Chamber Music Conversations from the Clark
2020 – 21 Season

Cheng² Duo

Sunday, October 18, 2020

Bryan Cheng, *cello*
Silvie Cheng, *piano*

PROGRAM

Welcome
Helen Deutsch, Director and Professor of English, UCLA

Host
Rogers Brubaker, Professor of Sociology, UCLA

Prerecorded Concert
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Sonata for Piano and Cello No. 4 in C Major, op. 102, no. 1

Andante; Allegro
Adagio; Tempo d'andante; Allegro vivace

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)
Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in A Minor "Posthumous"

Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979)
3 Pieces for Cello and Piano

Modéré
Sans vitesse et à l'aise
Vite et nerveusement rythmé

Francis Poulenc (1889–1963)
Sonata for Cello and Piano

Allegro–Tempo di Marcia
Cavatine: Très calme
Ballabile: Très animé et gai
Finale: Largo, très librement; Presto subito

Q&A
Rogers Brubaker
Bruce Whiteman, Clark Librarian Emeritus
Bryan and Silvie Cheng, Cheng^2 Duo

PROGRAM NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Sonata for Piano and Cello No. 4 in C Major, op. 102, no. 1

Beethoven composed five sonatas for cello and piano over his lifetime, and they fall rather nicely into the traditional three periods of his creative life. The earliest two comprise together his op. 5, and were inspired by the playing of the Duport brothers, Jean-Pierre and Jean-Louis, whom Beethoven heard play in Berlin in 1796. Those two sonatas still reflect eighteenth-century musical aesthetics, while the third sonata, op. 69, falling as it does almost exactly in the center of Beethoven's output, beautifully represents his so-called middle or heroic period. That sonata was composed in 1809 and was dedicated to Beethoven's lawyer at the time, a man called Ignaz von Gleichenstein. The last two sonatas, catalogued together as op. 102, come at the very outset of Beethoven's final or late period of writing. Composed in 1815 (though not published until some two years later), Beethoven dedicated them to his friend Countess Marie von Erdödy. In these pieces, as well as in the Piano Sonata op. 101 (composed after the cello sonatas, despite the catalogue numbering), Beethoven begins completely to rethink the sonata form that had dominated European art music since Haydn's time, and to call on the counterpoint skills he had developed under Haydn's and Johann Albrechtberger's tutelage many years before. Beethoven saved a fugue for the second of the op. 102 sonatas, but canon and imitative writing are to be found everywhere in the first one.

The opening movement begins with a long, slow introduction that, for all its melismatic wanderings feels like nothing so much as a protracted perfect cadence in C major, intended to establish the tonality of the work. When the Allegro proper starts up, it is surprisingly not in C at all, but in A minor. The exposition is extremely distilled, filling only forty-eight bars. Yet it does everything that an exposition is supposed to do, setting out two themes (of a strongly contrasting rhythmic character), and moving the tonal center to the dominant, in this case E minor. The remaining sections of the first movement–the development, recapitulation, and coda–are all equally brief as well. In terms of texture, Beethoven's extensive use of trills tells us that we are in his late period; and the brevity of the movement seems to suggest that the composer wanted to show that a great deal could happen in such a short span of time, with everything conceived in terms of contrast: the lyricism of the introduction versus the cragginess of

the main theme, for example.

The briefest of brief adagio movements follows, now again in C major. This music feels very transitional. It lacks a real theme and consists mainly of what in an operatic context would be called recitative, another characteristic of late Beethoven. While short on melody, it is harmonically quite adventurous, yet another characteristic of Beethoven's late style. As its nine bars (nine!) come to a close, Beethoven re-introduces the music of the introduction to the first movement, where it now provides a transition to the finale. Marked Allegro vivace, this final movement begins with the sort of tiny theme, or cell, that Beethoven will use many times in his final compositions. Little more than the hum of a bee, the five notes (four on the piano and one in the cello) of this cell establish the key of C and turn into a wonderfully rhythmic theme ripe for imitative counterpoint. Offbeat accents characterize the movement and give it an irresistible charm. The development section begins on a held A flat in the cello and is full of extraordinary writing for both instruments. With the recapitulation, the players almost trip over each other to sound the main theme. (Beethoven had used this technique less effectively at the start of the recapitulation in the first movement of his Piano Sonata, op. 90.) An extended coda, also beginning with the cello playing a long A flat, brings the piece to a boisterous conclusion.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)
Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in A Minor "Posthumous"

