

November 2023

by Derek Katz

Paul Dean (1966-) Suite for Clarinet and Cello (2019)

Chamber music has deep roots in family music making. One survey of musical life in Vienna at the beginning of the 19th century asserted that “nearly every music-loving family gathers as an amateur quartet, usually on a set day of the week. With an eye on this indispensable pleasure, musically talented sons learned to play the violin or cello...in those days, one would certainly form a string quartet from amongst one’s family’s friends and could easily constitute an ensemble in one’s own home.” Even today, music for small ensembles still provides opportunities for domestic collaborations in addition to public performances. The Australian clarinetist and composer Paul Dean is an excellent example of a musician flourishing in multiple spheres. The music in the Dean household when Paul was a child came from the records collected by his father, a Brisbane power station worker, but the family produced not one but two distinguished performer-composers in Paul and his older brother Brett, a violist and former member of the Berlin Philharmonic. The brothers have concertized together and inspired each other’s work.

Paul Dean’s Suite for Clarinet and Cello was written for members of the Melbourne Symphony when Dean was composer-in-residence for the orchestra, and the piece was premiered by those players. The first readings of the piece, however, were done by Dean and his cellist wife Trish Dean. The Deans are Co-Artistic Directors of Queensland’s Ensemble Q, and have performed and recorded the Suite. Unsurprisingly for a piece written by a professional performer at least partially for his own use and as an entertainment within his family, the Suite is highly diverting for both players and audience, and is extremely idiomatically written for the clarinet.

The Suite is in four movements, with each movement a tribute to someone. The first movement, “March for the love of chocolate oranges,” is an homage to Sergei Prokofiev, one of Dean’s compositional heroes, and specifically to the March from Prokofiev’s opera *The Love for Three Oranges*. Dean was inspired by the “quirky fast march rhythm” of the Prokofiev, and made a sort of game of varying his own opening gesture.

Dean’s March perhaps shares some of Prokofiev’s motoric energy and spiky harmonies, but is strikingly unstable for a march. The repeated riff that forms the basis of the movement is always in danger of sliding off the beat, and measures expand and contract without warning. The clarinet part has a brief passage of flutter-tonguing, a kind of tremolo growl, and makes extensive use of the instrument’s lowest register. The next homage is again to both a composer and a particular piece, in this case “Mercury, the Winged Messenger” from *The Planets*, by Gustav Holst. Dean’s movement, “Flight of the Winged Messenger,” is quiet and fleet perpetual motion, with running passage work combined with plucked notes from the cello and short notes imitating them from the clarinet.

The third movement, “Sunset Music,” is not a reference to a specific piece, but more generally in memory of the Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe. Sculthorpe, who died in 2014, was particularly known for evoking indigenous music from Australia and Tasmania, and for writing music that engaged with the natural world and climate change. This section, which Dean describes as “peaceful and plaintive,” also functions as a slow movement, and uses the most unusual tone colors in the Suite, with the cello often playing in ethereal harmonics, and the clarinet playing multiphonics (playing two notes at the same time). Like much of Sculthorpe’s music, this movement suggests the Australian landscape and sounds of nature, whether the general sense of spaciousness at the beginning of the movement or the gull imitations in the middle. The rollicking and humorous finale, “Tex and his amazing ropes,” is a tribute to Frank “Tex” Glanville, an Australian vaudeville performer active from the 1930s through the 1950s. Glanville, a rope spinner and juggler, was famous for tricks with lariats, whose loops he would roll through and step in and out of. Dean’s music sounds as if it could have accompanied Glanville’s act in a slightly off-kilter alternate universe, and features more flutter-tonguing, a Rhapsody in Blue-style glissando, and some exceedingly high notes for the clarinet.

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Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 49 (1979)

Like the *Dean Suite*, the *Sonata for Cello and Piano* by Alberto Ginastera was composed for a cellist spouse. Ginastera married the Argentine cello virtuoso Aurora Nátola in 1971, and wrote multiple works for her, including this substantial *Sonata*, which is dedicated "to my dear Aurora." According to the composer himself, Ginastera's output went through three phases, starting with works directly inspired by Argentine vernacular music, moving to a period in which the Argentine material was more abstracted and his musical language more modern, and culminating in a third stage in which the Argentine elements recede and he was engaging primarily with the trends of international modernism. This typology is problematic for a number of reasons, including the status of the label "Argentine" for Ginastera, a person of Italian and Catalan descent born into a multicultural and multiethnic country. Writing from the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, I feel obliged to mention that Ginastera was inspired by the figure of the gaucho (our mascot). More generally, "Argentine" for Ginastera often seemed to refer to the criollo culture of Argentines of Spanish heritage. While the *Sonata for Cello and Piano* is a very late work from Ginastera's last compositional phase, it is also one in which folkloristic elements have returned, albeit in highly abstracted guises.

In the first movement, the most audible of these abstracted elements are the vigorous dance rhythms, often consisting of groups of six notes divided into 3+3 and 2+2+2 (think "I like to be in America" from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*). These rhythms, articulated in repeated chords whose dissonance is leavened by frequent open strings in the cello, are the main material for a short first section, which is repeated. A transitional section, starting with the cello very high over tone clusters at the bottom of the piano keyboard leads to second section (also repeated) with jazzy chords strummed by the cello. The material of the opening returns for a whirlwind coda.

The slow second movement shares some characteristics with Ginastera's many rhapsodic evocations of the Argentine Pampas. It can also be heard as a kind of recitative and aria, opening with a long declamatory passage for cello alone, followed by an improvisatory response from the piano. When the cello enters again, it plays two rising figures that are quotes from Ginastera's *String Quartet* no. 3, with soprano. The quote is from the third movement of the quartet (also a slow movement), which sets a sensual poem by Federico García Lorca. The figures that the cello plays reproduce the entrance of the soprano on the words "love, love." The subsequent "aria" finds the cello singing sweetly and lyrically in its highest register.

