VANCOUVER
RECITAL
SOCIETY

FALL CONCERTS 2023

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Sunday October 29 2023

From the Artistic Director

Dear Friends:

This concert marks Sheku Kanneh-Mason's fourth visit to the VRS, but it is his first on his own with only his constant companion, his cello.

From a personal perspective, I am happy to see that Sheku's artistry has grown commensurately with his rise to super-star status. This is one of the privileges the VRS family enjoys as they witness the growth in the young artists we present as they return to our stage over the years. This is indeed what makes the VRS special.

At the conclusion of the solo cello recital, Sheku will be joined by a collection of young local students – 12 young cellists and a double bassist – for a performance of Pablo Casals's "Song of the Birds".

I would like to thank Angie Goddard, Head of the Strings Department at West Point Grey Academy (and a long time VRS collaborator), for selecting and rehearsing the young performers you'll hear today.

We are deeply grateful to London Drugs for their tremendous support and encouragement throughout the years, and for their sponsorship of today's concert.

To our Season Sponsor, the Peak Group of Companies, you help to make our dreams realities, thank you! Additional support for today's performance has been received from the Chan Endowment at the University of British Columbia and the Province of British Columbia.

Enjoy the performance!

Leila

CELLPHONES

The use of cellphones and recording devices is prohibited in the concert hall. Please take this opportunity to turn off all electronic devices.

音乐厅内禁止使用手机，禁止拍照，录音，录像。请观众关闭所有电子器材，谢谢您的合作。

Program

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Sunday, October 29, 2023 3:00 pm
Chan Centre for the Performing Arts

Sheku will be joined by young local students for the performance of the "Song of the Birds":

Adrian Lee
Bella Li
Harold Wang
Race Li
Lee Liu
Natalie Gan
Leo Van Jaarsveld
Hailey Kim
Paloma Martins
Sophia Ner
Ostin Wong
Hana McRobbie
Thomas Chen

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CHAN CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

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JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)
Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor BWV 1008
Prélude
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Menuet I
Menuet II
Gigue
(approx. 21 minutes)

GWILYM SIMCOCK (B. 1981)
Prayer for the Senses
(approx. 8 minutes)

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)
Suite No. 1 for Solo Cello Op. 72
Canto primo. Sostenuto e largamente
I. Fuga, Andante moderato
II. Lamento. Lento rubato
Canto secondo. Sostenuto
III. Serenata. Allegretto pizzicato
IV. Marcia. Alla marcia moderato
Canto terzo. Sostenuto
V. Bordone. Moderato quasi recitativo
VI. Moto perpetuo e Canto quarto. Presto
(approx. 25 minutes)

INTERMISSION

LEO BROUWER (B. 1939)
Sonata No. 2 for Solo Cello
(approx. 15 minutes)

EDMUND FINNIS (B. 1984)
Five Preludes for Solo Cello
(approx. 7 minutes)

GASPAR CASSADÓ (1897–1966)
Suite for Solo Cello
Preludio–Fantasia. Andante
Sardana (danza). Allegro giusto
Intermezzo e danza finale
(approx. 15 minutes)

PABLO CASALS (1876–1973)
Song of the Birds (arr. Posner)
(approx. 5 minutes)

LONDON DRUGS®
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London Drugs
is proud to sponsor the return of
Sheku Kanneh-Mason

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Early Life & Education: Sheku is a graduate of London's Royal Academy of Music where he studied with Hannah Roberts and in May 2022 was appointed as the Academy's first Menuhin Visiting Professor of Performance Mentoring. He is an ambassador for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, Future Talent, and Music Masters.

Photo credit: Ollie Ali

This Season: Highlights of the 2023-24 season include the Last Night of the Proms with the BBC Symphony and Marin Alsop, performances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Orchestre de Paris, Orquesta Nacional de España, National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, Oslo Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Gävle Symphony, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic on tour in Germany, Cincinnati Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, and San Francisco Symphony. With his sister, Isata, he appears in recital in Japan, Singapore, and South Korea in addition to an extensive European recital tour. Sheku will also perform a series of duo recitals with guitarist Plínio Fernandes as well as continuing his solo cello recital tour in the USA and Canada.

