

RAVEL. SCHULHOFF. KODÁLY.

STRING DUOS

LIN HE, VIOLIN. DENNIS PARKER, CELLO.

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Sonata for violin and cello

The music of French composer Maurice Ravel is often blindly categorized as impressionism. Though certainly there is some justification for this association in the cases of *Daphnis et Chloé* and a handful of other works by Ravel, the aesthetic label “impressionism” more accurately describes a set of traits which the music of Ravel’s predecessor Claude Debussy had exemplified. These include extended harmonies, renewed modality, non-Western scales, parallel motion, lush orchestrations, and a heightened interest in timbre. For Debussy and, for a time, Ravel also, these traits marked their escape from German Romanticism and the domination of Wagner. Yet, beginning around 1914 and the outbreak of World War I, Ravel’s compositions became far more eclectic in their inspirations. Whereas the suite *Le tombeau de Couperin* applies Baroque dances, his Piano Concerto in G looks to American jazz in its outer movements but the lyricism of Mozart and Saint-Saëns in its tender middle movement. Likewise, *Tzigane*, a rhapsody for violin and orchestra, is inspired by Gypsy music, and the ballet, *La valse*, by Vienna. Nevertheless, the wonder of Ravel’s artistry is that, despite their varied influences, each work remains in itself a unified whole and, likewise, every composition is representative of a unified body of works.

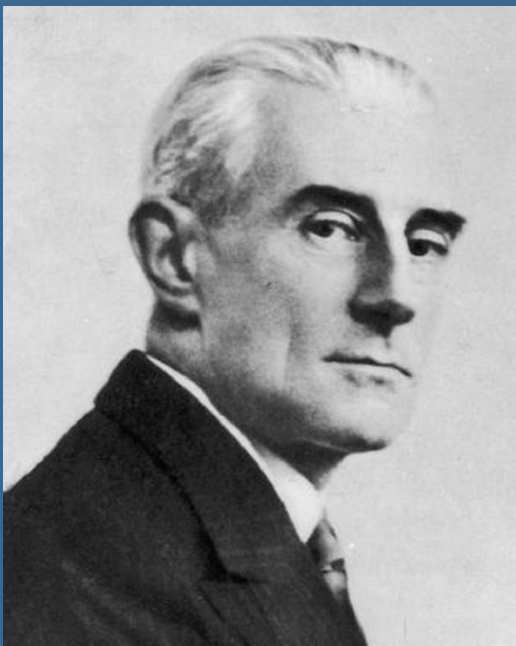
One possible explanation for this postwar development in Ravel’s aesthetic is that the impressionistic traits have become sublimated. Earlier, they had been the surface matter itself, but now they are the substrata below a quite multifaceted exterior. Indeed, we witness this same reevaluation and pruning away of unnecessary material in the postwar works of other leading modernists, including Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, and Hindemith to name just a few. Ravel himself admitted that the Sonata for violin

and cello, composed from 1920 to 1922, was a turning point in this way: he said of the work, “The music is stripped down to the bone. The allure of harmony is rejected and increasingly there is a return of emphasis on melody.” In a composition for two soloists and without the harmonic support of a piano or orchestra, melody is an absolute must as is counterpoint between these melodies. Impressionistic modality remains—much of the first movement is in the Dorian mode—as does the emphasis on timbre, with Ravel utilizing string techniques like *pizzicato*, *ricochet*, harmonics, and *glissandi*. Parallel fourths and fifths are also heard in the duo sonata.

The war alone cannot account for this aesthetic shift, though its influence can, of course, be felt on Ravel and modern music more broadly. The war exerted particular impact on Ravel, however, as he readily volunteered for service soon after its outbreak; though he was rejected as an air force pilot, he spent several months as a driver in the motor transport corps before becoming ill with dysentery. While he was recovering, his mother died; she had been his emotional foundation, and, without her support, he suffered from depression and composition became quite difficult. He composed very little in the first years after World War I, though, with Debussy’s death in 1918, he was generally regarded as France’s leading composer. This recognition proved problematic. When the French state wished to confer on him the *Légion d’Honneur* in 1920, he publicly refused, maintaining that the state did not have criteria to pass artistic judgement; many viewed this as snobbery on his part. In any case, the younger generation of French composers, including Milhaud, Poulenc, and Auric, came to view him as an establishment figure, whereas they prized Satie as an outsider. Inadvertently, Ravel confirmed his isolationism when, in 1921, he left Paris and moved to the countryside. Though he would occasionally entertain close friends at his country estate, more often he was left alone with his cats and his peculiar collection of figurines.