Ravel's early one-movement Sonata for Violin (heard today in an arrangement for cello) dates from 1897, a period during which Ravel had resigned from the Conservatoire after failing to win the Prix de Rome. (In early 1898 he would return, this time to study composition with Gabriel Fauré. Ravel was eventually rejected for the Prize six times, which, while unfortunate for him and scandalous for French music history, did lead to Fauré being appointed to head the Conservatoire and to a long overdue modernization of the institution's teaching.) Ravel's biographer, Arbie Orenstein, says that the youthful Sonata was "probably" performed at the Conservatoire, but whether it was or not, it disappeared entirely from sight after that première. It was not published and performed again until 1975 in, of all places, Flushing, NY.

Ravel was just twenty-two years old when he composed the piece, and for a twenty-two-year old it is an astonishing accomplishment. Vladimir Jankélévitch pointed out long ago that Ravel "was almost

immediately himself," which is to say that there is little in Ravel's output that one can write off as juvenilia. Harmonically, the Sonata ranges widely over the available resources, though the music never leaves traditional tonality behind. Ravel did then and always would adore chords with lots of extra notes and chromatic sequences rather than conventional cadences. Yet the Sonata is definitely in "A" even if the opening bars never employ a dominant seventh and feel more modal than tonal. Formally, Ravel follows the usual sonata form, even repeating the exposition. (In the future, Ravel would seldom use repeats in his music.) The time signatures are occasionally unusual. The piece begins in 7/8 and there are bars in 5/8 and 9/4. After several bars of introduction, the main theme is played by the violin. It is lyrical, but the tension mounts quickly to a passage of four bars in which an E-major chord (the dominant seventh of A) is repeated over and over; and while we expect a perfect cadence at the end of those bars, Ravel surprises us and moves the music to F, the so-called flattened sixth chord, and now the basic harmony for the slower second theme, introduced by the piano. That theme is full of yearning, and it too is pushed to a climax before falling away chromatically into a transitional passage that first returns us to the opening of the exposition (the repeat) and subsequently leads into the development section. The development feels very hesitant at first. More than once it slows down rhythmically and almost comes to a stop. Even as the music increases in intensity, Ravel subjects the main theme to augmentation–stretching it out in note values to screw the pitch of the theme almost to the breaking point. The texture of the piano writing grows substantially thicker until finally it falls back and the music pauses briefly. But Ravel is by no means finished with his development section yet. Now the subsidiary theme returns, and it too is subjected to intensification. Trills in the violin part lead to a sudden harmonic shift and with a series of loud arpeggiated chords the recapitulation at last arrives, played in octaves by the violin. (Here for the first time Ravel adds a key signature, that of A major.) The recapitulation foreshortens some of the material from the exposition, and a short and quiet coda concludes the work. It is easy to imagine that if Fauré heard this piece performed at the Conservatoire in 1897, Ravel's application to study with him the following year would have been accepted with great speed.

Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979)
3 Pieces for Cello and Piano

Though not well known as a composer–indeed she stopped composing after World War I–Nadia Boulanger was perhaps the

most famous music teacher of the twentieth century. Born to a musical family–her father was a composer and singing professor at the Paris Conservatoire, and her sister, Lili, might have been one of the great French composers of her time had she not died at the age of twenty-four–her most famous teacher was Gabriel Fauré. She tried several times to win the coveted Prix de Rome, but never managed more than a close second. (Lili Boulanger would be the first woman to win the prize.) Nadia taught music from a relatively young age, and as a teacher would have very famous pupils indeed: Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Roy Harris, Virgil Thomson, and many others. Dinu Lipatti, the great Romanian pianist whose career was cut short by disease at the age of thirty-three, was a student, as was the conductor Igor Markevitch. Philip Glass worked with her in Paris in the mid-1960s.

Although as a pedagogue Boulanger famously knew the entire European repertoire from Monteverdi to Stravinsky, her own music was influenced primarily by Fauré and Debussy. As such it remains within the bounds of traditional tonality, while employing some modernist variations on the rules such as parallel chords (a Debussy favorite) and remote keys, as well as an emphasis on timbre that would have mystified Beethoven or Brahms. The Three Pieces for Cello date from 1914. The first, in E-flat minor, follows a basic ABA form. The music wanders significantly from the home key in the middle, as it begins to sound more tormented, but eventually it settles back to the calmer emotion of the opening. A modal inflection dominates the harmony, and the piece concludes in a sunnier E-flat major. The second piece, marked "At a moderate speed and easy-going," works similarly. This piece is composed in A minor, but uses no dominant seventh until the final bar, so it too sounds modal, even somewhat folk-like. And it too has a roily middle section enclosed within two quieter parts. The final piece, marked "Fast and nervously rhythmic," is the most complicated of the three, harmonically as well as rhythmically. The slower, middle section is in a 5/4 time signature, and, short as it is, this third piece even has a sort of coda that comes after the opening music reappears. Folk influence is obvious as well in the music, which clearly cries out for tipsy dancers to take the floor.