Recordings: A Decca Classics recording artist, his 2022 album, *Song*, showcases his innately lyrical playing in a wide and varied range of arrangements and collaborations. Sheku's 2020 album *Elgar* reached No. 8 in the overall Official UK Album Chart, making him the first ever cellist to reach the UK Top 10. In January 2018 his debut recording for Decca Classics, *Inspiration*, was released, featuring the Shostakovich Cello Concerto No. 1 with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla.

Did you know: Sheku was appointed a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2020 New Year's Honours List.

Sheku plays a Matteo Goffriller cello from 1700 which is on indefinite loan to him

Sheku Kanneh-Mason appears by arrangement with Enticott Music Management
Sheku Kanneh-Mason records exclusively for Decca Classics

Program Notes

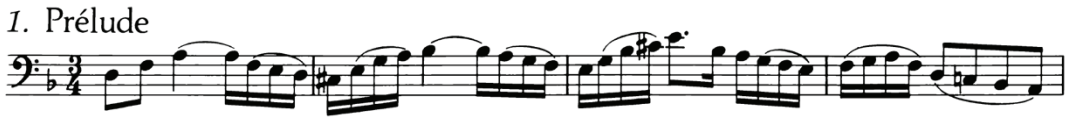
Johann Sebastian Bach
Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor BWV 1008

The instrumental suite, with its predictable sequence of dances (allemande–courante–sarabande–gigue) and its *un*–predictable addition of various *galanteries* (minuets, bourrées, gavottes, etc.), was a staple of the Baroque. Arising from neither of the period's two great wellsprings of musical emotion – religious piety and operatic bombast – the subtext of the dance suite was social gaiety in an intimate setting, but not just any setting. The tone had more than a whiff of aristocratic elegance about it, its imaginary terpsichorean world being one of crisp court etiquette rather than rollicking village merriment.

In this context, the second of Bach's set of six cello suites from ca. 1720 is a remarkable example of the genre. Written in a minor key, it constitutes an exceptionally serious take on the dance culture of the French court, from which the dark religious and dramatic impulses of Lutheran Germany cannot be excluded as inspirational prompts in its creation.

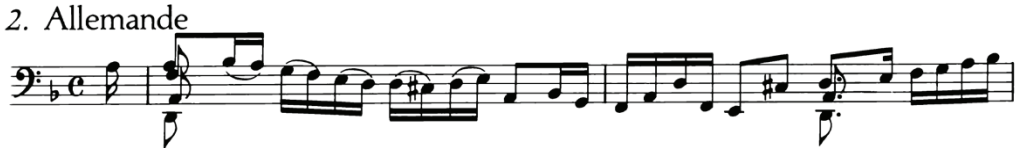
* * *

The opening *Prelude* is homogenous in its texture of running 16th notes, from which a recurring habit of pausing on the second beat of the bar stands out as a distinctly sarabande–like gesture.



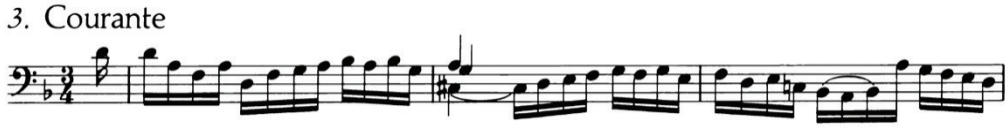
Its opening arpeggio spelling out the D minor triad sets out a pattern of similar arpeggiated approaches to this second–beat pause that will pervade the movement as a whole, building tension in waves of melodic and harmonic sequences that seek ever higher ground.

The dances that follow are in binary form, comprised of a first section that drifts away from the home key followed by a second section that returns to it, with each section played twice.



