Joyous Sounds

Paul Christopher, cello · Josue Ramirez, double bass

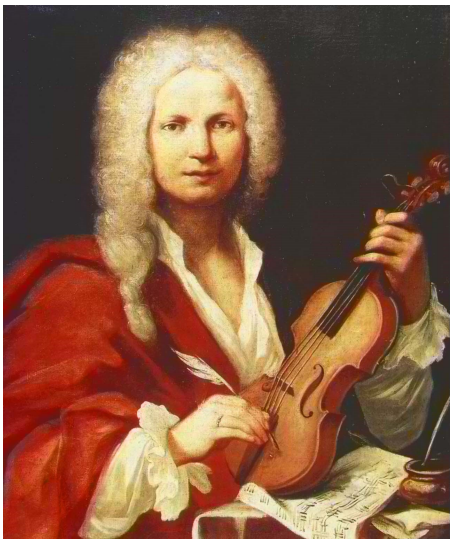
Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Tonight Series Curator Paul Christopher is joined by former student, Josue Ramirez, for a program of chamber music for cello and double bass. Their concert features the works of classical masters Antonio Vivaldi and Johann Sebastian Bach in special arrangements for their instruments as well as a reflection on tunes first heard in the operas of Vincenzo Bellini created by the German cellist-composer Julius Goltermann. As a special part of tonight's concert, Christopher and Ramirez will also give the world premiere of a new composition created by Natchitoches composer Samuel Stokes (see the insert for my recent interview with Stokes).

The double bass, although a regular participant in both symphony orchestras and jazz combos, is less often heard in classical chamber settings – in fact, most audience members have likely never heard the double bass in this kind of setting until tonight. Whereas the cello has long been appreciated as an important contributor to chamber music, the chamber repertoire available to the double bass is relatively limited. Franz Schubert's well-known *Trout Quintet* for piano and a string quartet including double bass perhaps gives bassists more opportunities to perform chamber music than any other single composition.

Historically the double bass rarely had any more function in the eighteenth-century orchestra than to echo the cello an octave lower – in effect, to "double" the existing bass line played by the cello. Ludwig van Beethoven was one of the first composers to grant more independence to the double bass in his orchestral music, a trait maintained and extended by his successors. Half a century earlier (c.1763), Joseph Haydn was perhaps the first composer to write a solo concerto for double bass, although this work has since been lost. Several of his Viennese contemporaries followed his example, writing their own bass concerti, although the nineteenth-century virtuoso Giovanni Bottesini – sometimes called "the Paganini of the double bass" – likely remains the best-known composer for this instrument. Twentieth-century and contemporary composers have shown more interest than their predecessors in writing concerti for the bass with Einojuhani Rautavaara's 1980 concerto *Angel of Dusk*, for example, having become an audience favorite. Because the chamber repertoire for double bass has been somewhat limited, several of the pieces on tonight's program are heard in arrangements whereas the new piece by Samuel Stokes was written specifically for this occasion and with Christopher and Ramirez in mind as performers.

Today when we think of the Italian composer **Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**, our first thoughts are probably of the man who wrote more than five hundred concerti, and especially of his set of violin concerti called *The Four Seasons*. Yet, in addition to the concerti, Vivaldi also composed operas, sacred music, sinfonias, and a good quantity of instrumental chamber music. This last category includes the Sonata in E minor, RV 40 heard on tonight's program and originally scored for cello and *basso continuo*. The Italian term *basso continuo* refers to a second, supporting melody line which traditionally would have been played by a bass melody instrument (i.e. cello or bassoon) and another instrument capable of producing semi-improvised harmonies above the given melody (i.e. harpsichord, organ, or guitar). Although the combination of cello and double bass might not have been considered in Vivaldi's day, the presence of two bass melody lines makes this score ideal for the combination employed tonight.