Francis Poulenc (1889–1963)
Sonata for Cello and Piano

The French composer Francis Poulenc wrote a number of sonatas for various instruments, individually and in groups. Wind players, in particular, owe him a debt of gratitude. His sonatas for stringed

instruments, by contrast, one for the violin and the other for the cello, are much less renowned than his comparable pieces for flute, clarinet, and oboe, and for other chamber works involving winds. Even Poulenc aficionados tend to characterize the violin and cello sonatas, both composed in the 1940s, as unprepossessing. That is too bad, as they both contain some typically charming Poulenc touches and some music that is compelling emotionally.

Poulenc came from a well-to-do family. Musically he was self-taught for the most part, though the pianist Ricardo Viñes, a close friend of Maurice Ravel, taught him piano and was a musical mentor. Poulenc became one of a group of French composers known as "Les Six"–The Six. They were five men and one woman composer who came of age in the 1920s and shared a general aesthetic without ever signing their names to any sort of credo. The writer and man-about-letters Jean Cocteau came up with the designation, and composer Erik Satie was their *éminence grise*. Poulenc's early style was post-Romantic: satirical, funny, and relatively easy-going. He liked the spice of dissonance but his music stayed well within the bounds of traditional tonality, as it would all his life. Following a pilgrimage to Rocamadour in 1936, Poulenc experienced a re-dedication to Catholicism and the music of the second half of his life reflected this new seriousness. He became one of France's most important composers of religious music, but even his secular works embodied a great emotional profundity. His great wit remained, however, and many works, like the Cello Sonata, combined the sparkling and the solemn.

Poulenc had difficulty completing his Cello Sonata. The French cellist Pierre Fournier assisted him with various technical matters. It was finally performed for the first time in the late spring of 1949 in Paris by Fournier, who shared the dedication with Poulenc's friend Marthe Bosredon, at whose house he had made the first sketches for the piece almost a decade earlier. The opening movement lacks a key signature but is undeniably in E major. It begins with typically Poulencian boisterousness but moves quickly to a rather sweet first theme played alternately by the cello and the piano. A contrasting second theme with a slightly mysterious air follows in F-sharp minor. At this point one begins to wonder whether this Sonata is really in sonata form, and a third theme in D-flat major (marked "Très sensiblement plus calme" or "noticeably quieter") suggests that it is not, or at least that the development section is very unconventional. The cello gets to sing here, but soon enough what sounds like yet another theme takes over, this one rather happy-go-lucky. We are now, incidentally, in F major. (Poulenc does love

to wander cheerfully through keys.) A transitional passage in 3/4 time leads back to the main theme, and its recrudescence certainly feels like a recapitulation, though in short form. Perhaps this is a weird sonata form after all.

Poulenc calls the slow movement a cavatina, a term usually but not always reserved for vocal music, and meaning a fairly simple song. (Agathe's cavatina near the beginning of Act III of Weber's *Der Freischütz* is a famous example, and Beethoven used the word for the slow movement of one of his late string quartets.) The movement is in F-sharp major and begins with a solemn but beautiful melody that Poulenc then treats in an ABA fashion, making it more and more tense in the middle section, and then relenting and letting it fade back into the opening tune, at first in F major but finally in the home key. A kind of coda, marked "Excessivement calme" ("excessively calm"), is to be played as quietly as possible, and the final notes in both parts are sounded in the highest realm of the staves. The third movement would be the conventional Scherzo in a sonata, and indeed Poulenc tells the players to play in a fashion that is "very animated and gay." But he entitles the movement "Ballabile," which means essentially "danceable," and indeed it is very high-spirited and might easily be choreographed. The rhythmic joy never lets up, and even when the somewhat angular main theme is smoothed out in the middle section, the speed remains the same. The concluding three bars, which sound like a blown kiss, are also to be played "above all without slowing down."