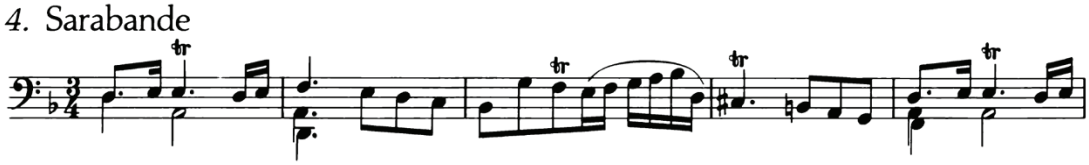
The *Allemande* begins assertively, with a quadruple stop that establishes its punchy style of rhythmic emphasis that, combined with its wide range of motion, provides it an exceptionally rambunctious start to the dance set.

The *Courante* hikes up the intensity a notch further in a driven *moto perpetuo* of virtually constant 16th–note motion.

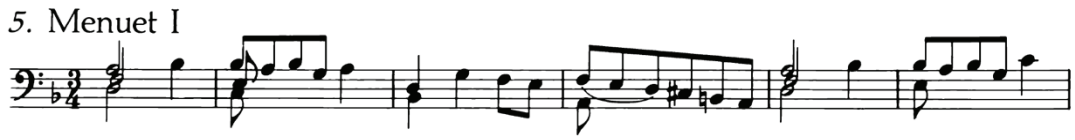


The clear harmonic outlines of this breathless movement make it one of the most toe–tapping of the suite. For sheer grit and dogged resolve it would be difficult to beat the headlong thrust of this dance movement that turns the cello into a veritable street fighter with bravado to spare.

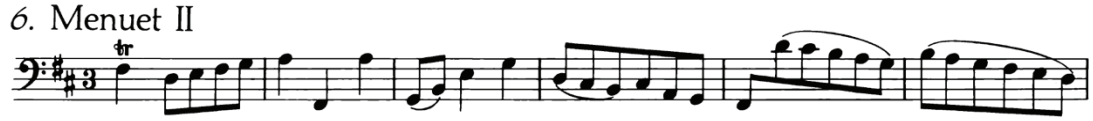
Darkest of the dark in this collection is the extraordinarily grave *Sarabande,* set in the deepest register of the instrument.



A feeling of intense longing comes through in its long-held dissonances and its bewildered, searching phrases beset with anxious trills. This movement wins the prize for wringing the greatest amount of expression out of a single, slow melodic line.

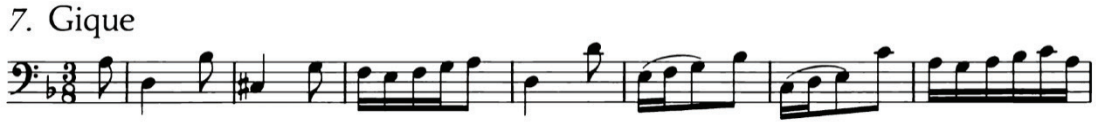


Menuets I & II form a matched pair of musical contrasts. The first in D minor is thickly scored in multiple stops but with an overtly dancelike lilt.



The second in a contrasting D major is sparingly laid out in a single flowing line of melody. We see in this pairing a parallel for the future matching of menuet & trio in the Classical era.

The concluding *Gigue* is true to its origins in the English or Irish *jig,* characterized by wild leaps, repetitive rhythms, and angular lines of melody that constantly change direction.



Sombre as this suite is as a whole, its rollicking finale recaptures some of the genre's elegant exuberance and élan. The huge leaps in this movement give this dance movement an especially memorable swagger that stays in the memory long after it has finished.

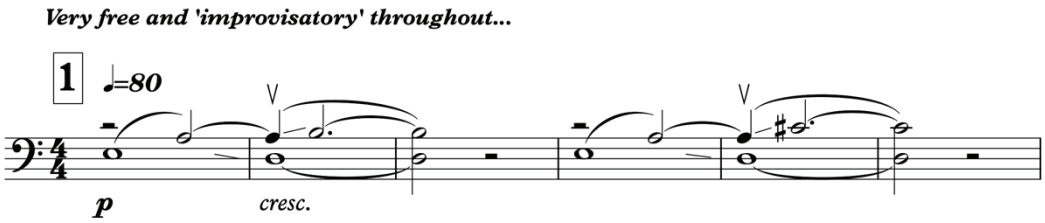
Gwilym Simcock
Prayer for the Senses

Welsh musician Gwilym Simcock is a classically–trained pianist and composer who straddles – or rather blurs – the divide between classical music and jazz. Described by Chick Corea as "a creative genius," he is regularly featured on the BBC both as a presenter and performer and has toured with drummer Bill Buford, violinist Nigel Kennedy and jazz guitarist Path Metheny. His music has been described as "melodically enthralling, complex yet hugely accessible, and above all wonderfully optimistic."

