July 17, 2025

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Music for Two Cellos

At first glance, music for two cellos might seem rare—it features two lower-range instruments that must do without the harmonic richness of piano accompaniment. But there is a surprising amount of music for two cellos, and composers have responded to its challenges in varied ways. This concert offers music for two cellos, composed by quite different composers in three different centuries.

Sonata in G Major for Two Cellos, Lv. 4, No. 4
JEAN-BAPTISTE BARRIÈRE

Born: 1707
Died: 1747
Composed: 1737-1740

I. Andante
II. Adagio
III. Allegro prestissimo

Born in southwestern France, Jean Barrière learned to play the viol as a young man, but he was soon attracted to its successor, the modern cello—a much more powerful and flexible instrument. Barrière became so good a cellist that at age 24 he moved to Paris, where he was named a member of the Académie Royale de Musique in the court of Louis XV. Unfortunately, Barrière—by all accounts one of the finest cellists of his era—died just a month after his 40th birthday.

Many of Barrière's cello sonatas employ a second cello as the continuo line, but in the Sonata in G Major, Barrière treats the two instruments as equally important, though the first cello more often has the leading melodic line. Published in Paris in 1740, the Sonata in G Major is in three brief movements: a poised Andante, a brief Adagio, and then a blistering (and fun) Allegro prestissimo that requires two first-class performers.

Arboreto Salvatico for Two Cellos
GIOVANNI SOLLIMA

Born: 1962
Composed: 2003

I. Il Pino
II. Il Tasso
III. La Sequoia

Giovanni Sollima trained first in Sicily and then in Germany and Austria, where he studied cello with Antonio Janigro, and he has made his career as a composer, cellist, and recording artist. Sollima is an eclectic composer, and there have been many influences on his music, including minimalism, jazz, and world and ethnic music. Sollima has led a two-track career: he is at once a "classical" performer and a daring experimenter who has made some haunting, surrealistic performance videos.

Sollima's Arboreto Salvatico ("Forest Arboretum") was inspired by the work of the Italian novelist Mario Rigoni Stern (1921–2008), famed for his close observation of the natural world. Each of Sollima's three movements was inspired by a specific tree—pine, yew, and sequoia—and his music requires extended techniques as well as individual virtuosity.

Variations on a Theme by Rossini (arr. for two cellos)
NICCOLÒ PAGANINI

Born: 1782
Died: 1840
Composed: 1818

Rossini composed his opera Mosè in Egitto (Moses in Egypt) in 1818 and then expanded it into a grand opera as Moïse et Pharaon (Moses and Pharaoh) in 1827. For a production of the original version in Naples in 1819, he added a prayer of the Israelites, led by Moses at the end of Act III: Dal tuo stellato soglio.

The great violinist Niccolò Paganini wrote a brief set of variations on this melodic prayer for violin and orchestra, and those variations have also been frequently performed in an arrangement for cello and piano by Pierre Fournier. At this concert, however, they are heard in an arrangement for two cellos by the German composer-cellist Thomas Werner-Mifune (1941–2016).

Program Notes

This is a very pleasing arrangement: the two cellists exchange melodic and accompanimental lines throughout so that both get to share the spotlight, and there is much brilliant writing for each along the way.

CONCERT

Six Épigraphes Antiques
CLAUDE DEBUSSY
Born: 1862
Died: 1918
Composed: 1914

Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été
(To invoke Pan, god of the summer wind)
Pour un tombeau sans nom
(For a nameless tomb)
Pour que la nuit soit propice
(That the night may be favorable)
Pour la danseuse aux crotales
(For the dancer with crotales)
Pour l'Égyptienne
(For the Egyptian)
Pour remercier la pluie au matin
(To thank the morning rain)

Debussy's Six Épigraphes Antiques are unfamiliar to most audiences, and the music performed on this concert has an especially complex history. In 1897–98, Debussy wrote a collection of pieces to accompany a reading of his friend Pierre Louÿs' Chansons de Bilitis. Louÿs—a photographer, poet, and author—had published Chansons de Bilitis in 1894. The Chansons, purportedly Greek poems in the manner of Sappho, were actually the work of Louÿs himself. They tell of the experiences of a Greek maiden "born at the beginning of the sixth century preceding our era, in a mountain village on the banks of the Melas forming the eastern boundary of Pamphylia."

Debussy doubted that the recitation of these poems needed music and wrote brief backgrounds for two flutes, two harps, and celesta to accompany some of them; he also wrote some brief piano pieces as part of this. In 1914, only four years before his death, Debussy rewrote these earlier pieces for piano four-hands and published them as the Six Épigraphes Antiques.

The music itself bears some relation to Debussy's two books of piano preludes, published in 1910 and 1913: these six brief pieces are harmonically spare and subdued in mood. Each has an evocative title—the epigraph—and all except the third end very quietly. Just as the Preludes are evocations of moods and moments, the Épigraphes may be thought of as impressions of faraway places or particular moments.