Antonio Vivaldi

The present Sonata is sometimes considered part of an Opus 14 publication where it appears as the fifth of six sonatas. Vivaldi himself, however, only published twelve sets of works with opus numbers, and might not have even been aware that this set was published in Paris in 1740 – a year before his death. Scholars believe the six sonatas contained in the supposed Opus 14 actually predate 1725 and made their way to Paris via the French ambassador to Venice. The Sonata's first movement *Largo* is slow and pensive. The sound is more nefarious and menacing in the faster second movement *Allegro*, while the third movement *Largo* brings a respite of sorts. The brisk pace of the fourth movement *Allegro* offers a determined conclusion to the sonata.

An Interview with Composer Samuel Stokes on the Premiere of his "Mythos"

What is the significance of the title "Mythos" and does your new piece follow a specific program? "Mythos" is a term that describes a culture's belief system. It is a general term and can encompass belief in both deities and political ideologies. I have been spending a lot of time recently thinking about how one's belief in a deity, and often a holy book, can shape one's political ideologies, and conversely, how one's belief in ideologies can shape one's perception of a deity and interpretation of a holy book. This reshaping of themes can be found in this piece, particularly through the competition between disparate harmonic languages. The beginning of the piece is clearly in A minor, but the themes presented at the beginning are altered throughout the piece and juxtaposed with very non-tonal harmonic language.

Are there any musical motives or ideas audience members should be listening for? Do these relate to the title "Mythos"? There are thematic motives from the opening A minor section. Immediately following the A minor section is an explosive non-tonal gesture in the bass, which is also an important motive throughout the piece. About halfway through the piece, there is a *dolce* theme in the cello, which is clearly in G major. It is then rather quickly transformed until it is barely recognizable. The alteration of the G major melody is particularly analogous to how quickly a culture's "mythos" can be altered until it barely resembles its original form.

Did you encounter any special challenges writing for two string bass instruments? If so, how did you overcome them? The biggest challenge in writing for a cello and bass duo is that both instruments are low string instruments and there is a tendency for the sound to become very thick on the low end. There are essentially two things that I did to overcome this. First, I simply embraced the low end during certain parts of the piece, especially with the double-stops in the bass during the first section of the piece. Second, I made good use of the higher register of the cello. The upper register of the cello is simply beautiful for lush melodies.

What has it been like working with Paul Christopher and Josue Ramirez? When did you complete your work and when did their work begin? Working with Paul and Josue has been great. I met Paul as soon as I moved to Natchitoches in 2013, and Josue and I were in grad school together at LSU before that. I've had the pleasure to see them both perform on multiple occasions in the past, and they are both high caliber, energetic performers. I completed the piece in June of this year and they began working on it right after I finished. I was able to hear them rehearse the piece at the beginning of September, and I'm very excited at how it sounds.

Samuel Stokes

What is the future of this composition? I don't have any immediate plans for the work after its premiere, but it is certainly possible that I would submit *Mythos* to composition calls or seek out other performers to play it in the future. The sheet music is also available for purchase as a digital download at www.SheetMusicPlus.com.

Is there anything else you would like to say about this piece? I really enjoyed writing this piece and working with Paul and Josue. I really hope everyone enjoys what I'm sure will be a fabulous performance!

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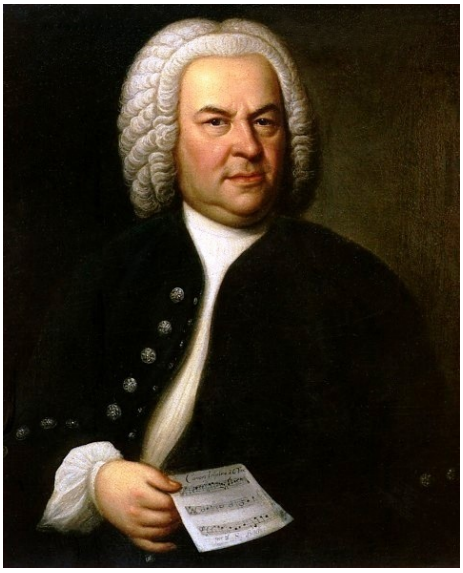
It was during the six years from 1717 to 1723 which **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)** spent as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen that the emerging German master composed much of his chamber and orchestral music. Among these works are the six suites for unaccompanied cello, listed as BWV 1007-1012. It is believed that Bach composed these cello suites around 1720, although Bach's handwritten manuscript has been lost. Other copies do survive from the composer's lifetime, however, including one version in the handwriting of his second wife Anna Magdalena which has been dated to either 1727 or 1728. Musicologist David Ewen has remarked of these compositions that "the instrument acquires an independence and variety of speech it had not known before." Bach writes contrapuntally for these melody instruments, imagining what a fugue might sound like through the use of double, triple, and occasionally quadruple stops where multiple strings are played at once. Significantly, Bach goes against the established Baroque practice in chamber music of including a *basso continuo* line, but makes up for this absence through his contrapuntal treatment and masterful handling of the solo cello. Although we are not exactly sure of Bach's abilities as a cellist, we know he was an adept violinist and likely also learned the cello as a boy; if nothing else, Bach certainly knew the cello's technical intricacies.