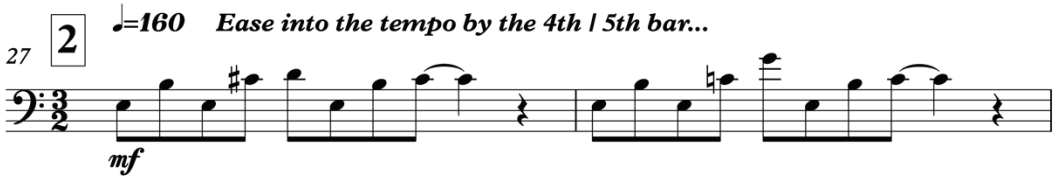
Prayer for the Senses was written for Sheku Kanneh–Mason in 2021 as part of the bicentenary celebrations for the Royal College of Music, from which both the composer and the performer graduated, and where Simcock currently serves as professor of jazz piano.

The work alternates slow deliberative passages in long notes with sections of constant 8th–note motion like a Bach 'pattern prelude,' drawing the ear over and over again to the hopeful, perhaps even 'prayerful' idea of melodic 'uplift' expressed in the continuously recurring gesture of an interval rising up from the bass.

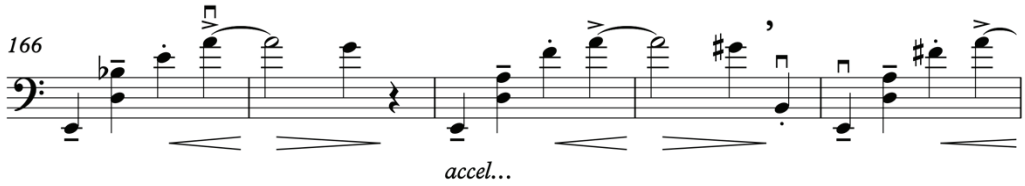
As the work opens this gesture is presented slowly and purposefully as the open interval between two strings.



But as the work progresses this idea begins to be expressed more energetically in a texture expressive of continuous upward striving.



The work reaches its climax in a series of ecstatic leaps

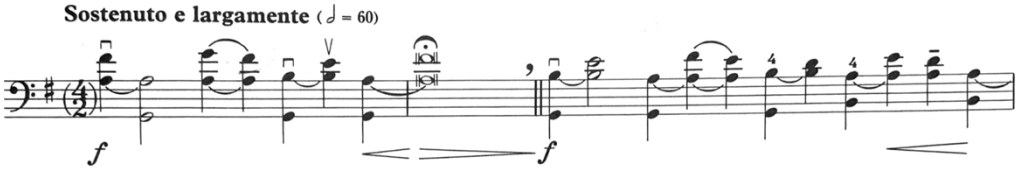


before returning softly to the simple evocative intervals with which it began.

Benjamin Britten
Suite No. 1 for Solo Cello Op. 72

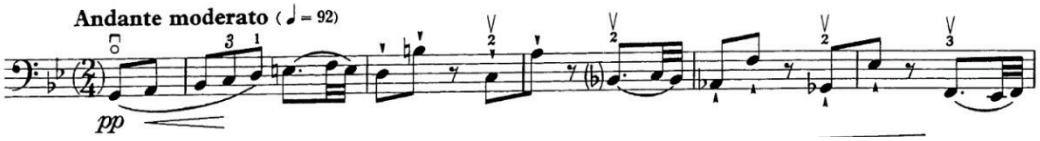
Benjamin Britten's major works for cello were written for Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich (1927–2007). The Cello Suite No. 1, composed in 1964, pays tribute to Bach's own works in the genre but substitutes a varied series of character pieces for the dances typically making up the traditional Baroque suite.

