

FOLK-TALE AND FAURÉ

By Jackson Harmeyer, Series Director Abendmusik Alexandria

Arnold Bax (1883-1953)

Folk-Tale for cello and piano

Sir Arnold Bax has been called the most Celtic of British composers. Although born in London, Bax found his inspiration in the landscape, folklore, and literature of Ireland and the elements of Celtic culture that still endured on the neighboring island. It was through the poetry of his Irish contemporary William Butler Yeats that Bax first discovered Ireland and the Celtic tradition, and at one time Bax had considered becoming a poet himself. Although Bax made his career as a composer, his music shares much in common with poetry: “It is the musical equivalent of the lyrical impulse in poetry, the attribute which causes utterance to take spontaneously beautiful forms, irrespective of all else.” And, while many other composers of his day were deliberate in their attempts to construct new forms for their music, Bax was content for his music to remain lush and natural.

Folk-Tale is an extended movement for cello and piano composed in 1918 around the time when Arnold Bax first reached his maturity as a composer. Having enrolled at London’s Royal Academy of Music in the fall of 1900 in order to study piano, his talents for composition were slow to be discovered. Therefore, not until the last years before World War I did Bax produce his first mature compositions. *Folk-Tale* is dated April 3, 1918 and was premiered later that month on April 27 at Wigmore Hall. Felix Salmond was the cellist at the premiere whereas Bax himself served as pianist. Salmond was in fact the same cellist who a year later gave the premiere of Elgar’s Cello Concerto – the work often regarded as that composer’s crowning achievement. Despite Salmond’s preeminence, *Folk-Tale* was quickly forgotten when Salmond left for the United States in 1922, and for a long time the piece was not taken-up by another cellist.

Although Bax’s publisher casually subtitled *Folk-Tale* a “popular song,” it would be incorrect to assume there is anything light or cheery about the piece. As Bax indicated on its score, the piece is “melancholy and expressive.” Especially towards the end, there are reminiscences of Irish folksong in the cello’s repeated notes, but overall the composition seems to hint at the unrealized dreams and expectations of the failed Easter Rising of 1916 in which Ireland attempted to win its independence from the British Empire. Within this context, *Folk-Tale* becomes a memorial piece not only for the friends that Bax lost in the rebellion but also for his beloved Irish culture which was forced to remain subservient. Whereas Ireland has since gained its independence, *Folk-Tale* is likewise beginning to receive renewed attention from performers – both on record and in concert.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Cello Sonata No. 2 in G minor, Op. 117

French composer Gabriel Fauré is today best remembered for his *Requiem* – an hour-long composition for chorus, two vocal soloists, organ, and orchestra. Yet, Fauré was more often a practitioner of smaller forms as evidenced by his charming songs and delightful chamber music. In his own time, he was called a modernist, although he never defied tonality like those composers of the subsequent generation – those that we today call modernists. Instead, his musical language was one of sensuous colors, subtle harmonies, and poetically-crafted melodies far from the Wagnerisms that drove so many composers of his day to write bombastic and weighty music propelled only by drama.

Fauré expressed his interest in music at a young age. At age nine, he had already been welcomed into the renowned Parisian music school Ecole Niedermeyer, and there among his teachers were Camille Saint-Saëns. Saint-Saëns and Fauré would not only become two of France’s leading composers, but would also remain friends throughout their lives.

Recognition for Fauré would not come until 1892, however, when Fauré became a professor of composition at the prestigious Paris Conservatoire. Ultimately in 1905 Fauré became the director of the Conservatoire for a period lasting the next fifteen years until 1920. While at this school, his pupils included Maurice Ravel, Nadia Boulanger, and others who would guide French music in the years after World War I.

The Sonata in G minor for cello and piano was written in 1921 – the year after Fauré left his post as director at the Conservatoire. Fauré had concealed a gradually worsening deafness for many years, and by 1920 he no longer felt capable of fulfilling his responsibilities as director. As he had battled this ailment, his compositions had grown more nebulous and elusive, and those characteristics are apparent in the Second Cello Sonata. Fauré dedicated the Sonata to the American composer and violinist Charles Martin Loeffler. The work was premiered by cellist Gérard Hekking and pianist Alfred Cortot at the Société Nationale on May 13, 1922 – the same musicians who had premiered the first Cello Sonata a few years earlier.