The Cello Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007 is performed tonight by bassist Josue Ramirez. In the absence of repertoire by Bach written specifically for double bass, many bassists have chosen to learn the cello suites, and in fact orchestras often require bassists to perform selections from the suites during auditions. Some of the cello suites, however, work better for bass than others: bassist Jason Heath claims, for example, that three of the suites must be transposed before they sound very good on bass; he also points to the differences in tuning between the cello and bass as a factor



Johann Sebastian Bach

which presents its own challenges. Nonetheless, because the chamber repertoire for double bass is so limited, the cello suites give bassists their best opportunity to play Bach's music as a soloist – an opportunity which is ultimately one of their most ideal for the music of any major composer.

As the title "suite" implies, the First Suite is a collection of stylized dance movements, introduced by a *Prelude*. This *Prelude* is one of Bach's best-known compositions as well as some of the most recognizable music for solo cello. The underlying genius of this music is that a charming motive, at times altered and at times simply repeated, is heard clearly through changing harmonies. More grounded is the *Allemande* that follows the flying *Prelude*; the allemande was a stately dance originating from Germany, set in common time and paced at a moderate tempo. Afterwards comes a *Courante*; this livelier dance took its name from the French word for "running" and, here, often seems to find itself rebelling against the written triple meter. The fourth movement is a *Sarabande* – a slow dance in triple meter. Two *Minuets* follow with the first repeated after the second; this moderately-paced, elegant dance form in triple meter was of French origin and later became part of the Classical-era symphony. A lively *Gigue* concludes the Suite; this fast, galloping dance genre originated in England, and was often employed as the final movement in Baroque suites.

The final piece on tonight's program is by **Julius Goltermann (1825-1876)**, a German cellist who was regarded as one of the most preeminent virtuosi of his era. From 1850 he was also a well-respected professor of cello based at the Prague Conservatory where he taught, among other students, David Popper, one of the foremost cellists of the next generation and a name still known today by all professional cellists and cello students. Goltermann – like most of the great virtuosi of the nineteenth century – wrote his own showpieces. Like so many of these expert performers, he also often borrowed familiar melodies from popular operas when creating his own compositions. Whether titled souvenirs, potpourris, or simply medleys, these new compositions capitalized on tunes audiences already knew and loved. Goltermann's *Souvenirs de Bellini* for cello and double bass, published in 1849, pulls tunes from the operas of *bel canto* genius, Italian Vincenzo Bellini. Although Bellini had died fourteen years earlier in 1835, his operas were still popular favorites – as they are today among opera lovers. Bellini's operas include *Norma*, *I puritani* (*The Puritans*), and *La sonnambula* (*The Sleepwalker*). It is this last opera from which Goltermann drew the majority of the tunes recounted in his *Souvenirs*.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. 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 will remain active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. Jackson has in fact written program notes for many of Central Louisiana's key music presenters, including the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, Arts Council of Central Louisiana, and Northwestern State University. 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. Jackson has followed classical music around the world, including trips to Colorado's Aspen Music Festival and the BachFest Leipzig in Germany. As a composer, he has worked to integrate a modern vocabulary into established classical forms in ways that are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His four -movement Suite for solo guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 and has also been aired on public radio. In fall 2016, Jackson will begin graduate studies at the University of Louisville with the ultimate goal of earning his doctorate in musicology.

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