The six movements of this work follow each other without a pause, framed by a *Canto* that opens the work and recurs throughout, acting as a kind of *ritornello* or recurring theme that glues the disparate elements together.

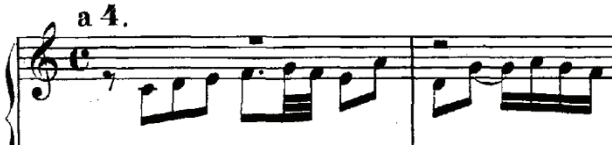


This *Canto* is written in groups of two or three double-stops with a common note providing continuity of resonance within each group, and each of its phrases ends with a pause in the manner of a German chorale.

The first piece is a *Fugue,* the first bars of which provide all the motivic grist for its musical mill: a simple rising scale pattern in 8th notes, a sudden turn-around in 32nds, and a series of leaps in 6ths:

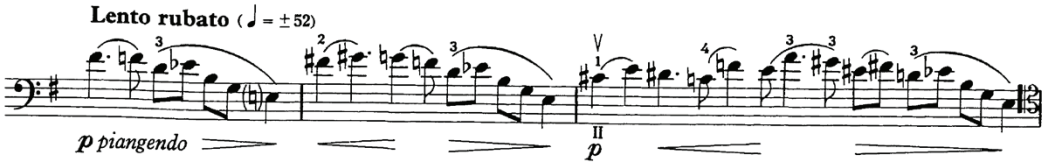


Students of keyboard music will recognize this as a thematic reference to the first fugue in Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I:



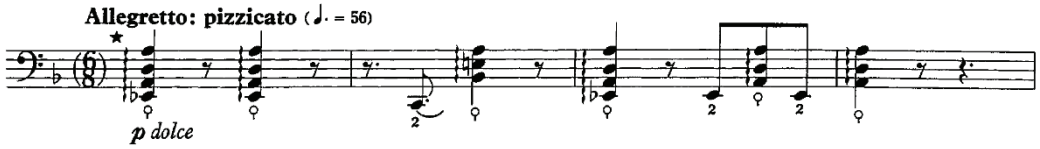
But Britten's fugue subject turns out to be no mere copy, with many a rhythmic and metrical quirk keeping the ear off-balance as it proceeds.

This is followed by a deeply expressive *Lamento.*



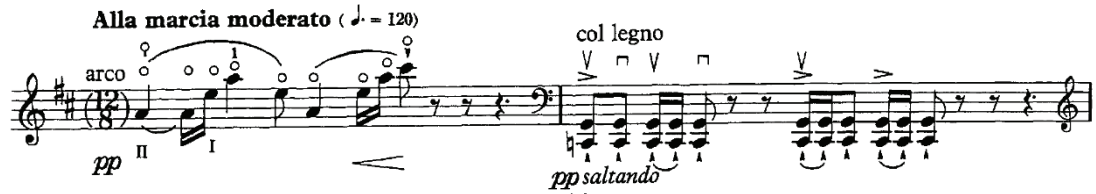
Its 'lamenting' quality is conveyed not just in its weeping *(piangendo)* style of delivery, but also in the way in which many of its phrases trail off into a downcast arpeggiated triad at the end.

After a subdued version of the *Canto,* next comes the Spanish-inflected *Serenata,* performed entirely in pizzicato – for both the right (bow) hand and the left (fingerboard) hand.



