

COLORADO COLLEGE



Program Notes
by
Michael Grace

FESTIVAL ARTISTS CONCERT

Saturday June 14, 2025

7:00 PM

Packard Hall

Trio Sonata from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079

Largo

Allegro

Andante

Allegro

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

In May of 1747, Bach visited Frederick the Great at his palace in Potsdam. The emperor was an accomplished musician and, as was customary, gave Bach a theme of his own on which the composer was expected to improvise. Just what Bach did on the spot is not known; it was, after all, a true improvisation. Within two months of this visit, however, Bach composed and had engraved a series of works based on this same “royal theme.” The freshly engraved music was then dedicated to the king on July 7, 1747, with the following inscription:

Most respectfully do I hereby dedicate a “Musical Offering” to Your Majesty, from whose hand the noblest part personally stems. It is with reverential pleasure that I still recall the very exceptional Royal kindness when, upon my presence in Potsdam some time ago, Your Majesty personally condescended to play me a theme for a fugue on the piano and at the same time most graciously enjoined upon me that it be improvised immediately in the presence of Your High Person. To obey Your Majesty’s command was my most respectful duty. I soon noticed, however, that due to the lack of the necessary preparation the improvisation did not want to succeed as befitted such an excellent theme. Thereupon I resolved, and undertook forthwith, to work out this very Royal theme more perfectly and then to make it known to the world. Within my powers, this resolution has now been realized. . .”

The entire engraved set of compositions consists of two “ricercars” (a Renaissance form which indicates, in this context, two fugues), ten very complex and learned canons, and one trio sonata. All the works are based on the royal theme in one way or another. And while most of the works do not call for a specific instrumentation (they can be played on the keyboard or any combination of instruments), the trio sonata is

specifically written for flute, violin and *basso continuo*, a combination of cello (playing the bass line) and keyboard (improvising harmonies on the bass). The king was a serious flautist and undoubtedly the specific writing of a part for his instrument was a reflection of Bach's royal homage.

The sonata is in four movements, slow-fast-slow-fast. The opening movement, a kind of prelude, is not strictly built upon the royal theme, but it shapes the general melodic contour of the bass line heard at the very beginning. The second movement, *Allegro*, is a loosely structured fugue. Here the royal theme appears in each of the instruments, but only as the movement evolves; it is heard first in the bass line and subsequently in each of the upper instruments played in relatively slow notes, as well as in more ornamented versions. The effect is a rich one which gives a feeling of musical unity to the entire movement. The third movement, *Andante*, is an expressive fantasia built on musical ideas from the second movement. Notable segments of the royal theme appear from time to time. In the final *Allegro*, one hears the royal theme transformed into a rolling 6/8 meter and used as the subject of a real fugue in which each instrument takes part, first the flute, followed by the violin and eventually the *basso continuo*.

While the other movements of the *Musical Offering*, particularly the canons, are academic and lack the warmth and richness of emotional character, the sonata is both carefully wrought musically and full of feeling, particularly in the slow movements.

Duett for trombone and double bass

Allegretto

Edward Elgar

(1857-1934)

Sir Edward Elgar was the preeminent English composer of the late romantic and early 20th-century eras. He was held up as the paragon of an English style, although the musical nature of said style is often elusive. Perhaps he deserves credit more as the first internationally prominent and successful English composer since the golden age of Henry Purcell in the 17th Century.

Sir Edward wrote the *Duett* for contrabass and trombone for a friend and delivered it to him at breakfast on his wedding day! The musical ability of the groom is not known, but we do know that Elgar himself was allegedly heard to play the trombone part, presumably with some bass-playing friend who might have been the groom. He liked to do this with amateur friends. The piece does sound English, particularly like the simple works of Henry Purcell himself. It is composed in charming and rhythmically-flowing imitative polyphony, meaning simply that the string bass starts with a little melody which the trombone imitates two measures later. This little ditty (emphasis on the word little) generally takes about 58 seconds to play unless the performers go for it twice!

Piano Quartet in A minor

Gustav Mahler

(1860-1911)

Gustav Mahler is best known for his symphonies. They are big, complex, lush, long and beautiful. This quartet for two violins, viola and piano provides a stunning contrast to its more famous relatives because it is small, not very long or complex or lush. But it is unquestionably beautiful. It was probably composed in 1876 when Mahler was

a student in the Vienna Conservatory at the age of 16. Given its place in his musical development, it reveals a great deal about his early musical thought, training and maturity. He was in a period of imitation; he knew he could learn from his elders by imitating them, but at the same time wanted to begin developing his own musical personality. It is likely that Mahler had other movements planned for this work. There was, in the same bundle of manuscripts containing this composition, the beginning of a *Scherzo* for the same group of instruments.