The Cello Sonata No. 2 is set in three movements in the Classical fast-slow-fast pattern. Likewise, the first movement marked *Allegro* is in sonata form with two themes presented, developed, and eventually recapitulated. The first movement also sets a trend followed by the other two by beginning in a minor key and ending in a major. The second movement *Andante* incorporates the *Chant funèbre* which Fauré was also working on in 1921 as a state commission commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Napoleon’s death. The third movement *Allegro vivo* replaces the agitation of the first movement and somberness of the second with a series of fantastical interchanges between the cello and piano.

Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880)

Three pieces for cello and piano

Jacques Offenbach is perhaps too quickly identified as the composer of the *Can-Can*. In actuality, Offenbach was not only the composer of nearly a hundred operettas and other light works for the stage, but also a composer of chamber and orchestral music who made his early career as virtuoso cellist.

Offenbach began playing cello as a boy, often performing alongside his brother and sister who played violin and piano, respectively. Later, Offenbach joined the orchestra of the Parisian *Opéra-Comique* as a cellist. His early compositions, therefore, reflect this preoccupation as a cellist and include many solos, duos, and studies for the instrument and even a few works for cello and orchestra including a *Concerto militaire* and a concertino. Among his chamber music for cello, there are popular waltzes and fashionable salon pieces balanced by duets for two cellos meant as teaching aids for Offenbach himself to play alongside a student. Much of his cello music places considerable demands on the cellist, indicating his own proficiency on the instrument.

Despite the merits of these compositions, for the first hundred years after the composer’s death, Offenbach was remembered only as a composer of stage music. Following the celebrations surrounding the centenary of his death in 1980, Offenbach’s music for cello was gradually rediscovered and has witnessed a renewed interest by performers and scholars. Numerous recordings from this extensive body of music have now been made, and in 1996 The Jacques Offenbach Society was founded with the aim of bringing back all of Offenbach’s music into public consciousness. Much work is still to be done, however, if Offenbach’s cello music is to find a place in that instrument’s standard repertoire.

The compositions for cello and piano heard on this program include three brief character pieces written relatively early in Offenbach’s career. *La*

Chanson de Berthe – in English, *Bertha's Song* – seems to have been written in 1853. It is unknown whether the Bertha of the title was a real person. The piece, however, does have the lyric quality expected of a song. *Rêverie au bord de la mer* (*Daydreaming at the Seaside*) was one of six short pieces Offenbach included in his 1839 publication *Chants du soir*. Originally, Offenbach wrote this melody for use as a patriotic song praising his native Germany. In its version for cello and piano, *Rêverie* is a collaboration between Offenbach and another composer Friederich von Flotow. Later, Offenbach would use this melody once more within his 1864 opera *Die Rheinnixen*. *Deux âmes au ciel* (*Two Souls in Heaven*) is labeled an *élégie* for cello and piano. Offenbach published the piece in 1844 as his Opus 25, and there is speculation that the flowery title was appended by the publisher.

Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001)

Kottos for solo cello

For Iannis Xenakis, 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 stated, “Surprisingly, the preliminary calculations are completely forgotten... the result in sound is a delicately poetic or violently brutal agitation, depending on the work.”

Iannis Xenakis was born in Romania, the son of Greek parents, and with them he moved to Greece in 1942. There, he was not only exposed to classical music for the first time, but also became fiercely involved with Greek liberation efforts, fighting first against the Nazis and then against the new British-imposed government. Xenakis was eventually arrested and condemned to death, before escaping to France in 1947. Making Paris his new home, Xenakis studied composition with Messiaen and architecture with the preeminent Le Corbusier. With Le Corbusier, Xenakis designed the Philips Pavilion for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. It was for this venue that composer Edgard Varèse famously created his *Poème Électronique*, although Xenakis also contributed his own electronic piece *Concret PH* to be played with *Poème*. Xenakis, however, had already had his breakthrough as a composer a few years earlier with the 1955 premiere of his much-imitated *Metastaseis* for 61 solo instrumentalists. Although only his first published composition, *Metastaseis* had already set Xenakis on the path of mathematically-derived music that he would pursue for the rest of his career.

