

PRO MUSICA
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Gabriel Cabezas, Cello
Andrew Tyson, Piano

Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Op. 102

Mit Humor

Langsam

Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen

Nicht zu rasch

Stark und markiert

Robert Schumann

(1810-1856)

Central to Schumann's music is the reflection of his so-called "split personality," that is, the free and happy Florestan side and the restrained and pensive Eusebius side. How much this reflects his own mental illness resulting in his attempted suicide by leaping into the icy Rhine on February 27, 1854 and his death two years later in a mental institution, we shall leave to the psychiatrists. What we need to study is the glorious result of his compositional efforts despite, probably not because of, his sufferings.

The *Fünf Stücke im Volkston* for cello and piano, written in 1849, comes in a particularly prolific year of Schumann's compositional life that also produced such works as the *Waldscenen* piano pieces, the *Phantasiestücke* for clarinet and piano, the *Adagio and Allegro* for horn and piano, a host of choral works, and a revision of his D minor and F major piano trios. The *Fünf Stücke im Volkston* was written, obviously hastily, between April 13 and 15. The haste, however, in no way impairs the work.

The title, *Fünf Stücke im Volkston* (Five Pieces in Folk Style) can be misleading. In no way should this suggest that the pieces are simple imitation. Quite to the contrary, they are works of high art merely flavored with the best sense of folk music. This is immediately obvious in the first piece with its rhythms reminiscent of a folk dance but with its ultimate effect being that of a most sophisticated collaboration between cello and piano. Even the "Mit Humor" marking shouldn't be taken too seriously since the movement is not without its hint of darkness. Piano and cello exchange leading roles before a rousing conclusion interrupted by a teasing sober moment.

The second piece offers a contrast with its beautiful song for cello and simple but important piano accompaniment. Dramatic shifts from major to minor add tension to the exquisitely lyrical quality of the movement. So, too, does the piece explore the full range of the cello.

The full sounds and dotted rhythms of the third piece are typically Schumann. From a strong chorale-like section, we are returned to a dark lyricism by the cello with a dotted rhythm accompaniment by the piano. The cello is sweetly lyrical before all ends quietly.

The vigorous opening of the brief fourth movement also turns lyrical. The vigor returns, however, with strong chords offered by the piano. The movement's brevity is startling.

The strongest statement yet occurs in the last movement where the cello is taken to its greatest depths and heights. Here we have an amazing clarity between the two instruments which, in lesser hands, can overshadow one another. Schumann brings us to an abrupt conclusion of his wonderful work.

Sonata for Cello and Piano

Allegro; tempo di Marcia

Cavatine

Ballabile

Finale

Francis Poulenc

(1899-1963)

Critic Claude Rostand's tagging of Poulenc as "half bad boy, half monk" is a telling comment on both Poulenc's life and his music. A Parisian by birth and instinct, he was a member of Les Six, a group of French composers (Milhaud, Auric, Durey, Honegger, and Tailleferre) who collectively and separately pushed the edges of French music in the first half of the 20th century. Yet as Poulenc broke rules, he could also honor Classical form in a remarkable way. He was openly gay and religious at the same time and suffered from inner struggles about the two. "You know that I am as sincere in my faith, without messianic screamings, as I am in my Parisian sexuality," he was quoted as saying.

The Cello Sonata, completed in 1948 for the great French cellist Pierre Fournier, came after Poulenc's religious transformation following the death of his composer friend Pierre-Octave Ferroud in 1936. From that time, his music took on a more religious context as illustrated by the *Stabat Mater*, the *Mass in G*, the *Gloria*, and his famous opera of 1959, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

With all of that, however, the Cello Sonata is not completely devoid of the bad boy/monk sides of Poulenc. It begins innocently with the bright, Parisian side of Poulenc in evidence, but soon there are hints of darker things. Everywhere there is the Poulenc gift for melody, surprising harmonic shifts, and a balance of the instruments. The *Cavatine* brings the sacred and the melancholic with beautiful singing passages for both cello and piano. *Ballabile* (a dance tune) is brief, sheer Parisian merriment with Poulenc borrowing from himself in the form of small "riffs" from his wonderful wind sonatas. The *Finale* is again Poulenc at odds with himself in his battle between the sacred and the profane.