This quartet has the unmistakable imprint of Brahms. That, in itself, is paradoxical because Mahler later was closely linked with Wagner who, in turn, went out of his way to criticize Brahms. Yet a young composer writing chamber music could not overlook Brahms' many profound contributions to German music in the second half of the 19th Century. The Brahmsian features of this quartet include its impeccable formal structure and a musical style that is perhaps best described as rhapsodic.

The composition is cast in sonata form. This form normally begins with an exposition of two themes, followed by a musical development of them, and finally a recapitulation of the opening themes. In this quartet, the first theme is very distinctive because it consists primarily of a 3-note motive that is spun out into a lyrical melody, almost like the famous four-note motive of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The motive, first heard in the left hand of the piano, leaps up a 6th (a fairly large interval) and then settles down a whole step. The listener will become very familiar with this for after its extensive play in the exposition, it permeates the development section. The second theme follows a fast scale-like transition and is very lyrical and melodic.

This single movement by Mahler is quite astounding for a 16-year-old composer; its level of maturity shows that he was a prodigy close to the likes of Mozart and Mendelssohn. The passionate outpouring we associate with a more mature romantic music seems especially striking from such a youth.

**Septet for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon,
trumpet, viola and cello**

Alexandre Tansman
(1897-1986)

Allegro molto

Lento

Presto

In his time, Alexandre Tansman was a very well-known composer, pianist and conductor. Born in Poland, he felt a close bond with French culture and lived in Paris for much of his life. He also spent time in the US, particularly Los Angeles, garnering the friendship of better known composers such as Stravinsky, Bartok and Darius Milhaud. The classical French group of composers known as "Les Six" tried to recruit him, but he wanted to remain aesthetically independent. Nevertheless, he did take on a lot of classical musical ideas.

His Septet, composed and published in 1932, is rather typical of his musical personality at that time. Made up of movements that were typical of classical chamber music and are pleasing harmonically and melodically, most notably, the work is polyphonic, or contrapuntal. It earns that recognition by generally being made up of combinations of melodic lines that often seem very independent but that also work together to create a charming musical texture. The effect is that there are seven interlocutors

all engaged in animated conversation, each trying to get his thoughts heard in this exciting debate context. For example, the first movement, *Allegro*, opens with a fast melody for clarinet accompanied by a fast arpeggiated bass line in the bassoon. Shortly, all the instruments get engaged in this exhilarating contrapuntal debate.

Piano Quartet, Op. 1

Adagio-Allegro-Adagio-Moderato-Misterioso-Moderato

Adagio

Cantabile-Allegro

Scott Yoo
(b. 1971)

This piano quartet was commissioned by Patricia Kohlen in 2022. I was initially extremely hesitant to accept the commission. I had never written a piece of original music before, only arrangements of *Silent Night* in the style of Brahms, and other musical examples designed to elucidate the musical intentions of other (much better) composers. However, Harry Lynch—the Director of my television series—encouraged me to dive into the composition. The idea was that an episode of *Now Hear This* could document my compositional process on camera to show the PBS audience the challenges—and rewards—of composition.

In the summer of 2023, I composed enough of the piano quartet to receive instruction from Augusta Read Thomas and Bernard Rands—and that music was performed and filmed in snippets in San Luis Obispo for the season finale of the fifth season of *Now Hear This*.

Part of the conceit of the episode was that I would draw inspiration from my own ethnic roots as a Japanese-American. So, during film production, the crew and I went to Tokyo, where I was exposed to koto music, as well as the martial art Aikido and Ikebana, the ancient Japanese art of floral arrangement. I wrote some of the work in Tokyo, literally on-camera. Other sections were written in Warsaw, Lucerne, Colorado Springs, and Paris, although the bulk of the work was written at my home in Columbia, Missouri and my apartment in Mexico City.

In this piece, I draw on the classical forms of the music I've been performing since my childhood. The first movement sets forth the main motto of the piece, followed by two contrasting Nocturnes, one of which repeats at the end of the movement. The second movement was inspired by, and partially written at, TeamLabs in Tokyo. I played my violin in the exhibit, and the exhibit responded to my improvisation. The third movement is a dance that includes a toccata and a Bulería inspired by my several trips to Andalusia.

Many thanks to Susan Cahill, Augusta Read Thomas, and Bernard Rands for giving me composition instruction, and to Patricia Kohlen who generously supported the composition and is also the dedicatee of this, my first composition.

-notes by Scott Yoo



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