

# NOTES FOR JANOS STARKER 80<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY CONCERT

## **Sonata in g minor, Op. 2, No. 8, G.F. Handel (1685-1759)**

George Frederic Handel was born in Halle, Germany, in 1685. He moved to London in 1712, remaining there until his death in 1759. His instrumental music is stylistically conservative, tending to follow procedures and forms more reminiscent of Corelli and his contemporaries than of his own contemporary Vivaldi. The trio sonatas published in the early 1730s as his Op. 2, comprising works written between about 1700 and 1730, show this predilection. They are sonatas da chiesa, in four movements, alternately slow and fast, sometimes linked by indecisive cadences. While Handel often freely reused and reworked his music, from fragments to entire movements, among instrumental works and between instrumental and vocal compositions, the Op. 2 sonatas are not based on any other compositions, nor was their material reused by the composer elsewhere. The thematic material is shared in polyphonic interaction among the two 'cellos and the bass line of the keyboard part. As in most of his trio sonatas, the four movements of Handel's G-minor sonata are arranged in two pairs. The first movement is dominated by an expressive, modulating gesture with prominent dotted rhythms; the second movement is based on a vigorous fugal subject beginning with accented repeated notes. In the third movement, Handel returns both to the mood and to the melodic style of the opening movement and in the finale he elaborates contrapuntally upon a forceful theme, perhaps in the style of a minuet or courante.

## **Suite for Solo Cello, Gaspar Cassado (1897-1966)**

The son of a composer, who was his first teacher, Gaspar Cassadó was born in Barcelona in 1897. His family lived in Paris from 1907 to 1914, where he studied with Maurice Ravel and Manuel de Falla and came to know other major musical figures of the time, including Claude Debussy, Erik Satie, Alfredo Casella, Joaquin Turina, and Isaac Albéniz. One of the few early students of Pablo Casals, Cassadó emerged as a 'cellist of major importance just after the First World War; in 1923 he settled in Florence, where he lived for the rest of his life, although he died in Madrid in 1966. His oeuvre includes a significant group of chamber works as well as an oratorio, a 'cello concerto and orchestral music. Cassadó transcribed a large body of music for 'cello and piano and even arranged works of Weber, Schubert and Tchaikovsky for 'cello and orchestra. Moreover, in the manner of Fritz Kreisler, who composed and performed many miniatures for violin and piano in emulation of the styles of assorted Baroque composers, Cassadó included in his recitals works attributed to Frescobaldi, Couperin, Schubert and a group of lesser figures which in fact he himself had written. Tonight's Suite is one of his finest original compositions.

Published in 1926 and dedicated to the 'cellist and stage director Francesco von Mendelssohn (1901-1972), a distant relative of Felix Mendelssohn, Cassadó's Suite is one of a group of important twentieth-century works, among them the unaccompanied suites and sonatas of Max Reger, Paul Hindemith and Béla Bartók, the solo 'cello sonata of Zoltán Kodály and the six solo violin sonatas of Eugène Ysaÿe, which infuse the spirit of Bach's unaccompanied masterpieces with contemporary musical gestures, rhetoric and instrumental idioms. In its three movements Cassadó imbues the polyphonic tradition of the Bach solo 'cello suites with his own exuberant virtuosity as a performer and with a language redolent of the Spanish nationalist tradition. The first movement begins in the spirit of a sarabande. Initially straightforward rhythmically it becomes more and more rhapsodic as passage-work, at first reminiscent of Baroque ornamentation, eventually overwhelms the underlying pulse and is transmuted into wide-ranging figuration. References to the opening texture and motifs occur several times; the movement ends with quiet plucked chords. The second movement, "Sardana" is an evocation of the national dance of the composer's native Catalonia; after a brief introduction the 'cello plays almost continuously in double stops imitating the drone-bass and parallel sonorities of a cobla, the instrumental group traditionally accompanying this dance. We encounter an even broader range of textures and moods in the last movement; at first impassioned recitative-like passages alternate with simpler melodic phrases, then, a strongly rhythmic jota begins. This in turn is interrupted by allusions to the opening recitative, which then yield to a reprise of the jota in ever-increasing speed as the Suite concludes.

## **Fantasiestücke for Cello and Piano, Op. 73, Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**

Schumann was born in Zwickau, Germany, in 1810, and died near Bonn in 1856. Written in 1849, the Fantasiestücke is one of several sets of character-pieces in which he projected the style of his great piano cycles such as Davidsbundlertänze, Carnaval and Kreisleriana into the medium of chamber music. Although far more compact and straightforward than these massive, multimovement works, they follow similar formal and expressive contours; despite the integrity of material and mood of each of the component movements some thematic gestures of the first piece reappear cyclically in the last. Beloved by both clarinetists and 'cellists, the Fantasiestücke also exist in

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Schumann's arrangement for violin and piano. Probably due to the plethora of Romantic repertoire for this combination, it is rarely performed.

### **Le Grande Tango, Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)**

Born in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1921, Astor Piazzolla moved with his family at the age of four to New York City, where they lived until 1936. When they returned to Argentina, he began to perform first in Mar del Plata and then in Buenos Aires. With the exception of a few years in Paris and again in New York in the 1950's, he lived in Buenos Aires until his death in 1992, although he toured internationally on many occasions.