Kottos for solo cello was composed in 1977, commissioned as a test piece for the Rostropovich International Cello Competition. Whereas his first piece for solo cello *Nomos Alpha* had been performed by its dedicatee Siegfried Palm and few others, Xenakis understood that writing a new piece which all competitors would have to face would ensure greater recognition than given *Nomos Alpha*; therefore, Xenakis was happy to accept the new commission. According to Greek mythology, *Kottos* was one of the hundred-armed sons of Uranus and Gaia who fought alongside Zeus in his battle with the Titans. In naming the composition such, Xenakis seems to be alluding to the virtuosity required of the cellist who – as if he had a hundred-arms – is responsible for doing many things all at once. From its very opening, *Kottos* demands that the player create a harsh grinding noise by bowing heavily on the bridge of the cello. From there, the cellist is responsible for making frequent timbral and dynamic shifts, playing relentless *glissandi*, stopping where two or more notes are played at once, and making other difficult moves all while maintaining a high level of energy throughout. This is one of those pieces that challenges even the best of cellists, and so achieves its goal as a competition test piece admirably.

Isang Yun (1917-1995)

Glissées for solo cello

The Korean composer Isang Yun was both influential in new music circles and controversial politically. Although Yun spent most of his career away from Korea in Germany, he nonetheless advocated for the reunification of Korea and, in his music, posited a unity of Eastern and Western materials. Yun once stated “I was born in Korea and project that culture, but I developed musically in Europe. I don't need to organize or separate elements of the cultures. I am a unity, a simple person. It's a synthesis.” As he himself was a combination of East and West, so was his music as he sought to develop Korean concepts by way of Western instruments and avant-garde techniques.

Isang Yun was born in Tongyeong – a city in southeastern Korea – at a time when the Korean peninsula was controlled by Japan. Yun first studied European music in Korea and, during World War II, continued these studies in Japan. A 1955 award allowed Yun to study in Germany where he was introduced to Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone method and made contact with the avant-garde which regularly congregated in Darmstadt. In 1966, his orchestral composition *Réak* brought him international renown when it premiered at the Donaueschingen Festival – the other center for avant-garde gatherings besides Darmstadt. Only the next year, however, Yun's burgeoning career came to a standstill when he was abducted by the South Korean secret police, returned to South Korea, condemned for treason, and sentenced to life imprisonment. In response, over two hundred artists signed a petition for his release – a petition which included the names of Igor Stravinsky, Herbert von Karajan, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, Mauricio Kagel, Hans Werner Henze, and others. Yun was released in 1969, after which he returned to West Berlin and gained German citizenship. Over the following decades, Isang Yun became an influential teacher in his adopted Germany and often at a distance became an inspiration to many aspiring Korean composers.

Isang Yun wrote his *Glissées* for solo cello in 1970. The composition was premiered on May 8, 1971 by the cellist Siegfried Palm. Palm was a legendary cellist known for his pioneering virtuosity, and correspondingly inspired or commissioned many of the cello works written by the avant-garde composers of the 1960s and 1970s. The name *Glissées* refers to the musical technique known as a *glissando* where one pitch slides into another; colloquially, this technique is often called a “smear.” Plucked *glissandi* can be heard almost immediately after just a few fierce, pulsating plucks by the cellist. Over the piece's twelve-minute span, these *glissandi* are not the only difficult techniques required of the cellist: there is much whinnying, quick tempo changes, even quicker exchanges between bows and plucks, stopping, as well as the difficulties associated with the frequent non-tonal pitch transitions. Despite the avant-garde approach, Yun's merging of these techniques with the gestural nature of Korean folk music make *Glissées* a rewarding listening experience for all as well as a cultural experience for those unfamiliar with Asian music.

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Jackson Harmeyer studied music history while at the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, Louisiana. There he completed an undergraduate thesis entitled “Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers.” Now living an hour south in Alexandria, Louisiana, he has continued his music scholarship writing program notes for the Rapides Symphony Orchestra and Arts Council of Central Louisiana while also consulting to the Louisiana International Piano Competition and conducting much independent research. He has also expanded into arts promotion – writing about Central Louisiana's many music offerings at MusicCentral, part of the larger TicketCentral program he has helped develop. Mr. Harmeyer is also an emerging composer and has already organized several performances of his exciting and challenging music. Jackson Harmeyer also serves as Series Director of the new chamber music series Abendmusik Alexandria which hosts concerts once a month at the Hearn Stage in downtown Alexandria.