The Sonata for violin and cello is in four movements in a Classical fast-scherzo-slow-fast pattern. The first movement is marked, *Allegro*. The motive introduced right away by the violin suggests two ideas that linger throughout this movement and into the others. Firstly, the circular, repetitive nature of these *ostinati* and others give the movement a consistent texture which seems to be in perpetual motion, much like the familiar opening Prelude of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I*. The second idea is that of modal ambiguity: the motive arpeggiates around the pitches of both the A minor and A major triads, so that while the tonic of A is clear, its modal context is unclear. The cello, playing high in its range, introduces the movement's first theme as the violin repeats its motive for a third time; the violin soon repeats the theme. The violin and cello continue to alternate melodic and arpeggiated, accompaniment materials throughout the course of the movement, rarely slowing in pace. Overall, there is a suggestion of sonata form, and for a time the tonal center shifts to the would-be subdominant key on D.

The second movement, marked *Très vif*, has the same aspects of perpetual motion and modal ambiguity as the first. It begins with both instruments playing *pizzicato*,



Maurice
Ravel

before the violin launches into nervous figures in *arco*. In the fierce game which develops between the two instruments, there is a percussive intensity and playful sarcasm not heard in the first movement. Just as the competition seems at its most intense, familiar material returns from the preceding movement, and momentarily peace returns too. The lyrical third movement, marked *Lent*, is elegiac in mood and contrapuntal in design. The cello is given an extended solo at its opening, and, when

the violin enters, it reiterates the cello's initial melody while the cello gains another, complementary melody. Still tense and controlled, the movement's pace, however, has slowed greatly from that of the second movement. Its form is ternary with material from the opening returning to conclude the movement. The cello again initiates the fourth movement, marked *Vif, avec entrain*, this time with a motive which possesses a bouncier, enlivened feel. There returns some of the competitive spirit of the second movement, though the game seems to be friendlier this time. The main thematic material reoccurs four times with three contrasting episodes, according to a lively rondo form. Toward the center, material from the first movement is heard once more with a slighter echo at the work's conclusion.

The initial inspiration for the Sonata for violin and cello was a special issue of *La Revue Musicale* commemorating Debussy. The music that became the first movement appeared here in December 1920 alongside several works by other composers also written in homage. By September 1921, Ravel had decided to expand the composition to the four-movement structure we know, though not without some difficulty. Only in February 1922 had Ravel completed the Sonata, and its premiere was given in Paris that April by violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange and cellist Maurice Maréchal. Ravel was not able to attend the premiere, and apparently the players struggled with the new work. Subsequent performances were more accurate and were received with more enthusiasm. At present, the Sonata is widely performed and recorded, one of only a few compositions for violin and cello which has received this level of attention.

Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)

Duo for violin and cello

For nearly half a century, the once well-known name of Erwin Schulhoff went largely forgotten as his music remained virtually unheard. Schulhoff, the Czech composer who in the 1920s and early 1930s was regarded as a leader among the European avant-garde, died in a German concentration camp in 1942. His compositional output then had to wait until the 1980s before witnessing even the first signs of its rehabilitation. That process continues to this day, as Schulhoff's compositions are slowly making more appearances on record and on concert programs like this one. Erwin Schulhoff was born in Prague and, at a young age, already displayed impressive proficiency at the piano. On the personal recommendation of Antonín Dvořák, it was decided that Schulhoff would pursue a career in music. He began at the Prague Conservatory in 1904 after which followed additional studies in Vienna, Leipzig, and Cologne. His earliest compositions date from the first decade of the

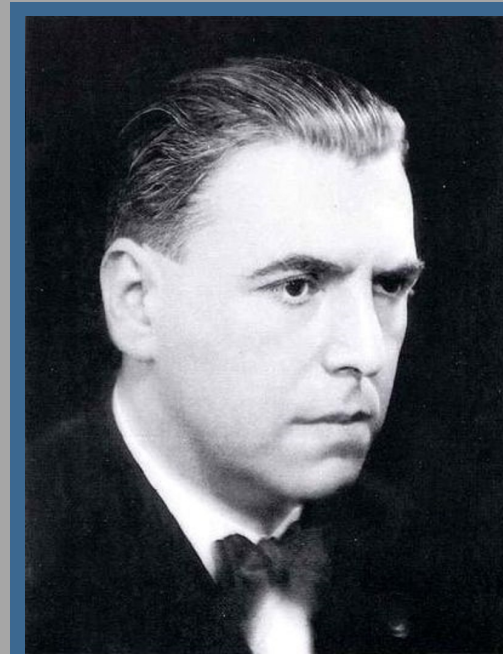
twentieth century with his first models including the German masters (Schumann, Brahms, Reger), various innovators (Strauss, Debussy, Scriabin), and, of course, the music of his homeland as summed up in the work of Dvořák. Four years of rigorous military service, however, had a profound impact on his musical style: when World War I broke out in 1914, he was almost immediately conscripted into the Austrian army.