The six pieces: To Invoke Pan, God of the Wind of Summer, which Debussy asks to have performed "in the style of a pastorale"; For a Tomb without Name, with outer sections in a very free 5/4 meter; That the Night Might Be Propitious, with a quietly shimmering beginning that gives way to bright flashes of sound; For the Dancer with Miniature Cymbals, which features arpeggiated chords at the beginning and bright sounds later; For the Egyptian, which Debussy asks to have performed "without stiffness"; and To Thank the Morning Rain, where the steady patter of sixteenth notes echoes the sound of the rain—Debussy brings back the main theme of the opening piece at the close.

Program note by Eric Bromberger

Music for 8
(Co-Commission by the SCMS Commissioning Club)
JOHN NOVACEK
Born: 1964
Composed: 2025

I. Step-to
II. Coconino
III. Heirloom Stomp (Thinking of Jelly Roll)

Music for 8, for double string quartet, is the result of a joint commission from the Seattle Chamber Music Society, The Schubert Club, Colorado College Summer Music Festival, and Festival Mozaic.

I think of the work as belonging to the category of Divertimento, or Dance Suite, and indeed I hear/see the first movement 'Step-to' as a mini-ballet. Following a brash opening flourish (thereafter a recurring motto) reiterating the step up of the interval of a 2nd, all four violins enter one after another, their one-upmanship emphasizing the sense of 'stepping-to' as a sort of provocative challenge. For the most part however, this is a good-natured - if spiky - neoclassical piece in compact sonata-form that ultimately settles into an off-kilter waltz. It leads directly to...

'Coconino' - a term originally derived from the Hopi language, and one that has acquired various contemporary applications in the Southwestern US, geographical, sociological, geological. (It even denotes one of the sandstone strata in the Grand Canyon.) Some of my most treasured memories are of taking-in the star-packed skies, desert terrain, ancient ruins (Anasazi, et al) of Arizona, New Mexico, the Four Corners, Northern Mexico. I consider this my 'Desert Nights' piece, its unhurried nocturnal dance (hints of the tango) enclosing a middle section that rises to an unabashedly romantic climax.

The final 'Heirloom Stomp' is my humble tribute to that key figure of early New Orleans jazz, Jelly Roll Morton. The series of records Morton made in 1926 in Chicago with his Red Hot Peppers are merely some of the best ever made. I particularly appreciate his compositions' 3rd strains (ie, tunes), where a series of solos and polyphonic ensembles build to an almost unbearably exciting close. I challenged myself to write a raggy showpiece for octet that, while exhibiting some of these trad-jazz markers, contends with post-modern intrusions of the waltz and even a brief old-school development section.

Program Note by John Novacek

Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 16
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770
Died: 1827
Composed: 1801

I. Grave — Allegro ma non troppo
II. Andante cantabile
III. Rondo. Allegro ma non troppo

Virtually unknown to audiences, Beethoven's Piano Quartet in E-flat Major is quite authentic: it is an arrangement—by the composer himself—of his Quintet for Piano and Winds in E-flat Major, Op. 16, originally composed in 1796. As a young man, Beethoven wrote a great deal of chamber music for winds. In Bonn, Archduke Maximilian Franz maintained a wind octet that serenaded him at mealtimes and played at court functions, and the teenaged Beethoven had written music for these players. After he moved to Vienna in 1792, Beethoven continued to write for winds, often in combination with piano.

The major work from these years was the Quintet for Piano and Winds, which was—as everyone quickly saw—modeled on Mozart's Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452: the two works share the same instrumentation (oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon, and piano), the same key (E-flat Major), and the same pattern of movements. Beethoven greatly admired the wind music of Mozart, but he was taking a real chance here by inviting direct comparison with music that Mozart himself had called "the finest of my works," and many have felt that—however attractive Beethoven's quintet might be—it does not match the Mozart, which is one of the glories of the chamber music repertory.

Beethoven recognized that performances by this combination of performers might be rare but that there was a ready supply of string players eager to perform (and to buy!) new music, and so he arranged his wind quintet as a piano quartet: when the Quintet for Piano and Winds was published in 1801, that first edition also included parts for violin, viola, and cello, so that the music could be performed in either version. The music is essentially the same in the two versions: both have the same movement markings, the same number of measures, and the same key. Most of the changes result from arranging music originally intended for five players for the new ensemble of four players. The prominent piano part is identical in the two versions, but at some points Beethoven adds doublestops to the string parts to complete the harmony. He also makes use of the greater flexibility of the strings: for example, a fairly simple passage originally written for the horn is greatly embellished when it is given to the viola in the revised version.

If the quartet version loses some of the contrast of wind sonorities that so distinguished the original, it compensates for this with greater flexibility and at some points greater detail. In any case, this arrangement marked the end of Beethoven's interest in the piano quartet form. He had written three while still a teenager in Bonn, but after this arrangement he never returned to the form.

Those who know the wind quintet version will rediscover familiar pleasures in a slightly different form here. A dignified slow introduction leads to a sonata-form movement of Mozartean grace with a distinguished part for piano. The lyric slow movement features exchanges between piano and strings, while the good-natured rondo-finale offers the pianist what is virtually a solo part, complete with opportunities for cadenza-like improvisation.

Program note by Eric Bromberger