

Reno Chamber Orchestra presents
The 20th Nevada Chamber Music Festival

Cello Mavericks
December 29, 2023
7:30 pm

Beethoven: Cello Sonata No. 1 in F major, Op. 5/1

Composed: 1796
Duration: 24 minutes

The cello had but rarely been featured as a solo instrument before Beethoven's first two sonatas, Op. 5. In 1796 Beethoven played a concert tour that took him to Prague, Dresden and Leipzig on the way to Berlin. While at Potsdam, Beethoven played an official court concert for King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia (nephew of Frederick the Great). Beethoven's collaborator was the King's cello teacher and principal cellist in his orchestra, Jean-Pierre Duport (or possibly Duport's brother Jean-Louis). It is likely that they played both of the Op. 5 Sonatas, which were later dedicated to the King and for which Beethoven was rewarded with a gold snuffbox filled with *Louis d'or*.

After the first movement's slow, stately introduction, the tempo picks up and the texture turns polyphonic as the piano introduces the first main theme. A second theme is a bit more wide-ranging in its harmonies. After playful exchanges between the cello and piano and a thoughtful passage that recalls the slow introduction, these preceding ideas are developed in stormy fashion, traveling through a variety of keys. After a semi-cadenza for the cello, the movement ends cheerfully. Beethoven allows both instruments to display their virtuosity in the Rondo second movement. The cello opens the proceedings, with the piano following imitatively. Calm descends only briefly, with sustained notes from the cello and arpeggios from the piano. After more fiery display, the music seems to grind to a halt before a final outburst from both instruments.

Berio: *Sequenza XIVa*

Composed: 2002
Duration: 12 minutes

Luciano Berio was a major representative of the musical avant-garde for decades. He studied both composing and conducting in Italy and at Tanglewood in Massachusetts. On returning to Italy, he co-founded an influential electronic music studio. For a time he was dedicated to electronic and twelve-tone music. But he eventually started incorporating more conventional sounds, as well as references to music of the past, in his works, including the once-famous *Sinfonia* (1968). From the 1960s and into the 2000s, he taught at various locations in Italy and the United States, counting among his students Steve Reich, Louis Andriessen, and Phil Lesh of the Grateful Dead.

Composed from 1958 to 2002, Berio's *Sequenza* series includes fourteen works for solo instruments (and in one case, voice). Most of the *Sequenza* works incorporate unusual performing techniques. *Sequenza XIVa*, one of his last compositions, was composed for cellist Rohan de Saram (there is also a version for double bass known as *Sequenza XIVb*). The work begins with elaborate percussive tapping on the body of the instrument – incorporating traditional rhythms from Rohan de Saram's birthplace of Sri Lanka, specifically its ancient capital of Kandy – as well as the strings, including below the bridge. Eventually the bow is deployed, creating ghostly sounds, including *glissandi*, glides between notes, amid further *pizzicati*. The bow is abandoned again for more percussive tapping, then it returns. As Berio has written, "There is a constant dialogue between the horizontal and vertical dimensions (between melody and harmony, as they used to say) and therefore also between sound and noise."

Holst: *Invocation*, Op. 19/2

Composed: 1911

Duration: 11 minutes

Gustav Holst's music is a unique amalgamation of the large orchestras and programmatic content of Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner, the tunefulness of Edvard Grieg and Arthur Sullivan, an interest in Eastern spirituality, and a fascination with the folk music of his native Great Britain. The latter characterizes his *Invocation*. Originally scored for cello with orchestra, the version with piano also received several performances in the 1910s before the work was largely forgotten, lost amid Holst's papers for many decades. Solo cello opens the composition peacefully, its lyrical outpouring soon taken up by the piano. The music has the pastoral nature, and evocation of folk song, that is so familiar in the works of Holst's friend Ralph Vaughan Williams. On a couple of occasions, the music builds passionately, before soon settling back into its gentle, contemplative flow.

Dohnányi: *Serenade in C major*, Op. 10

Composed: 1902

Duration: 21 minutes

Ernst von Dohnányi – or Dohnányi Ernő, to use the original Hungarian form of his name – was one of the most important Hungarian musicians of the first half of the twentieth century. Along with Bartók and Kodály, Dohnányi did much to revive and modernize Hungary's musical life. Having attracted early attention as a piano virtuoso, he won the support of notables like Johannes Brahms and Joseph Joachim, the latter of whom arranged for Dohnányi's first teaching job, at the Berlin Hochschule. Dohnányi went on to teach at the Budapest Academy for many years, serving as its director from 1934 to 1943. Later he held the post of music director of the Budapest Philharmonic for some twenty-five years. All the while he continued to compose and perform as a pianist. He served as teacher and mentor for a host of famous musicians, including Géza Anda, Annie Fischer, and Sir Georg Solti. He is also the grandfather of conductor Christoph von Dohnányi. Late in life he lived in the

United States, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1955 and teaching at Florida State University from 1949 until his death in 1960.

While Dohnányi didn't embrace Hungarian folk music to the degree that Bartók or Kodály did, it is still evident in many of his works, including the present Serenade. Scored for string trio – violin, viola, and cello – the Serenade was composed during a European concert tour. In writing it, Dohnányi took some inspiration from a much earlier string trio, the Op. 8 by Ludwig van Beethoven. As in Beethoven's work, Dohnányi's short first movement is a march, with a proudly strutting first theme, and a second theme that emulates a folk song, complete with underlying drone. *Pizzicati* begin the second movement Romanza, with a warm, lyrical theme introduced by the viola. The viola's subsequent fluttering arpeggios accompany an intense new idea from the violin and cello.

The Scherzo third movement, light in texture but intense in energy, features outer sections of a contrapuntal nature, framing a more relaxed central section, with the violin and viola harmonizing with one another over cello *pizzicati*. The theme of the fourth movement is something of a hymn; its five variations largely maintain the relatively somber tone, although at times the music becomes more agitated. The joyous finale focuses largely on an energetic first theme and an insouciant second. After a return of the opening movement's march, the music quiets before a final chord.

Mercury: "Bohemian Rhapsody"

Composed: 1975

Duration: 6 minutes

"Bohemian Rhapsody" originally appeared on the fourth studio album by the group Queen, *A Night at the Opera*. Freddie Mercury referred to his song, which actually combined parts of three earlier songs he'd written, as a "mock opera." Comprised of an introduction, a piano ballad, an operatic interlude, an electric guitar-driven rock section, and a quiet coda, "Bohemian Rhapsody" is also noteworthy for its dense production, supervised by Roy Thomas Baker, featuring some two hundred tracks of overdubs, almost unheard-of for its time. Its lyrical references to Scaramouche, the fandango, Galileo, Figaro, and Beelzebub, as well as cries of "Bismillah!" have become iconic. *Rolling Stone* ranked it #17 in its list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time," and a reader poll by the same magazine ranked Freddy Mercury's vocal performance as the greatest in rock history. This concert features an arrangement of the song for cello quartet.

Program notes by Chris Morrison