NSU Faculty Recital – Paul Christopher, Cello

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, NSU Alumnus May 2013

Today it seems that, with a few exceptions, the music of French composer **Darius Milhaud (1892-1974)** is more often written about than performed. Scholars like to discuss such topics as Milhaud's explorations into jazz and Latin American music, his unique approach to polytonality, and his radical early years as part of *Les Six*. Yet, there are only a handful of the more than four hundred compositions Milhaud wrote that are regularly performed. The *Elégie* for cello and piano, Op. 251 is not one of these select few. This rarely heard piece was written in 1945 as World War II was coming to an end. Milhaud at the time was living in America – Jewish, he and his family had relocated to California in late 1939 to escape the imminent German invasion of France, and Milhaud would not return until a teaching post opened up in 1947. This *Elégie* which also exists in a version for viola and piano is a short, lyrical piece full of nostalgia – perhaps for his lost homeland, perhaps for the lives lost to war. Aaron Copland commented on Milhaud's music, "Springing from a native lyricism, his music always sings… the music flows so rationally that it seems to have been improvised rather than composed." This lyrical quality can certainly be heard in the hauntingly beautiful *Elégie*. At the same time, there are many transformations to its melody that might suggest improvisation. What a shame that this remarkable *Elégie* is not heard more often.

For **Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001)**, his dual interests in composition and architecture were one in the same. His compositions were regularly prefigured by rigorous calculations, and he saw the mathematical principles of probability and stochastics as guiding forces behind his music. Yet, unlike the music of so many other composers affiliated with the post-World War II avant-garde, the music of Xenakis does not sound calculated when it is listened to. As Olivier Messiaen once observed, "Surprisingly, the preliminary calculations are completely forgotten… the result in sound is a delicately poetic or violently brutal agitation, depending on the work."

Paille in the Wind for cello and piano hails from the last decade of Xenakis's life. The score is marked April 10, 1992 and dedicated to Roger Woodward and Jacopo Scalfi. Its bilingual title – Xenakis integrates the French word "*paille*" meaning "straw" into an otherwise English name – is the first hint at the essential contrast which underlies this piece. In a setup not dissimilar to what American composer Henry Cowell might have done, Xenakis compares the heavy tone clusters of the piano – representative of the "wind" – with the slow melody line of the cello – the floating "straw" blowing in the breeze. Dissonance is a factor throughout, and is generated most notably by the tight intervals heard in both the cello and piano. Joel Sachs, founder of the New Juilliard Ensemble, describes *Paille in the Wind* as a "dialogue between the rude clangor of the piano and the broad sweeping tones of the cello." Meanwhile, Ronald E. Grames of *Fanfare* magazine reaches deeper when he calls the piece "emotionally concentrated" and asserts "there is a sort of serenity to the work that is unusual for this composer." Despite the inherent dissonance of *Paille in the Wind*, a certain serenity does exist in this depiction of primordial and unchanging nature which Xenakis has painted.

Kalevi Aho (born 1949) is regarded as one of Finland's foremost contemporary composers. Like his teacher Einojuhani Rautavaara, Aho has written a number of large-scale operas, symphonies, and concerti throughout the course of his career; in the case of the latter two genres, Aho has actually been more prolific than his teacher. So far, there have been sixteen symphonies, and, since the dawn of the new millennium, it has been a goal of Aho to write a concerto for every instrument in the symphony orchestra: this project is nearly complete as of fall 2015 with twenty-four concerti written, including a few repeats and, interestingly enough, an award-winning concerto for the electronic instrument known as the theremin. Most of the orchestral music Aho has composed over the past two decades has been written for the Lahti Symphony Orchestra where Aho has been composer-in-residence since 1992. Aho is also respected as a writer on music, and his immense output includes the treatises *Finnish Music and the Kalevala* and *Einojuhani Rautavaara as a Symphonist*.

Aho composed *Seven Inventions and Postlude* for oboe and cello between 1986 and 1998. Much of the musical material for this piece, however, is derived from an earlier work by Aho: his opera *Avain* (*The Key*) premiered in 1978. *The Key* had explored the alienation of the individual in contemporary metropolitan life. Much of the same darkness and estrangement can still be heard in *Seven Inventions and Postlude*, although these feelings are now somewhat abstracted without the lyrics or stage action of the opera. The invention is a Baroque form rooted in two-part counterpoint, most famously utilized by J. S. Bach in his study pieces called *Inventions and Sinfonias*, BWV 772-801. "Small in form but magnificent in expression," reads a recent review of *Seven Inventions and Postlude*, "it is fascinating how the Finnish composer plays with the Baroque idea and what colors the two musicians, individually and in dialogue, conjure out of the score!"

