

# Leland P. Ko *cello*

Recital in partial fulfillment of the Artist Diploma, 2024 Student of Yeesun Kim and Donald Weilerstein

> with Adria Ye, piano

Volksgeist

Tuesday, April 9, 2024 7:30 p.m. NEC's Jordan Hall I have a fascination with folk music — not just as a link between popular music and classical music, but as a bridge between classical musicians and people from all over the world.

This program is full of some of the most vibrant and invigorating music I know for solo cello as well as piano and cello, and captures the dance and the spirit of life that so many cultures have in common. "Volksgeist" translates literally from German as "people's spirit," but refers more broadly to a national spirit or a shared cultural spirit.

William Henry Squire

(1871–1963)

Danse Rustique. Op. 20 no. 5

Adria Ye, piano

Béla Bartók

(1881 - 1945)

Rhapsody No. 1 for Cello and Piano, Sz. 88

Lassú Friss

Adria Ye, piano

Bright Sheng 盛宗亮

(b. 1955)

Seven Tunes Heard in China (1995)

Seasons (Qinghai) Guessing Song (Yunnan) The Little Cabbage (Hebei) The Drunken Fisherman Diu Diu Dong (Taiwan) Pastoral Ballade (Mongolia)

Tibetan Dance

#### Robert Schumann

(1810-1856)

# Five Pieces in Folk Style, op. 102

Vanitas vanitatum: Mit Humor

Langsam

Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen

Nicht zu rasch

Stark und markiert

Adria Ye, piano

# Zoltán Kodály

(1882 - 1967)

# Sonata for Solo Cello, op. 8

Allegro maestoso ma appassionato Adagio (con grand' espressione)

Allegro molto vivace

Leland P. Ko is the recipient of the Edward P. and Margaret Richardson Presidential Scholarship. Those of you who grew up or raised someone on the Suzuki Method might recognize **William Henry Squire's** *Danse Rustique*, either by name or by the tune alone. I had the experience of rediscovering a core memory earlier this year teaching it to a young student: when I assign new pieces to young students I usually try to play just the beginning to give them an idea of what it might sound like, but with this piece I was so overcome by childlike joy that I ended up playing through the whole three-minute piece, perhaps to my student's annoyance.

It had occurred to me that this was the first piece I couldn't wait to go up on stage an play as a toddler (I started cello at age three, and I don't know the math works out exactly but I know this piece is in Suzuki Book Five). I now feel this kind of excitement about pretty much everything I play, and I wonder if I owe *Danse Rustique* for bringing that sensation to the forefront of my attention as a little boy.

For those historically curious, William Henry Squire was one of England's leading cellists at the turn of the 20th century. He taught at the Royal College of Music and the Guildhall School of Music, and composed a whole host of cello music, including charming miniatures such as *Danse Rustique* (or *Tarantella*, for those of you familiar with Suzuki Book Six). *Danse Rustique* was written in 1895, when Squire was in his early twenties.

I do think this piece is a nice prelude to the rest of the program, but I think the real reason I wanted to play it is that I still love it with every ounce of childlike joy in my now twenty-five-year-old frame.

"Bartók wrote his two Rhapsodies for violin and piano in 1928, a year he spent at home in Budapest after traveling much of the previous year giving piano recitals. Touring the world was naturally an eye-opening experience, and his letters show that a tour of the United States had left him duly impressed with the sheer size of the country, and with that warm weather wonder, the avocado, which he discovered in Los Angeles.

All the same, much of the music he wrote in 1928 is firmly grounded in his homeland. The First Rhapsody, which also exists in versions for violin and orchestra, and cello and piano is, like much of Bartók's music, based on Hungarian folk music, which intrigued him both as a composer and as an academic researcher who had traveled the countryside collecting tunes [alongside Zoltán Kodály]. The Rhapsody is full of the sounds of folk fiddling: improvisatory-sounding variations in the melodies and multiple stops of the sort that would be natural for a player creating his own harmonies as he goes along.

It consists of a  $Lass\acute{u}$  and a Friss, two movements taken from the Hungarian  $cs\acute{a}rd\acute{a}s$ , where they traditionally would be more or less synonymous with slow movement and fast movement. Things are seldom so simple with Bartók. His  $Lass\acute{u}$  is divided into two outer sections, featuring a ponderous, throaty tune, and a more subdued middle section.

The *Friss* is based on a folk tune - with an uncanny resemblance to the American Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" - which is shunted aside for a procession of other folk

tunes in a series of episodes in steadily accelerating tempo, reappearing toward the end in a recapitulation as surprising as it is inevitable."

— Howard Posner

"Based on folk melodies and other songs collected by the composer from various regions of China, [Bright Sheng's] *Seven Tunes Heard in China* was written for cellist Yo-Yo Ma. It was commissioned by the Pacific Symphony for Dr. George Cheng in honor of his wife Arlene Cheng, to whom the work is dedicated. The movements and their sources are as follows:

#### I. Seasons (Qinghai)

Spring is coming,
Narcissi are blooming,
The maiden is out from her boudoir seeking,
My love boy, lend me a hand, please.

#### II. Guessing Song (Yunnan)

Baby, I am testing you:
What is the long, long thing in the sky?
What is the long, long thing under the sea?
What is the long, long thing sold on the street?
What is the long, long thing in front of you, young girl?

## III. The Little Cabbage (Hebei)

The little cabbage is turning yellow on the ground, She lost her parents when she was two or three. Mom, my Mom!

#### IV. The Drunken Fisherman

Classical, based on a tune originally written for the *qin*, an ancient seven-string Chinese zither.

#### V. Diu Diu Dong (Taiwan)

The train is coming,
It is going through the tunnel!

## VI. Pastoral Ballade (Mongolia)

White clouds are floating in the blue, blue sky; Under the clouds, the grass is covered by the snow-white sheep.

