

NSU Faculty Recital

Paul Christopher, cello

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

This evening's recital by Paul Christopher features works by three composers – Paul Hindemith, Ursula Mamlok, and Philip Glass – all for solo cello. Each of these composers possesses a distinct voice, one which may or may not be familiar to the listener. Despite the variety of the music performed, however, there remains an amazing amount which nevertheless unifies these compositions and their composers, both musically and historically.

In the years following World War I, objectivity was something sought by many composers who viewed the old culture – and their music's participation in it – in some way responsible for the atrocities of the war years. The German composer **Paul Hindemith (1895-1963)** was no exception, and he quickly found himself moving away from the late Romantic aesthetic he had pursued before the war. This "new objectivity," which became the dominant artistic trend of the 1920s, purported that a work's content had everything to do with its usage: in other words, as the noted American architect Louis Sullivan would say, "form follows function." Music by Hindemith and others was to be written to fill a purpose; it could be spare and eclectic in its design, so long as it fulfilled its function – a notion far-removed from the Romantic past in which art was most of all a means of self-expression. Indeed, a piece of music only had relevance in the present and, like so many Baroque sonatas, could be discarded and replaced by something else after its usefulness was finished.

The Sonata for solo cello, Op. 25 No. 3 was written by Hindemith in July and August 1922 as the composer was first mining this aesthetic of new objectivity. It was one of several cello sonatas, solo and with piano, Hindemith would write throughout his career. Hindemith was a skilled violist, and from 1921 to 1929 played as part of the Amar Quartet. The cellist with this string quartet, Maurits Frank, gave the premiere of Hindemith's Sonata in Freiburg on May 6, 1923. In five movements with German titles, the Sonata does not follow a conventional movement plan. Instead, it pursues its own design, encouraged by the necessities of its own moment in time. The Sonata opens with a movement marked *Lebhaft, sehr markiert*, an aggressive prelude which reaches for extremes of expression. It then moves in its second movement *Massig schnell, gemächlich* into music which is less-determined and often content just to wander. The lengthier third movement *Langsam* forms the centerpiece of this Sonata thanks to its lyricism and rich emotional content. Then, whereas the fourth movement *Lebhafte Viertel* is a brief scherzo, the fifth and final movement *Massig schnell* returns us to the world of the first movement with some irony borrowed from the second.



Paul Hindemith

The composer **Ursula Mamlok (1923-2016)**, much of whose career would be based in New York City, was born in Berlin into the same utilitarian, often dispassionate, society which had spawned Hindemith's new objectivity. Her experience growing up in the 1930s, however, was much uglier than the utopia envisioned in the 1920s: Jewish, she suffered as the humanity of this society slipped away, and her family was forced to flee their home after *Kristallnacht*. They first resettled in Ecuador, but the compositional promise Mamlok had already begun to demonstrate recommended her for a full scholarship to the Mannes School of Music in New York where she studied for the next four years from 1940 to 1944. There, her composition teacher was the celebrated conductor George Szell, himself a recent refugee from Hungary, who taught her mostly the



Ursula Mamlok

classics, especially the music of Brahms. Her music began sounding like that of Hindemith under Szell's tutelage, but she wanted more and sought teachers who could instruct her in twelve-tone practices, individuals like Ernst Krenek, Stefan Wolpe, and Roger Sessions.

Mamlok's own teaching career revolved around New York schools, and her compositions established her as a valued member of the American avant-garde. Her compositions have been performed by such renowned musicians as oboist Heniz Holliger, cellist Fred Sherry, and flutist Harvey Sollberger as well as major orchestras including the San Francisco Symphony and others. Although atonal, her music remained more approachable than that produced by many of her colleagues. She has said, "My main concern is that the music should convey the various emotions in it with clarity and conviction. It interests me to accomplish this with a minimum of material, transforming it in such multiple ways so as to give the impression of ever-new ideas that are like the flowers of a plant – all related yet each one different." After the death of her husband Dwight Mamlok, a poet and businessman, she chose in 2006 to return to Berlin where she lived-out the remainder of her life.

Mamlok composed her *Fantasy Variations* for solo cello in 1982. This work is actually an arrangement of an earlier piece for solo clarinet called *Polyphony I*. *Fantasy Variations* is in four brief movements, as is the original version,

although the movement titles have changed some. The first movement marked *Pensive* slowly builds in contrast as it opposes different gestures idiomatic to the cello. The contrast begins sharply-defined, alternating between bowed playing and plucks, but grows in expression to include bold strikes with the bow and multiple stopping in which more than one string is bowed at once. The second movement *Quarter note = 60; fast quarter note = 132* is comprised of short motivic fragments which build in intensity towards the center of the movement before returning to their initial state by its end. The third movement *Always quarter note = 30, but with increasing excitement* begins slowly and lyrically, losing control of itself as its material progresses. The fourth movement *Dreamy* balances the first, possessing a certain world-weariness that is easily frustrated and finally fades away into silence. *Fantasy Variations* was premiered by cellist Dawn Buckholz in New York in 1983.

The works of American composer **Philip Glass (born 1937)** shall forever be linked to minimalism, an artistic movement which favors the permutation of minute motivic fragments. Yet, from the mid-1970s, Glass has adapted this chosen aesthetic to impressively largescale projects including more than a dozen operas, eleven symphonies, fifteen concerti, and numerous film scores. When in the mid-2000s, however, he unveiled his much more intimate Partita No. 1 for solo cello, subtitled *Songs and Poems*, there was some initial shock from critics and devoted listeners. This suite in seven movements was written for the cellist Wendy Sutter and premiered by her at New York's Baryshnikov Arts Center on February 13, 2007. The suite's intimacy might be partially explained by Sutter and Glass's own relationship: they dated for a few years until 2011, a timespan which saw the creation of several works for her. When they met, Sutter was a member of the contemporary classical music ensemble, The Bang on a Can All-Stars, and, although their romantic involvement did not last long, it helped launch a solo career for Sutter. Her critically-acclaimed recording of *Songs and Poems* had, in fact, profited from over 85,000 downloads in just its first five years.



Philip Glass

The music of Johann Sebastian Bach is an obvious model here and one which Glass traces to two distinct times in his youth. Firstly, Glass recalls the many hours he spent in his father's record shop as a child listening to recordings of Bach's works for solo strings, exploring the many interpretations by different players and savoring the nuances of each. Then, there were also the years he spent as a

young adult studying in Paris with Nadia Boulanger during which time so much focus was given to the works of Bach and especially this composer's legendary contrapuntal practice. Drawing on these early influences has been, for Glass, like writing from memory, he has suggested. A Second Partita for solo cello was composed for Sutter in 2010 but not performed until June 2017 when it was premiered by cellist Matt Haimovitz.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a music scholar and composer based in Louisville, Kentucky. Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College located in Natchitoches, Louisiana in May 2013 after completing his undergraduate thesis "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." As series director of the successful Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series from May 2014 to April 2016, Jackson played a vital role in the renewal of interest in chamber music across Central Louisiana. This interest has encouraged the creation of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival and the new series Nachtmusik von BrainSurge, both of which Jackson remains active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. He also blogs at MusicCentral where he shares concert experiences, gives listening recommendations, posts interviews with contemporary composers, and offers insights into his own compositions. As a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into pieces which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. In fall 2016, Jackson began graduate studies in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has recently been awarded the Gerhard Herz Scholarship in recognition of his accomplishments. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He also sings with the University of Louisville Chorus and participates in the School of Music Composition Seminar.

Read additional program notes by Jackson at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.