After the war, his interests would turn, on the one hand, to the expressionism of the Second Viennese School—he notably began a correspondence with Alban Berg—and, on the other, the absurdism of the Dadaists who he encountered while in Berlin. Dadaism was an artistic movement which few composers of his age attempted to translate into music. For Schulhoff though, his Dadaist aesthetic included the parody of seemingly elitist music; collage rivaling the eclecticism of later generations; the inclusion of sirens and other noisemakers; and the integration of various nonsensical elements from irrational time signatures to the copious use of exclamation points! The Dadaist painter George Grosz, perhaps most significantly, also introduced him to American jazz at this time: even after some of the other Dadaist influences had begun to recede by the early 1920s, his interest in jazz remained, spawning foxtrots and rags aside movements in traditional forms. By 1925, when we encounter Schulhoff through his Duo for violin and cello, his avant-gardism had fused with his classical upbringing, allowing him to create cohesive multi-movement works albeit not lacking in experimental charge. After years abroad, he was back in Prague where a new admiration for the compositions of his countryman Leoš Janáček would encourage him to rediscover folk music. Czech musical traditions were certainly of inspiration, but he also looked to other Slavonic traditions, gypsy music, and even the folklore of Native American cultures. His last years would witness yet another change of direction, toward the Socialist Realism of Stalinist Russia—a society he longed to join in response to the impending rise of German fascism and the discrimination he had already begun to face due to his Jewish heritage. His death in the Wülzburg concentration camp was the result of tuberculosis.

The violin opens the Duo's first movement, marked *Moderato*, with a pentatonic melody which Schulhoff gradually expands chromatically. The cello often imitates his partner's line at a slight delay, echoing his gestures if not reciting them note-for-note. Their mood is sorrowful with fluid transitions into faster, more aggressive music according to a rondo scheme. The second movement is marked *Zingaresa. Allegro giocoso*. As its title implies, this scherzo movement offers an evocation of gypsy music. The cello launches the movement with cutting rhythmic figures

which will often return to propel the drama. The violin soon joins, presenting a melody suggestive of the gypsy fiddling tradition in both its gestures and its harmonies. On occasion, their roles are reversed as the cello becomes the melodic voice and the violin takes an accompaniment role. Throughout the movement, quick *pizzicati*, *glissandi*, harmonics, and multiple stopping are included to show-off the virtuosity of the players. Ultimately though, the movement ends humorously with some final *pizzicati* from both players.

Marked *Andantino*, the third movement is surprisingly gentle by comparison to the second. Its melody, initiated by the violin but later traded to the cello, is strangely



Erwin
Schulhoff

nostalgic, recalling in us some forgotten past experience. The cello's accompaniment line, played *pizzicato*, is virtually a walking bass, something Schulhoff would have encountered frequently in listening to jazz. The violin also takes up this gesture when it switches to the accompaniment role. After some alternation between melodic soloists, both instruments offer melodies concurrently, although not always in sync. The final few measures return to the dichotomy of the opening. The fourth movement parallels the first: it is again marked *Moderato* and follows a rondo form where slower, sorrowful sections erupt into faster, more aggressive areas. Even the melodic material of the fourth is derived from the first. In these ways then, the fourth movement brings circularity to the Duo. It also brings closure: unlike the first movement which had ended softly, the fourth movement ends violently with one final explosion.



Zoltán
Kodály

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967)

Duo, Op. 7 for violin and cello

Zoltán Kodály is a seminal figure in the history of modern Hungary. Not only a composer, he was also a linguist who received a PhD for his thesis, “The Verse Structure of Hungarian Folksong.” With his friend and colleague Béla Bartók, he would regularly make expeditions into the Hungarian countryside to record and transcribe folksongs. Jointly, they published several collections of authentic folksongs as well as arrangements. With the parallel work of Cecil Sharp in rural Britain and Appalachia, these expeditions mark some of the earliest research in the discipline of ethnomusicology. Folk material also found its way into their compositions, with the melodic interest of this repertoire exerting particular influence on Kodály. Bartók wrote in 1921 of Kodály’s aesthetic, “His compositions are characterized in the main by rich melodic invention, a perfect sense of form, a certain predilection for melancholy and uncertainty... he strives for inner contemplation.” Kodály was, additionally, committed to education and the elevation of the Hungarian people through musical education, in particular. He posited that, “Our age of mechanization leads along a road ending with man himself as a machine; only the spirit of singing can save us from this fate.” He produced singing exercises and, in the 1930s, launched the Singing Youth movement. Indeed, his educational vision was felt on a national scale, and, in his lifetime alone, his principles for daily music education were introduced in more than a hundred elementary schools.