The sheep are like pieces of white silver, Spreading over the green, green grass. How lovely! When I was younger, my mother used to write the date of when I started learning a piece in my brand new sheet music. My sheet music for this piece has "February 2009" written in the top right corner (I would've been 10 years old), as well as many fingerings, bowings, and other markings from my teacher at the time, Ron Lowry. My favorite is "good tone, don't hit!!"

As far as my memory and the frequency of my mom's and my old teacher's markings serve me, I definitely didn't learn the whole piece in 2009. I've been learning them one-by-one and out of order in the years since then, but haven't until now had the chance to put the whole thing together. I've loved each of them on their own, but am now beginning to appreciate how brilliantly they work together as a complete set.

Much like with *Danse Rustique*, there is something personally significant (or satisfying?) about being able to put something from my childhood on a graduation recital, but even without that I would be extremely excited to share these seven pieces tonight.

"The late 1840s saw Schumann take up "house music" in a big way. This does not mean that he began to DJ at raves, playing dance music with repetitive drum tracks and synthesized basslines. Rather, he had a productive period composing music specifically designed for the home market: Hausmusik. This was music meant to be appreciated by amateurs making music in their own homes, a demographic that had come to make up an increasing proportion of the German middle class during the Biedermeyer period (1815-1848) in which family life was celebrated and home activities like music-making cherished.

In **Schumann's** *Five Pieces in Popular Style* (1849), his only work for cello and piano, the "popular" style of these pieces is evident in their simple A-B-A formal structure, their strongly profiled melodies, and their frequent use of drone tones in the bass.

The first piece is entitled *Vanitas vanitatum*, a phrase from the book of Ecclesiastes ("Vanity of vanities, all is vanity"). It is likely meant to depict a drunken soldier like the one featured in Goethe's well-known poem of the same name. Its heavy peasant swing conveys something of the soldier's alcoholic swagger, or perhaps even stagger, but offers glimpses of his tipsy charm, as well.

The second piece is like a drowsy lullaby, or perhaps just something cozy to play in a room with plenty of coals on the fire and a hot bowl of punch at the ready. This is warm home life distilled into sound.

An aura of mystery seems to pervade the third piece, which opens with a sad waltz in the cello dogged by furtive interruptions in the piano. More lyrical material occupies the middle section, notable for the high register used in the cello and the

double-stop writing in 6ths.

The fourth piece offers one of those bravely optimistic and celebratory anthems that one often finds in Schumann, alternating with more fretful expressive outpourings in its middle section.

The least 'amateur' of the set is the fifth piece that features copious scoops of double thirds in the piano part and a restless, roving cello line determined to sing out its line on its own terms."

— Program note, Vancouver Recital Society

"'What musical features are characteristic of Hungarian music? In general, it is active rather than passive, an expression of will rather than emotion. Aimless grieving and tears of merriment do not appear in our music. Even the Székely [region] laments radiate resolute energy. Hungarian folk music has a form that is sharp, definite and varied. Its melody has buoyancy and freedom of movement, and does not unfold timidly from a premeditated harmonic basis. Its form is concise, proportionate, lucid and transparent. The form is lucid, for we always know where we are."

— "Kodály's Sonata Opus 8: Transformation of Hungarian Lament" by Francesco Mastromatteo

As far as I'm concerned, this statement from **Kodály** himself is a highly complete description of his **Sonata for Solo Cello, Op. 8**, which he composed in 1915 and published in 1921, after gathering and studying Hungarian folk music as an ethnographer alongside Bartók. The piece very much begins with this resolute energy — two quadruple-stop chords — but is met quickly by rhapsodic and improvisatory bursts, and eventually by a vocal lament. Such is the blueprint of the movement: every bit of determination and gaining in strength allows the music to break free momentarily, but eventually results in that energy dying away ("what comes up must come down"). The first movement ends how it began, with the two same resolute chords.

The second movement is a true lament, beginning in the lowest, throatiest register of the cello before rising and vocalizing alongside a plucked drone. This duet of bowing and plucking simultaneously — a shepherd's pipe and a lyre? Or perhaps a voice and a heartbeat? — runs through the whole movement. The duet is interrupted by a frenzied and improvisatory middle section, before returning to the opening material, this time fully-fleshed-out and embellished by rapidly-accelerating figures, as if transformed itself by that improvisatory frenzy. Sound and energy dissipate as the movement comes to a close, until the voice gives one final exhale and only the plucked drone is left.

The third movement is at once a sprint and a marathon. Folk tunes unfold rapidly one after the other, utilizing the full range and sounds of the cello as it imitates everything from a fiddle and a lyre to a cimbalom, a hammered dulcimer, and even bagpipes. Momentum only ever briefly stops in this movement, and every lull in energy is quickly swept back up again. Tune after tune, variation after variation, the movement eventually barrels to a frenetic and triumphant ending, very

much an "active expression of will."

As with Seven Tunes Heard in China, this piece is not just one of my favorite and monumental works for solo cello, but also an unfinished project from my childhood. I think it's also one of those pieces that has the ability to get a person, my younger self included, really excited about cello. I learned the first movement at the end of 2010 at the encouragement of my old teacher, Ron Lowry, who had studied it with Starker and played it on his own graduation recital. I remember being so excited to learn the rest of the piece, but each time I came to it every few years, it presented itself as an insurmountable task and I simply felt not ready to digest it as a whole, let alone even play all the notes. I'm quite stubborn, though, and after many years I think I've wrestled the piece into my mind and my body for the first time.

I always thought I would finally play the whole piece before I graduated, and I figured there's no better time (or place!) to do it. I've still got a lot of growing to do, but I hope little Leland would be proud to see me playing Kodály Sonata here tonight.

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