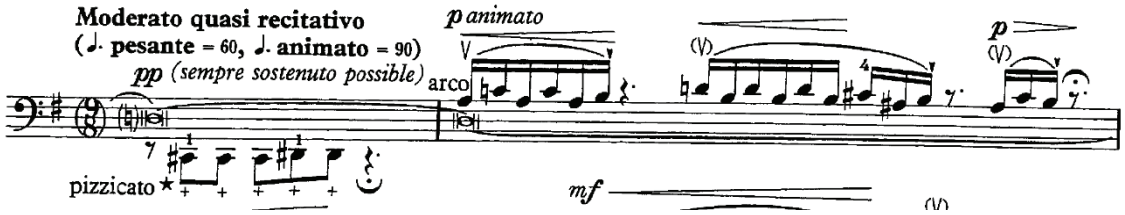
This imitation of guitar-strumming, combined with intimations of the characteristic descending bassline of Spanish folk music, evokes what one writer has called "the staggering swagger of drunken flamenco."

This is followed by a *Marcia* or march, summoning up the sounds of a festive procession on the occasion of some town holiday



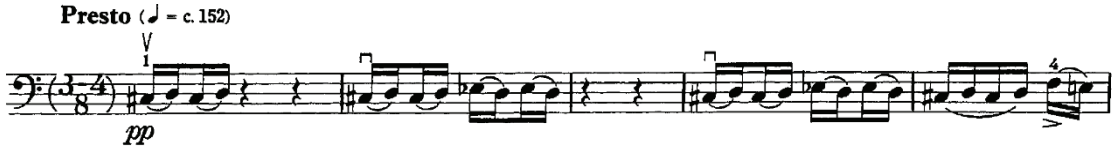
It features trumpet fanfares in harmonics alternating with drum rhythms tapped out with the wood of the bow *(col legno)*.

A further iteration of the *Canto* then brings us to the folk-like *Bordone* or 'drone' piece.



Particularly tricky for the performer in this movement is how to keep the drone pitch sounding – alternating between an open D string and a stopped D pitch – while melodic filigree noodles around on both sides of it and left-hand pizzicato complicates matters even further.

The work ends with a whilrwind *Moto perpetuo.*



Aptly described as a "Flight of the Bumblebee on steroids", this theme, based on little melodic 'bites' of semitones, is interrupted more than once by the *Canto,* which eventually drops its stately pace and blends the motoric rhythms of the movement with its more spacious intervals to bring the work to a punchy and emphatic end.

Leo Brouwer
Sonata No. 2 for Solo Cello

Cuban composer, guitarist and conductor Leo Brouwer is a major figure in Cuban musical culture. His first instrument was the guitar and his first compositions, written in his teen years, were for that instrument. He was largely self-taught but when in 1959, at the age of 20, he received a Cuban Government scholarship to study composition at Juilliard, he discovered to his surprise and delight that his *Estudios sencillos* (Simple Etudes) for guitar were already in the institution's music library. Not a bad welcome for a first-year composition student.

He is best known for these and many other guitar works that have established themselves in the repertoire, and for his scores to dozens of films. His musical style has evolved over the decades, but he insists that one fixed principle in his aesthetic has remained constant: his hatred of *clichés,* and by that he broadly refers to the classic 'recipes' for creating chart-topping pop tunes.

In a recent interview he stated:

My music is a little bit non-standard, because I don't care about melodies.

It is supposed to be that melody is the queen of music and then the other aspects – harmony, tension, dramaturgy, pulsations (popularly called 'rhythm') – are serving the melody, helping the melody to be continuously on the throne of the kingdom.

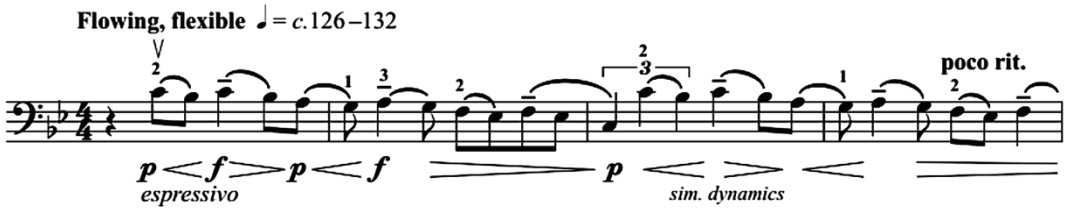
I think this is a 19th–century idea. And pop music has taken advantage of this situation in history.