The third movement is a rapid scherzo, and is marked by unusual sounds from the cello, including plucked glissandi, harmonics, bounced bowings and playing near the bridge. This fleet and constant motion leads directly into the final movement. This is another movement that is in constant motion, but the motion is much louder and more assertive than in the scherzo. As in the first movement, some of the rhythms suggest dance, including a passage marked "in the rhythm of the Carnival." There is an exultant middle section with the cello once again singing in a very high register before the pounding rhythms of the movement's opening return to close the *Sonata*.

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano in A minor, Op. 114 (1891)

Unfortunately for the conceit of these notes, Johannes Brahms was not married to a cellist (or to anyone else, for that matter). Nonetheless, Brahms's Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano was intended for a community of musical friends and was heard in domestic settings before it was presented in public. Like the Ginastera Sonata, the Brahms Trio is a very late work. The Trio, along with the Quintet for Clarinet and Strings (heard on last February's Camerata Pacifica programs) and two Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano, comes from a group of works written for the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. Brahms had heard Mühlfeld when he had traveled to Meiningen to hear a performance of his fourth symphony by the court orchestra, which featured Mühlfeld as the principal clarinet. Although Brahms had been planning to retire from composition, he relented and produced these glorious and substantial chamber works for the player whom he nicknamed his "prima donna" and "the nightingale of the orchestra."

The Trio was first played by Brahms himself at the keyboard, with Mühlfeld (of course) playing the clarinet part, and Robert Hausmann, the cellist of the string quartet led by Brahms's close friend Joseph Joachim, filling out the ensemble. Before the piece was heard in public, it received final rehearsals in the Vienna home of a musical family who were friends with Joachim and Hausmann and who regularly hosted private concerts with audiences for fifty to eighty people. The first open performance took place in a quartet concert series presented by Joachim at the Berlin Singakademie. These were performances that were heard in an atmosphere of attentive reverence. As one listener reported, "the audience listened devoutly, like the congregation at a church." Brahms's Trio stood out both by virtue of being a rare contemporary work and because introducing Mühlfeld's clarinet into a series otherwise restricted to the string quartet was a bold gesture. In Brahms's words, "Joachim has sacrificed the virginity of his quartet to my newest things. Hitherto he has protected the chaste sanctuary but now, in spite of all of my protestations, he insists that I invade it with clarinet and piano, with trio and quartet."

About a decade after Brahms's death, the composer Max Bruch delivered an extended appreciation of Brahms, whom Bruch considered "one of the greatest personalities in the entire annals of music." Bruch contrasted his own need to compose music that was pleasing and sold well with the freedom to experiment afforded Brahms by his lack of financial constraints. Bruch said that Brahms could "outrage critics with wonderful conflicting rhythms, bold and startling modulations and paint in dark colors, à la Rembrandt." All of these qualities are present in the Trio, although, exactly as Bruch predicted, far from outraging posterity, they continue to "proclaim him as a composer of marked originality." Of Bruch's list, it is perhaps the dark and warm colors that are most prominent in this Trio. While the scoring superficially resembles that of a standard piano trio, the substitution of clarinet for violin both lowers the register of the corresponding part (the Trio was published with an alternate part for viola) and provides a more vocal tone color. The prominence of the cello, which frequently leads the musical argument, also contributes to this effect.

The first movement shows Brahms at his most overly clever. The opening gesture, first played by cello alone, is barely more than a modest rising broken chord. The simplicity of this figure makes it easy to manipulate and combine with other things. As the clarinet echoes the cello, the piano accompanies the two with the same broken chord, but slower and upside-down. After some more agitated figures are introduced by the piano, Brahms toys with the rising arpeggio in different speed and rhythms. The next bit of cleverness comes when the cello presents a new idea in a high register against a full accompaniment in the piano. This sounds as if it starts on a strong beat, but is actually notated as a weak pulse. This creates a tension that requires resolution, and Brahms gets back on the right foot with the second theme, once again first played by the cello alone. This theme is basically the same broken chord, but going down. At this point, it will come as no surprise that the piano accompaniment is yet another broken chord, with the right hand imitating the cello and going down, while the left hand goes up in a mirror image.

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The second movement is this one that most suggests the rich browns and golds of Rembrandt. Here, the clarinet finally gets the main melody first. The warm colors are enhanced by placing the cello and the left hand of the piano very low. The contrasting idea is a rare moment when the piano presents a theme (like a good host, Brahms keeps his own piano part largely in the background and generously divides the melodies amongst his friends). The accompaniment is a murmur of interlocking arpeggios for low clarinet and cello.

The next movement is as unapologetically melodic and rhythmically swinging as the first was complex and unstable. This sounds like a waltz that could have come either from Brahms's *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, or from the *Op. 39 Waltzes for piano four-hands* (one of the very successful publications that created the freedom that Bruch so envied). This is domestic music of the most graceful sort, with a trio that tends more towards a rustic *Ländler* than a ballroom waltz.

The last movement shows Brahms's "wonderful conflicting rhythms," as the beat continually switches between divisions into triplets and sixteenth notes. The pulse remains the same, but the subdivisions into three and four keep players and audience off balance. Critical reception frequently positions the Trio as more austere than the widely beloved *Clarinet Quintet*, but it spans a wide emotional range that encompasses passion and humor and is a fitting tribute to Brahms's love of Mühlfeld's playing and to the community of friends that supported him by playing and providing spaces for his music.