The American composer **Milton Babbitt (1916-2011)** was one of the chief innovators within musical Modernism. Babbitt sought to extend the organizational principles of twelve-tone serialism as conceived by Arnold Schoenberg to elements other than pitch, in the process becoming one of the originators of integral serialism. He explored the frontiers of sound through his pioneering work with the RCA Mark II Synthesizer while director of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. While other composers haphazardly approached and ultimately exhausted their Modern devices, Babbitt continuously and organically refined his advanced compositional language throughout the course of his career. Paul Lansky, a composer and a student of Babbitt, has remarked of his teacher, "He was one of the founding fathers of music as an academic discipline." In his 1958 article *Who Cares If You Listen?*, Babbitt had compared the Modern composer to a research scientist whose duty it was to advance his or her art and whose music thereby could be of little interest to the general public. Teaching at Princeton from 1938 until his retirement in 1984 and at Juilliard from 1971 to 2008, Babbitt surrounded himself by intellectuals whose research interests were similar to his own.

A late work, *More Melismata* for solo cello was commissioned upon the hundredth anniversary of the Julliard School in 2006. Its title is among the many clever names given by Babbitt to different compositions, including *It Takes Twelve to Tango*, *The Joy of More Sextets*, *All Set*, and *Whirled Series*. The title *More Melismata* at once refers back to a 1982 piece for solo violin Babbitt entitled *Melismata*, as well as to a musical term known as a "melisma." In medieval chant, a "melisma" is an expressive, multi-note phrase occurring on a single syllable of text. Babbitt has written "such a term thus can be loosely applied to a solo string piece, in which a continuous, expressive line also may unfold." This developmental process is what *Melismata* and *More Melismata* share in common, although musically these pieces are unrelated. Therefore, as one commentator has written, *More Melismata* is "all about compound melody, an initial division into high and low ranges, each range then evolving further hierarchies."

It was during the six years from 1717 to 1723 which **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)** spent as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen that the emerging German master composed much of his chamber and orchestral music. Among these works are the six suites for unaccompanied cello, listed as BWV 1007-1012, which Bach composed approximately 1720. As is also the case with the unaccompanied violin sonatas and partitas he composed about this same time, "the instrument acquires an independence and variety of speech it had not known before," to use David Ewen's words. While the original autograph of the suites has been lost, copies of the scores do survive from Bach's lifetime, including one version in the handwriting of his second wife Anna Magdalena. Even after many of Bach's works had been rediscovered in the nineteenth century, the cello suites remained neglected until they found an important advocate in cellist Pablo Casals. He had discovered the then unknown works in a music shop around 1890 and, only after privately rehearsing them for a dozen years, did Casals begin introducing them to the public in the early years of the twentieth century. Now each of the six cello suites is a staple of the professional cellist's repertoire.

The Cello Suite No. 5 in C minor, BWV 1011 is in six movements. As the title "suite" implies, the Fifth Suite is a collection of stylized dance movements, introduced by a Prelude. This Prelude has a slow, somewhat ominous opening followed by a faster fugal section. An Allemande follows; the allemande was a stately dance originating from Germany, set in common time and paced at a moderate tempo. Then comes a Courante; this lively dance took its name from the French word for "running" and often featured a certain amount of metrical ambiguity. The fourth movement is a Sarabande – a slow dance in triple meter. Two Gavottes follow with the first repeated after the second is played; this moderately-paced dance form in duple meter was of French origin. A Gigue with dotted rhythms concludes the Suite; this fast, galloping dance genre originated in England, and was often employed as the final movement in Baroque suites.

Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. He is a graduate of the Louisiana Scholars' College – Louisiana's designated honors college located on the campus of Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. While there, Jackson completed an undergraduate thesis entitled "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." He has followed classical music around the world, attending the BachFest Leipzig in Germany, Colorado's Aspen Music Festival, and many concerts across Louisiana and Texas. Resident in Alexandria, Louisiana, Jackson works with the Arts Council of Central Louisiana as Series Director of the Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series. He also writes the program notes for the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, blogs at MusicCentral, and continues to study other aspects of music in his spare time. His four-movement Suite for Solo Guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 at Abendmusik Alexandria. At his day job, Jackson serves as Operations Manager of TicketCentral, a centralized ticketing service which represents more than thirty arts groups and nonprofits across Central Louisiana. Learn more about Jackson at his new website www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.