

NSU FACULTY RECITAL

PAUL CHRISTOPHER, CELLO • MICHAEL YOUNG, PIANO

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Tonight NSU Associate Professor of Cello, **Paul Christopher**, plays three contrasting works written for cello since the turn of the twentieth century. The first is by Natchitoches-based pianist and composer **Michael Young**, who also serves as Mr. Christopher's musical partner tonight. Young has written the following about his new piece, Nocturne for cello and piano, which he and Mr. Christopher premiered at the Sugarmill Music Festival in May 2019: "My Nocturne for cello and piano is a lyrical piece in ternary form. After a brief introduction in the piano, the cello presents the principal theme, a nostalgic melody tinged with poignant chromaticism. The piano soon abandons its accompaniment role as the two instruments engage in a dialogue centered around five motives that form the basis for the rest of the piece. In the middle section, two features in the treble broken chord figuration in the piano—one rhythmic and one harmonic—contribute to the section's rise and fall in tension. The figuration progresses from six to eight subdivisions of the beat and then slows to quintuplets. Meanwhile, the figuration creates a harmonic arch from seventh to thirteenth chords and then back to triads. Throughout the middle section, the two instruments continue their lively dialogue around the five motives, now supplemented by their inversions. One of these motives generates the chromatic key scheme of the middle section (B major, C minor, A Lydian, B-flat minor, G major, and G-sharp minor), which is supported by a series of bass pedal points that outline the six notes of the whole tone scale. In the final section, the principal theme dissolves into pensive solos for the cello and then the piano. After a final impassioned dialogue the music fades to a delicate end."

The next piece we hear is *Cello Song Variations* ("Hallelujah, I'm a Bum") by American experimental composer, **Christian Wolff (born 1934)**. This work for solo cello, composed in 1978, reflects Wolff's interests in political subjects and protest songs which, in the 1970s, became significant factors in his music. Previously, Wolff had, like his mentor John Cage, kept his music "free of propaganda" and concerned only with musical matters, although his works of the 1960s already demonstrated a certain social consciousness in the way they allowed performers to

contribute to decision-making processes. As of the 1970s, however, Wolff's social consciousness had aligned with the new political awareness in folk music, jazz, and other popular idioms as well as that of fellow experimental composers, like his colleagues Cornelius Cardew and Frederic Rzewski. These composers were particularly concerned with workers' rights, and Wolff, in a 1980 article entitled, "On Political Texts and New Music," comments on their allegiance to democratic socialism. Yet, here, Wolff also admits two problems that experimental composers face when they assert political stances. These are extreme individualism and esotericism, both of which can prevent the music from communicating to the same mass audience for whom it claims to advocate. These are issues which ultimately drove Cardew to renounce his earlier experimental music, although Wolff seems to have been satisfied with a compromise of sorts.

Works by Wolff creatively integrate folk, work, and protest songs into their musical fabric without abandoning the experimental language. Often, as in *Cello Song Variations*, the original song is heard straightforwardly before these materials are, in the industrial terms used by Michael Hicks and Christian Asplund in their biography of Wolff, melted-down and recast. In other pieces where the songs are not presented openly in this fashion, Wolff simply instructs his players to perform the song itself prior to the new work. The song, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," appears in *Songs of Work and Protest* by Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, a popular 1973 Dover reissue of a 1960 anthology of folk music, as well as in Carl Sandburg's 1927 collection, *The American Songbag*. "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" is attributed to Harry McClintock, a singer-songwriter associated with the labor union, the Industrial Workers of the World whose members are known as the Wobblies. McClintock claimed that he added the irreverent text, which describes the beggar's life asking for handouts, to a Presbyterian hymn when he himself was a hobo in the late 1890s; soon, it was so popular, it was assumed to be an anonymous folksong and McClintock had to sue for his authorship. In Wolff's *Variations*, the cello plays the presumably familiar melody stringently before initiating variations which effectively deform the tune.

Throughout the piece's more than ten-minute span, fragments of the original can be heard and they become the basis for Wolff's disjoint variations. Eventually, the independent parts build to an emotional intensity, although the tune itself never truly returns.

Sir **Arnold Bax (1883-1953)** 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 that neighboring island. It was through the poetry of his Irish contemporary William Butler Yeats that Bax first discovered Ireland and the wider Celtic tradition. Then, while living in Dublin from 1911 to 1914, he adopted the pseudonym Dermot O'Byrne, as if an Irishman, and began publishing poetry, short stories, and plays. Although, in the end, Bax made his career as a composer, his music shares much in common with poetry: as one commentator has remarked, "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 in the early twentieth century were intent on breaking with the Romantic past, Bax was content for his music to remain lush in its orchestrations and driven in its harmonies. At the height of his popularity in the 1920s, he was briefly regarded as Britain's leading symphonist; indeed, he completed seven symphonies, fourteen tone poems, and numerous other orchestral works throughout his career. He composed fewer and less-demanding works in his later years, wishing to "retire, like a grocer" as he put it. Despite his knighthood in 1937 and appointment as Master of the King's Music in 1942, his compositions fell into general neglect after his death, and only recently have they seen a renewal of interest from listeners, performers, and scholars alike.

The Cello Sonata in E-flat major, which concludes our program tonight, was completed on November 7, 1923 and premiered on February 26 of the following year by cellist Beatrice Harrison and pianist Harriet Cohen. Harrison was a revered cellist who was the soloist in the first festival performances and recordings of Elgar's Cello Concerto. Cohen, meanwhile, was a formidable pianist and also Bax's lover, for whom he had abandoned his wife and children; Cohen remained a steadfast advocate of Bax's music throughout her career and he would continue to write for her, even after he became romantically involved with another younger woman. The Sonata is in three movements, the first marked, *Moderato*. It applies a rough sonata form, complete with exposition, development, and recapitulation, but with many contrasts between individual and often

conflicting materials. The opening is fearsome and troubled, while the second subject has the delicacy of a nocturne; later, the recapitulation begins, unexpectedly, as a slow lament. The second movement, *Poco lento*, borrows from a tone poem, *Spring Fire*, which Bax had written ten years earlier but would not be performed until 1970. Bax described the music of its opening section, reused here, as suggestive of "the uncertain and pensive hour immediately before daybreak in the woodland. It has been raining. The branches drip softly, and a damp, delicate fragrance rises from the earth." The gentle passagework heard in the piano evokes rainfall while the elegiac melody introduced by the cello sets the mood and hour. The third movement, *Molto vivace ma non troppo*, begins in a lively, folkdance fashion unlike either the conflicted first movement or tranquil second. After much excitement, the Sonata closes with a reflective epilogue which incorporates familiar material, a narrative device which Bax often employed.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 following the completion of his thesis, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." There he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world's leading contemporary composers. Jackson is active as a concert annotator and serves as Director of Scholarship to the Sugarmill Music Festival in Alexandria, LA. A project he is developing for the 2020 festival, "A Scholarly Presentation in Lecture and Music: Solomon Northup in the Central Louisiana Sugarhouse," has recently been awarded a prestigious Rebirth Grant by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. He has shared his research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN; the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN; and the University of Louisiana System Academic Summit in Thibodeaux, LA; in March 2020, he will present at the Music by Women Festival in Columbus, MS. Aside from his studies, Jackson is a composer, choral singer, music blogger, avid reader, and award-winning nature photographer.

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