His three–movement *Sonata No. 2 for Solo Cello* was written specifically for Sheku Kanneh–Mason on commission from the Royal Philharmonic Society.

Edmund Finnis
Five Preludes for Solo Cello

Edmund Finnis' *Five Preludes for Solo Cello*, like Gwylim Simcock's *Prayer for the Senses,* was written for Sheku Kanneh–Mason on commission from the Royal College of Music to celebrate the institution's 200th anniversary in 2021. Its five brief movements display the composer's remarkably accessible musical style, which is based in large part on the varied repetition of similar motives and gestures in successive phrases, as if an echoing musical thought were being played with or mused over.

A typical example is the recurring 'motto' opening of the phrases at the beginning of Prelude 1:



In an interview published on the Your Classical website, Sheku Kanneh–Mason says:

I love the first prelude. There's a conversational and intimate feeling about it. The music speaks to me. I feel that I'm able to speak with it because it's music that doesn't shout out to grab your attention. Rather, it draws you into this intimate conversation.

The following movements alternate between atmospheric and melody–based textures.

Prelude 2 emerges from almost nothing into a series of swelling and receding waves of fleetly created cross–string sonorities before subsiding into the quasi–silence with which it began.

Prelude 3 unfolds in a series of short concise phrases reminiscent of Gregorian chant.

Prelude 4 evokes with astonishing realism the deep breaths of the human organism as it inhales and exhales.

The melodic phrases of Prelude 5 are the most active and wide–ranging but no matter how far they range, they always manage to arrive back 'home' to a point of rest.

The following tribute from Sheku Kanneh–Mason appears above the first prelude in the published score of this work:

I first heard Ed's music a couple of years ago and was struck by the directness of his intentions and ability to portray emotion in a captivating and concise way. These five preludes are each distinctive in character and perfectly written for the cello.

In this regard, one is reminded of Vladimir Horowitz's pithy summing up of the sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti: "There is so much music in so few notes."

Gaspar Cassadó
Suite for solo cello

Gaspar Cassadó is hardly a household name, but he was one of the great cellists of the twentieth century, active as both a performer, composer and transcriber for his instrument. Born in Barcelona in 1897, he was discovered at the age of nine by a young Catalan cellist just starting out on his career, the 21–year–old Pablo Casals, and was accepted to study with him in Paris on a scholarship from his native city. During his long studies with Casals in Paris, he absorbed the many aesthetic crosswinds blowing through the French capital, coming to admire the spiky modernism of Stravinsky, the impressionism of Ravel, and the Spanish nationalist sentiments of Manuel de Falla.

Among the strongest influences on him, however, came from Casals' championing of the Bach suites for solo cello, which certainly influenced the composition of his own Suite for Solo Cello, composed in 1926. Cassadó himself never recorded the work, and it lay dormant for half a century until it was popularized by cellist Janos Starker in the 1980s. Cassadó's student Marçal Cervera, who studied the piece with him, says that it represents in its three movements three important cultural regions of Spain: Castilla–La Mancha, Catalonia and Andalusia.

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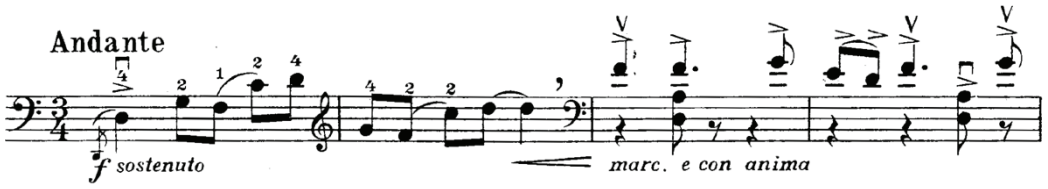
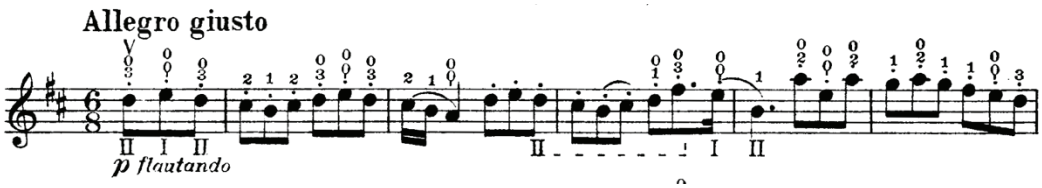
Like the Bach suites, Cassadó's suite is a collection of dances, introduced by a *Preludio,* which in the first movement of his suite turns into a *zarabanda,* related to the Baroque *sarabande.*