The final movement begins very dramatically, with loud chords in both parts followed suddenly by a mysterious passage consisting of four bars that are played with a sudden drop in dynamics. The dramatic chords return and lead directly into the main theme of the Finale, a sprightly and dashing melody played at top speed. Once again Poulenc wanders through several keys. (How does he get from B major to E-flat? Well, he just does. It's part of the fun of this music.) A long middle section follows involving two thematic areas: a foursquare melody that gives way to a quieter and more mysterious theme in 3/4 time, with lots of off-beats. The fast theme returns and the movement plays out, with a last appearance of the loud, slow chords providing a dramatic conclusion to the work.

ABOUT CHENG² DUO

Photo credits (front cover): Harold Hoffmann; (above): Uwe Arens

Captivating audiences and critics alike, the Cheng² Duo (pronounced "Cheng Squared Duo") distinguishes itself with uncompromising musical integrity, undeniable chemistry, and unparalleled communication. The brother-and-sister pair are cellist Bryan Cheng, playing Canada Council for the Arts' "Bonjour" Stradivarius (c. 1696), and pianist Silvie Cheng, recipient of the Roy M. Rubinstein Award for exceptional promise in piano performance.

Named one of CBC Music's "30 Hot Canadian Classical Musicians Under 30," the dynamic Cheng² Duo siblings have made music together for the past 16 years. Their aim to bring classical music to new audiences of all backgrounds is steeped in a rare balance of infectious enthusiasm for playing, and mature, historically-informed interpretations. The Duo's repertoire ranges from baroque to contemporary, and from original arrangements inspired by folk music to new commissioned works. They have presented recitals in concert halls throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. Through extensive tours they have established a reputation for return engagements at many prestigious venues and festivals, including Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall, Chamber Music at the Clark, the National Gallery of Canada, the Festival of the Sound, and Ottawa Chamberfest. The duo has also been featured at numerous other international festivals, including Aspen, Trasimeno, Usedomer, and Canadian Amateur Musicians. The pair have performed for broadcasts on CBC Radio, ICI Musique, Radio-

Canada International, Winnipeg Classic 107, Vermont Public Radio, WCRB Classical Music Boston, WCNY Classic FM, Kulturradio RBB Germany, and Südwestrundfunk Germany.

Bryan and Silvie are equally committed to presenting both traditional masterworks and contemporary music. Since 2013 they have commissioned nearly a dozen new works, as well as curated cross-disciplinary concert experiences that meld classical and contemporary music with jazz, poetry, and visual/media arts. World-class collaborative partners include photographer and cinematographer Edward Burtynsky, Mercury Films, and multimedia studio Normal.

Cheng² Duo has released a trilogy of critically-acclaimed albums on the German label Audite: *Russian Legends* (2019), *Violonchelo del fuego* (2018) featuring Spanish works, and *Violoncelle français* (2016). The latter disc was selected as one of WCRB Classical Radio Boston's top CDs of 2017. The duo's recordings have been lauded by the international press for their "phenomenal virtuosity", "maturity and perfection", "extremely imaginative and personal interpretation", "taste, sure flair for phrasing, and tonal beauty."

www.cheng2duo.com

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ABOUT THE CO-HOST

Bruce Whiteman has been writing the program notes for the Chamber Music at the Clark series since 1998. He was Head Librarian at UCLA's Clark Library from 1996-2010, and is now a full-time poet, writer, and translator. He lives in Canada.

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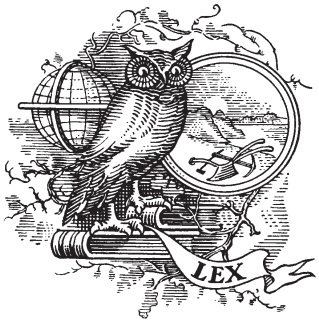

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In 1926 philanthropist William Andrews Clark Jr. donated his library of rare books to the burgeoning UCLA campus in honor of his father, a copper magnate and United States senator from Montana. The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, a unique resource for the humanities, today includes major holdings in English literature and history (1580–1820) and fine printing, as well as the world's most comprehensive collection of the works of Oscar Wilde, attracting scholars throughout the world. The library hosts a range of activities, including scholarly lectures and conferences, theatrical performances, and music concerts—organized by the UCLA Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies. The acclaimed *Chamber Music at the Clark* series honors the musical passion of William Andrews Clark Jr., an accomplished violinist and founder of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.