With the emphasis Kodály placed on melody and singing, it

is only natural that he would devote much of his compositional energies to choral music. Today, his best-known works include his *Psalmus hungaricus* and *Missa brevis*—both largescale, choral pieces of popular orientation. Aside from these is the opera, *Háry János*, though better-known, outside of Hungary at least, through orchestral excerpts. All of these are later works, written after World War I, if not World War II as is the case for the *Missa brevis*. Prior to the First World War, however, Kodály had begun to cultivate an international reputation for demanding chamber music of which his String Quartet No. 1, Op. 2 and Sonata, Op. 4 for cello and piano make striking examples. The Quartet was heard in Zürich, and several piano pieces had been well-received in Paris. Neither the Duo, Op. 7 for violin and cello, composed in 1914, nor the Sonata, Op. 8 for solo cello of 1915 were accorded the same recognition. These works lack not in artistic merit; rather, their timing was unfortunate, both with the war abroad and with press controversies surrounding Kodály’s music at home. Nevertheless, Kodály would write little further chamber music after the success of *Psalmus hungaricus* in 1923, finding his niche, it could be said, in choral music. In some sense, then, these early chamber works—the products of a mature technique and fully-formed aesthetic—represent a high point all their own. Certainly, chamber musicians appreciate and perform them, even if they remain unknown to many classical listeners.

Kodály’s Duo for violin and cello is in three movements, each of relatively equal length. The first, marked *Allegro serioso, non troppo*, is of a rhapsodic character with various themes and gestures recurring throughout its ten-minute span. Texture, for this reason, is often a better determinant of the musical narrative than the recognition of singable melodies. Instead, the significant melodic dimension is characterized by a continuing sense of line throughout the movement where one theme or gesture evolves into the next. An introductory section begins the work in a manner reminiscent of folk music where the players seem to still be warming up and discussing with each other before the first theme is launched by the violin over a *pizzicato* texture in the cello. The cello promptly answers as the violin switches to *pizzicato*. Structurally, there are traces of sonata form here, but more realistically we might describe the form as merely ternary: after numerous extemporizations, familiar material at last returns, first with the theme and then with a section reminiscent of the introduction in its improvisatory feel. Throughout, timbral elements like *pizzicati*, multiple stopping, and *glissandi* enrich the sound world of the two solo string instruments.

The second movement is marked *Adagio. Andante*. It maintains the free, rhapsodic character of the first

movement while extending the expressive element through *tremolo*, insistent repeated notes, quick dynamic turns, and the use of extreme registers. The melodic writing is reminiscent of centuries-old singing traditions through its flexibility of meter, sustained drones, and often melismatic character. There is something lonely and melancholic about the mood this movement evokes. The third movement is marked *Maestoso e largamente, ma non troppo lento*. This movement comes closer than the others to the familiar Hungarian-Gypsy idiom that another Hungarian composer, Franz Liszt, had exploited in his *Hungarian Rhapsodies* and which is still well-known to contemporary listeners. The virtuosic showiness and improvisatory nature of the instruments' interchanges capture this, but so does the structural layout of the movement. Specifically, there is a slow section followed by a more extensive fast one. This format relates to the *verbunkos*, or the dance traditionally used by the Hungarian military to recruit young men as soldiers, where these formal divisions are called the *lassú* and *friss*, respectively. An engaging and innovative composition, the Duo, Op. 7, nonetheless, had to wait a full ten years for its premiere which finally occurred in 1924 in Salzburg at the Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a master's candidate in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has been awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. His current research focuses on French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho, exploring the

aesthetic ramifications of timbre, harmony, and melody in this new music. He has shared this research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meeting in Asheville, NC last spring and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. He has been selected to present at AMS South-Central again this March when they meet in Sewanee, TN. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, LA following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. Since that time, he has remained concert annotator for presenters of classical music across Louisiana and a co-organizer of the Sugarmill Music Festival, held each May in Alexandria, LA. Also a composer, his music has been performed at the festival, New Music on the Bayou, in Monroe, LA.

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