" because the the violin and the two hands of the keyboard produce a three-part texture.

We don't know exactly when the six sonatas were composed; the earliest extant manuscript source dates from around 1725, two years after Bach moved to Leipzig. It is likely, however, that the sonatas go back to the Köthen period (1717-1723). The first five sonatas follow the Baroque church sonata model (four movements: slow-fast-slow-fast); the sixth one is a more complicated case, combining elements of the sonata and the suite.

Tonight's recital opens with the third sonata from the set. The ornate melody of the opening Adagio unfolds over a single bass note that remains unchanged for a long time; even later, the bass changes at extremely wide intervals, creating an impression of extreme spaciousness. The second movement is an extended three-part invention in which the opening theme is contrapuntally imitated, combined with a lively countersubject in fast eighth-notes and taken through a succession of different keys. In the third movement is a passacaglia; that is, it is based upon a four-bar bass line that is repeated over and over again in the bass. Unlike some other passacaglias, this one keeps changing keys, disguising the uniformity of the bass line. Against the recurrent bass, an expressive melodic line unfolds, alternating between the violin and

the right hand of the keyboard. The ending of the Adagio is left open harmonically, leading directly into the final movement, another fast-moving three-way conversation with some fascinating rhythmic interchanges.

Although not as well known today as Bach's unaccompanied violin works, the six *obbligato* sonatas are special gems in their

own right. Writing in 1774, Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, one of the greatest composers of his generation, counted them "among the best works of my dear departed father. They still sound excellent and give me much joy, although they date back more than fifty years. They contain some *Adagii* that could not be written in a more singable manner today."

L'Eraclito amoroso from Cantate, ariette e duetti, Op. 2, No. 14

Barbara Strozzi

Born: Venice, 1619

Died: Padova, 1677

Composed: 1651

Arr. By Alexi Kenney (*b. Palo Alto, CA, 1994*)

One of a mere handful of women who achieved fame as composers in the Baroque era, Barbara Strozzi was a virtuoso singer who published eight volumes of vocal music between 1644 and 1664. She worked largely in the tradition of Claudio Monteverdi, who had collaborated with her father, the poet Giulio Strozzi. Yet her individual contributions to the evolution of Baroque style are not negligible: her meticulous text-setting and innovative harmonic writing distinguish her from other Italian composers of her generation.

It is not known why Strozzi called

the unhappy lover in the present soliloquy Eraclito, after the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus—making the abandoned lover a male, even though the piece was clearly intended for Strozzi herself to perform. In keeping with Baroque practice (exemplified by Monteverdi's *Lamento della ninfa*), Eraclito's lament takes the form of a set of variations on a ground bass consisting of four descending notes. Over this simple harmonic foundation, Strozzi wrote a rather varied upper part, which is just as expressive in a purely instrumental rendition.

Thème et variations

Olivier Messiaen

Born: Avignon, France, 1908

Died: Paris, 1992

Composed: 1932

This brief work was Messiaen's wedding present to his first wife, the violinist and composer Claire Delbos. Is it possible to discern how one of the most original

compositional voices of the 20th century is emerging in this youthful essay? With hindsight, one may well see how the work's pungent harmonies eventually evolved into

Messiaen's modal system as set forth in his book *Technique of my musical language* (1944). The undulating theme hovers between keys without settling on any one in particular, and follows a pattern of 7+7 bars instead of the classic 8+8.

All these characteristics point to the future, but the work itself is fairly conventional. The expressive melody receives five variations. The tempo becomes faster and faster through the first

four: in No. 3, the character of the theme changes from an even motion to a more contrasted treatment. This dramatic variation is followed by one marked with the word “passionately”; it prepares the culminating moment, the slow final variation in which the melody assumes its original form, played by the violin in its extreme high register against the majestic even chords of the piano, then gradually descending and fading away into silence.

Hommage à JS Bach from *Signs, Games and Messages* György Kurtág

Born: Lugoj, Romania, 1926

Composed: Before 1981

Hungarian composer György Kurtág's music is characterized by a combination of extreme concision and extreme expressivity. One source of this rigorous lyricism or lyrical rigor may be found in Kurtág's lifelong study of early music, from Gregorian chant to J.S. Bach. Anyone who has ever heard him and his wife Márta play his piano-duet arrangements of Bach, will surely never forget the experience. Rarely is one privileged to hear music of such emotional depth and intimacy.

Kurtág has written hundreds of short works, collected in his large piano cycle *Játékok* (“Plays and Games”) and in

numerous volumes for other instruments entitled *Signs, Games and Messages*. A very large number of these pieces are homages to composers, performers and personal friends of the composer's. The Bach tribute obviously occupies a very special place among these. One of the earliest such works, it stands at the beginning of the violin volume of *Signs, Games and Messages*. It is a single uninterrupted melody, where, in spite of the wide leaps, the notes always remain very strongly connected. From beginning to end, Kurtág makes the violin sing.

Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus (“Praise to the Immortality of Jesus”) from *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (“Quartet for the End of Time”) Olivier Messiaen

Born: Avignon, France, 1908

Died: Paris, 1992

Composed: 1941

One of Messiaen's most famous works, the *Quartet for the End of Time*, was written in a prison camp in Silesia, where the composer

found himself in the company of three excellent musician colleagues, all captured by the Germans in World War II. The

circumstances at the camp were extremely harsh: there was a chronic shortage of food and practically no heat in the dead of winter. Yet cultural opportunities did exist. The camp had a library, an orchestra, and the prisoners even published their own newspaper.

Messiaen, in his early thirties and already well established as a composer, was allowed and even encouraged to write music. His 50-minute, eight-movement Quartet (for violin, cello, clarinet and piano) was performed at the camp on January 15, 1941 and the audience of prisoners, many of whom had no previous knowledge of music—let alone new music—listened with rapt attention and, according to later recollections, cherished the memory for the rest of their lives.

The “end of time” in the title refers both to the Apocalypse and to the end of measured time as known in Western classical music. Messiaen, a profoundly devout Catholic, was almost always inspired by Scripture and other religious writings, in this case, the Book of Revelation. At the same time, he introduced several important innovations in compositional technique. His rhythms, oftentimes, are not based on doubling or halving the duration of a note, but rather on adding or subtracting small increments (eighth- or sixteenth-notes) to the halves and quarters—an entirely new

way of keeping time. The audible result is a peculiar “floating” sensation that expresses the state of being “outside” time as commonly perceived, both in a literal and a figurative sense.

Of the eight movements of the Quartet, the full ensemble plays only in four. There is one movement for solo clarinet, one trio without piano, one duo for cello and piano and one for violin and piano. It is the latter, which closes the entire work, that we shall hear at tonight's recital. Marked “Extremely slow and tender, ecstatic,” the movement was described by the composer in these words:

“Praise to the Immortality of Jesus.”
Long solo for violin, the counterpart to the cello solo in the fifth movement [“Praise to the Eternity of Jesus”]. Why this second eulogy? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus: Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh, immortally resurrected, to impart us his life. This movement is pure love. The progressive ascent toward the extremely high register represents the ascension of man towards his Lord, of the Son of God toward his Father, or deified Man toward Paradise.

Fantasiestücke, Op. 73

Robert Schumann

Born: Zwickau, Saxony, 1810

Died: Endenich, nr. Bonn, 1856

Composed: 1849

In his late thirties, Schumann conceived a special project in order to improve the quality of *Hausmusik*, or chamber music played in German middle-class homes. In particular, he was drawn to composing works for wind instruments whose solo

repertoire was still somewhat limited. Thus in 1849 he composed his *Adagio and Allegro* for horn, his *Three Romances* for oboe, and the present *Fantasy Pieces*—all in the course of what was one of the most productive years of his entire career. To

increase the appeal of these works, he allowed each of them to be played on instruments other than the ones for which they were initially conceived; thus, he made op. 73 available in versions for violin and cello in addition to the original form for clarinet.

These three “fantasy pieces”—in turn dreamy, lighthearted and fiery—show

Sonata in A major, K. 526

Wolfgang Amadè Mozart

Born: Salzburg, 1756

Died: Vienna, 1791

Composed: 1787

The present work, Mozart’s final sonata for violin, is by far the most technically demanding of all the sonatas. Its outer movements are characterized by a level of rhythmic energy rarely seen in Mozart. The opening theme of the first movement has only fast notes (eighths) in in, and it is not long before even faster sixteenth-notes appear in both the violin and the piano parts. Once they do, they remain a constant component in the lively musical texture, except in the development section, which maintains the momentum in a different way: the eighth-notes of the main theme are developed in imitation, which means that there is not a single moment when we don’t hear that insistent pulse.

The second-movement *Andante* offers a brief respite. It is an exquisitely lyrical dialog between the two instruments, lavishly ornamented and full of emotionally charged harmonic changes. Dutch

Schumann’s supreme gifts as a writer of expressive melodies. Allusions to the style of his great art songs abound as the solo instrument—whatever it happens to be—pours out its musical soul against an active and technically demanding piano accompaniment.

musicologist Marius Flothuis sensed “a strong foretaste of the world of Franz Schubert” in this music.

In the *Presto* finale, the mad rush starts all over again. The piano part is virtually a perpetual motion, but the violin doesn’t stay idle either. There is a wealth of gorgeous melodies, but the violin theme of the central episode stands out by its noble passion and intense character. Then the virtuoso runs return and dominate the music to the end.

According to Neal Zaslaw, one of the leading Mozart authorities of our time, this finale was based on a sonata by Carl Friedrich Abel, a composer and gamba player famous in his own day, whom Mozart had met as a child in London. Zaslaw thinks it could be a tribute to the older man, who died on June 20, 1787, two months before this sonata was written.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society’s program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.