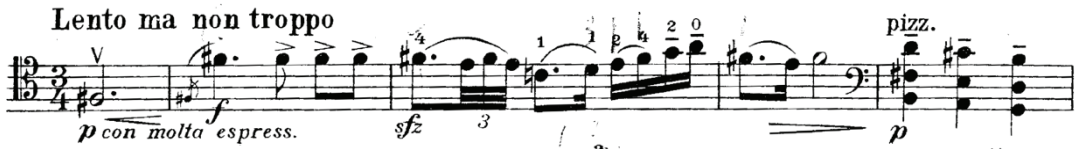
Cervera suggests that the two presentations of the opening theme, one *forte*, the other *piano*, represent in turn Don Quixote and his beloved, Dulcinea. But other associations run through the movement, as well, including quotations from Ravel's *Daphnis & Chloe* (the famous opening flute solo) and from Zoltán Kodály's *Sonata for Solo Cello*.

The second movement is a *sardana,* the folk dance most closely associated with the Catalonian nationalist revival of the 19th century.



The *sardana* is a round dance accompanied by a *cobla* wind band comprising a high–whistling *flaviol* (wooden fipple flute), double–reed shawms and various brass instruments. The opening, played entirely in harmonics, imitates the high whistling sound of the *flaviol* summoning the dancers to the town square. The *sardana* is a dance in three parts, the middle section being more lyrical and in a minor key. The frequent changes in register on the cello imitate the way that various sections of the band interact.

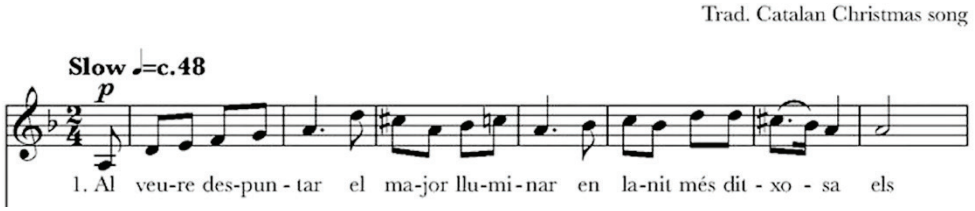
The last movement is the one in which the spirit of the dance is most evident.



The snap of castanets is imitated in sharp, abrupt rhythms, the strumming of the guitar in flamboyant arpeggio patterns, and the harmonies of Spanish folk music in the distinctive pattern of the four–note descending bass line.

Pablo Casals
Song of the Birds (arr. Posner)

The *Song of the Birds* (El cant dels ocells) is a traditional Catalan Christmas song which in each of its 15 verses features a different bird singing of the joy brought into the world by the birth of Jesus.



It was made famous by Catalan cellist Pablo Casals (1876–1873) who after the defeat of Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) went into exile but would play this simple lullaby at each of his concerts as a reminder of his homeland. By so doing he created an enduring symbol of Catalan national pride and an international anthem for peace around the world.

On October 24, 1971, two months before his 95th birthday, Casals was honoured at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. After receiving the UN Peace Medal from the hands of Secretary–General U Thant he said:

I have not played the cello in public for many years, but I feel that the time has come to play again. I am going to play a melody from Catalan folklore: El cant dels ocells – The Song of the Birds.

Birds sing when they are in the sky, they sing: “Peace, Peace, Peace”, and it is a melody that Bach, Beethoven and all the greats would have admired and loved.

What is more, it is born in the soul of my people, Catalonia.

Program notes by
Donald G. Gíslason 2023

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