Sonata in G Minor for Piano and Cello, Op. 19

Lento; Allegro moderato

Allegro scherzando

Andante

Allegro mosso

Sergei Rachmaninoff

(1873-1943)

The Russian musicologist Leonid Sabaneyev's entry into the conservative *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, first published in 1929, ranks the Sonata for Cello and Piano with the best of Rachmaninoff's work and speaks of its "depth, maturity, restraint and originality." Sabaneyev also refers to the virtuosic difficulties of the piece and admits that it "owes much to the performers." Gerard McBurney, in his interesting note to the Finckel and Han recording of the work, confirms this notion by his reference to Rachmaninoff's generation of Russian composers as "conservatory-trained stars from childhood, not romantic outsiders." They wrote music for their virtuosic friends and colleagues not to be played, as McBurney explains, "in the drawing-room, not as after-dinner entertainment, not as a local demonstration of their Russianness, but as fully-fledged public music to be toured from one city to the next and published and performed in concert halls both great and small where people would pay to hear this music and the miracle of how great cellists and pianist played it." So it was that the "miracle" of Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata had its first hearing in Moscow on December 2, 1901 with Anatoly Brandukov as cellist and Rachmaninoff himself, a formidable pianist, at the piano.

The Sonata comes from 1901 as Rachmaninoff, then 28, was recovering from four years of an intense depression that rendered him incapable of composing. Treated with a form of hypnotism by psychologist Nicholai Dahl, Rachmaninoff emerged from this dark period to write the Cello Sonata and, soon after, a wealth of beautiful works including the Second Piano Concerto, the love duet from *Francesca da Rimini*, the Second Suite for Two Pianos, the Chopin Variations, and the ten Preludes of Op. 23.

The Piano and Cello Sonata bears the best of Rachmaninoff: spontaneity, rich harmony, and, of course, gorgeous melodic lines best illustrated by the moving second movement. There is a distinctive "Russianness" about the work that we immediately recognize and are seduced by. Defining it is another matter. Gerard McBurney explores the so-called "soul of Russian music" only to conclude that it is ultimately elusive. He suggests certain characteristics such as melody, spaciousness, and programmatic content, all of which are present in the Sonata but do not fully explain its effectiveness. One thing is certain about the work, however, and that is the virtuosic demands it makes on its players.

An unjustified but understandable criticism of the work has been the predominance of the piano part. True, there are piano passages that only a virtuoso of the highest order could handle, but still the work remains a beautifully balanced one with equally demanding parts for the cello. A story is told that Rachmaninoff, after hearing a radio performance by Joseph Schuster and Nadia Reisenberg, called the pianist and reminded her that the Sonata "is not for cello with piano accompaniment, but for two instruments in equal balance."

Le Grand Tango

Ástor Piazzolla

(1921-1992)

Considered one of Piazzolla's masterpieces, *Le Grand Tango* was commissioned by Mstislav Rostropovich and premiered by him in 1990. Here we have all the power and complexity of Piazzolla's *nuevo tango* revealed in one work. It moves even closer to classical music than some of Piazzolla's other works such as the *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* but not at the expense of the tango itself in all its glories. Here we have dark moods, moments of passion and lyricism, daring harmony, and above all, the powerful rhythmic effects we associate with Piazzolla. As to "grandness," *Le Grand Tango* is just that since it is almost twice the length of any traditional tango piece as well as Piazzolla's explorations in the form.

Ostensibly in one movement, the work nevertheless seems to fall into three: a rhythmically strong first section with mood swings between the violent and the tender, a lyrical and poignant second section, and an almost sonata-like return in the third section to the rhythmic power of the first. Like *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*, the piece employs the colorful string effects that suggest the original instruments of Piazzolla's Octeto Buenos Aires (violin, electric guitar, piano, cello, bass, and bandoneon). Audible knocking and non-classical glissandi pepper the work.

It is interesting to note that Piazzolla's biographers, María Susana Azzi and Simon Collier, used *Le Grand Tango* as the title for their book. Indeed, the work seems to personify Piazzolla at his very best.

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Lucy Miller Murray is Founder of Market Square Concerts in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and served as director of the chamber music series from 1982 to 2009. Her book, Adams to Zemlinsky: A Friendly Guide to Chamber Music, was published by Concert Artists Guild of New York and is available at amazon.com.