In retrospect, Piazzolla's compositional career seems to have frequently veered between enthusiastic embrace of the popular genres of his native Argentina and a passionate desire to write "classical" music. In pursuit of the latter he studied with major figures in the international musical world, among them Alberto Ginestera, Nadia Boulanger and Hermann Scherchen, ultimately achieving a splendid synthesis of traditional tango styles with techniques taken from the world of twentieth-century art music. Piazzolla's colorful, impassioned music fits equally well in the context of chamber music, solo piano recitals, jazz performances and orchestral concerts. Major classical artists such as Gidon Kremer, Yo-Yo Ma, the Kronos Quartet, Daniel Barenboim and Emanuel Ax program and record his music, along with jazz stars Gary Burton and Al Di Meola; a tribute to the breadth of its appeal as well as to its compositional integrity. "Le Grand Tango" was written in 1982 for Mstislav Rostropovich, who first performed it in New Orleans in 1990. The vibrant outer sections display the evocative lopsided additive rhythm typical of the tango, while a slower central section is lyrical and contemplative. Piazzolla makes full use of the 'cello's wide pitch range and virtuoso potential throughout; harmonics, glissandi, percussive double-stops and brilliant scales abound. Possibly the composer's most celebrated single composition, "Le Grand Tango" has been adapted for innumerable instrumental combinations, including a transcription for flute, viola and guitar, one for violin and guitar, and an ensemble arrangement by the Tatar composer Sofia Gubaidulina. This work's iconic status is commemorated in the title of an extensive biography of Piazzolla published in 2000 by the Oxford University press, *Le Grand Tango: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla*.

### **Sonata in a minor "Arpeggione" for Cello and Piano, Franz Schubert, (1797-1828)**

Franz Schubert was born in Vienna in 1797 and died there in 1828. He is the only major composer in the Viennese tradition who was actually a native of the city as Haydn was born in Rohrau, Mozart, in Salzburg, Beethoven in Bonn, Bruckner, in Ansfelden and Brahms, in Hamburg.

Considering his enormous oeuvre, it is surprising how little music Schubert wrote for one instrument and piano. We find only eight compositions of this sort; four sonatas for violin and piano (1816-17), a Rondo Brillante for violin and piano (1826), the Fantasy for violin and piano (1827), a set of variations for flute and piano (1824) and the "Arpeggione" sonata (1824). Other major instrumental works from 1824 include the Octet as well as the string quartets in A minor and D minor ("Death and the Maiden"). Our sonata takes its name from the instrument for which it was originally written, a cross between a 'cello and a guitar, produced in 1823 by the prominent Viennese guitar-maker Johann Georg Staufer (1778-1853). Schubert, an enthusiastic guitarist, owned a guitar from Staufer's shop. The arpeggione had six strings, tuned like those of a guitar, a fretted fingerboard, like that of a guitar, but was held between the legs, like a 'cello and played with a bow. All historians agree that the instrument had a limited life span, vanishing within a decade. Only one instruction book for it was published, in 1825, by the Viennese guitarist Vincenz Schuster (ca.1800-?) Schuster is the only known solo arpeggionist, and it was for him that his friend Schubert wrote the A-minor sonata, the only significant work ever composed for this instrument.

The range of the arpeggione fits easily within that of the 'cello, Schubert's sonata and has been a central work of the 'cello repertoire since its publication in 1871. Violists often play it, with some adjustments to register and range, and it has also been appropriated with varying degrees of success by flautists, oboists, clarinetists, violinists, bassists, guitarists and even by one trombonist. There are even concerto-like arrangements for 'cello and orchestra by Gaspar Cassadó [as mentioned above] and for guitar and orchestra, arranged for John Williams. In 2001, the 'cellist Nicolas Deletaille not only commissioned an arpeggione from a distinguished Belgian luthier but also invited contemporary composers to write music for his new instrument to program along with the Schubert sonata, thus closing the circle after 177 years.

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The A-minor sonata is in three movements, the last two played without pause. While the Romantic sonata-allegro tradition typically involves the antithesis of an animated first theme and a more melodious second subject, Schubert's first movement begins with a lyrical statement, initially played by the piano and then by the 'cello, followed by a livelier second theme. Throughout the first movement, brief motifs are thrown back and forth between the two instruments in close dialogue. The 'cello dominates the second movement, unfolding a broad, wide-ranging symmetrical melody against repeated accompanying chords. A brief unaccompanied gesture leads to the rondo-like finale, in which a lyrical refrain alternates with virtuoso episodes; as in the first movement, reversing the more traditional order of contrasting material. Although not specifically marked as "in the Hungarian manner" the intricate string-crossings and other figurations of the finale and some of the passage-work of the first movement hint at this popular sort of exoticism, which Schubert exploited with such zest in the *Divertissement à la hongroise* for piano duet, completed at about the same time as the "Arpeggione" sonata.

### **Sonata in C Major for 2 Cellos, Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805)**

Born in 1743 in Lucca, Italy, Luigi Boccherini was the son of a distinguished 'cellist and double-bass player. He was sent to study in Rome in 1757 and shortly thereafter began to tour not only in Italy but in Austria and France as well. By 1768 he was at the Spanish court in Madrid, and held positions there until 1789, when the King of Prussia, an amateur 'cellist himself, took him into his musical establishment in Potsdam. Connections he maintained with Spanish nobility brought him back to Madrid in 1797, and although he stopped composing shortly thereafter Boccherini secured the patronage of the French ambassador to Spain, Lucien Bonaparte, brother of Napoleon, for the remainder of his life. He died in Madrid in 1805. Boccherini made an extensive contribution to his instrument's repertoire. He wrote about ten concerti, nearly 100 quintets with two 'cellos and more than 30 duos for two 'cellos, among these the composition with which our program ends. Although a contemporary of Haydn and Mozart, his compositional style maintains a striking independence from theirs although it displays many generic traits of the late Classical idiom.

---Joel Lazar