

The Firebird with Xian Zhang

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Johann Sebastian Bach: Prelude from Cello Suite No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008

The six suites for unaccompanied cello, BWV 1007–1012, are bedrock to the cello literature. Every cellist studies them, and most cellists retain all six suites in their permanent repertoire.

Each of the suites opens with a Prelude in the form of a French overture, consisting of a slow introduction with pronounced dotted rhythms, followed by a fugal Allegro. The Second Suite's Prelude opens on the low C, the lowest pitch on a cello. The music has a dark cast and somber character at the start, often calling for triple and quadruple stops on the downbeat. The slow introduction cedes to a faster contrapuntal passage in 3/8 meter that proceeds in running sixteenth notes for much of its duration. Double, triple, and quadruple stops flesh out its harmonies as Bach brings the Prelude to a close.

Caroline Shaw: *Valencia*

Earlier this spring, the New Jersey Symphony performed Pulitzer Prize-winner Caroline Shaw's *The Observatory*. This weekend we get acquainted with one of her short chamber works. *Valencia* is a paean to the delicious Mediterranean citrus fruit named for a Spanish city. Her evocative composer's note brings the Valencia orange to life:

There is something exquisite about the construction of an ordinary orange. . . became an untethered embrace of the architecture of the common Valencia orange, through billowing harmonics and somewhat viscous chords and melodies. It is also a kind of celebration of awareness of the natural, unadorned food that is still available to us.

Shaw's piece is an exuberant mix of harmonics, *glissandos*, minimalism, and rhythmic games. What starts out as a marked contrast between the pairs of string players eventually coalesces into a quasi-symphonic

collaboration. Rather than being at odds with one another, they sail forth. Though pizzicato and rapid harmonics surface toward the end, the conclusion is unified—and witty.

Qasim Naqvi/arr. Ben Corrigan: *God Docks at Death Harbor* for Piano Quintet

Pakistani-American Qasim Naqvi has a double-pronged career as composer and drummer. He is a founding member of Dawn of Midi, a trio comprising India's Aakaash Israni on double bass, Morocco's Amino Belyamin on piano and Naqvi on drums. Based in Brooklyn, Dawn of Midi has favored composition rather than improvised music. Qasim's works have been performed in Finland, the UK, and Holland, and he is a prolific composer of soundtracks for film. He studied performance at the New School Jazz and Contemporary Music program and California Institute of the Arts. Nimbus Dance and the Symphony have collaborated twice before on chamber music works by Naqvi. His composer's note follows.

This piece was inspired by its title. The phrase, "God Docks at Death Harbor" came to my wife in a dream. She's an extraordinary poet, and one morning she woke up with these words in her mind...As soon as I heard the phrase, it immediately conjured some very strong and specific imagery for these words. I imagined an earth many years into the future where we no longer exist. I imagined the quiet and peacefulness of this planet without us, as it restores itself. I imagined the sun rising on empty cities and towns. I guess you could say this piece is about our end, but not in an apocalyptic sense. To me, its tone is one of hope, for a planet that is getting a second chance in our absence.

God Docks at Death Harbor is a reverent, shimmering work, suffused with chimes, and gently blurred harmonies that grow more complex. A repeated bass line anchors the seamless flow of this atmospheric piece.

Igor Stravinsky: Divertimento from *The Fairy's Kiss* (1949 version)

This Divertimento is drawn from a neoclassical ballet, *Le baiser de la fée* (*The Fairy's Kiss*), based on "The Ice Maiden," a tale by Denmark's beloved author Hans Christian Andersen. Stravinsky borrowed his themes from little-known salon pieces by Tchaikovsky; however, he "spiced them up" with original music that employs unexpected harmonies, giving the music a modernist and distinctively Stravinskyan touch. Thus, the Divertimento is at once tuneful and piquant. Disjointed rhythms also surprise the ear, enhanced by Stravinsky's colorful use of orchestral winds, brass, and percussion. Strings are not neglected: the concertmaster, principal viola, and principal cello all have luscious solos.

Igor Stravinsky: Suite from *The Firebird* (1919 Revision)

Stravinsky's Suite from *The Firebird* is one of the oddest multi-cultural mixes imaginable. The ballet scenario is adapted from a Russian fairy tale in which a handsome prince is drawn into an enchanted garden and palace by the mythical bird of the title, who is a sort of good fairy. He falls in love with a beautiful captive princess but must break the spell of the evil ogre Kashchei (who presides over the palace) before he may claim his bride. However, in this week's performances, Nimbus Dance imagines an entirely new story to accompany this recognizable music.

Stravinsky had developed exceptional skills in writing for orchestra studying with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. He put those skills to superb use in *The Firebird*, commingling Russian folk tunes with original themes and adorning both in sumptuous orchestral garb. He captures the scintillating character of the magic bird and the menace of the terrifying Kashchei. *The Firebird's* final tableau remains one of the symphonic literature's most splendid conclusions.

Johann Sebastian Bach: Prelude from Cello Suite No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008

Johann Sebastian Bach

Born: March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany

Died: July 28, 1750, in Leipzig

Composed: ca.1720

World Premiere: Undocumented, but probably in Leipzig in 1720.

Duration: 4 minutes

Instrumentation: solo cello

The six suites for unaccompanied cello, BWV 1007–1012, are bedrock to the cello literature. Every cellist studies them, and most cellists retain all six suites in their permanent repertoire.

It was not always so. Bach was nearly a forgotten composer in the 19th century. Those who were acquainted with his music classified it as academic, useful for pedantic purposes, but unsuitable for performance. Not until the Spanish cellist Pablo Casals began to play the Bach Cello Suites in public did they acquire a broader audience. Their popularity today is undisputed. They vary widely in difficulty, which means that even beginning cellists can learn a couple of the easier movements, incorporating Bach into their repertoire early in their studies.

Bach probably intended these works as a companion group to his Sonatas and Partitas for unaccompanied violin, which date from 1717–1723, the years he was in service to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Some

scholars believe that parts of the unaccompanied cello suites are earlier, possibly from his stint between 1708 and 1717 working for Prince Johann Ernest of Saxe-Weimar. We know that Bach played both violin and viola. In composing these works for cello, he must have learned a considerable amount about the instrument's technique, capabilities—and limitations (for example, the cello cannot play chords as easily as the violin). It is possible that he was writing for Christian Bernhard Linike, cellist in the Cöthen court orchestra.

No autograph score survives for the cello suites. The earliest copy is in the hand of Anna Magdalena, Bach's second wife, and dates from the late 1720s. Later manuscripts have come down to us in various copyists' hands, which means that there is no definitive version. It is likely that Bach returned to these suites and continued revising them through the 1720s and 1730s; he did so with many other works. Furthermore, the expectation that Baroque performers would embellish the music, particularly during repeated halves of dances, lends another measure of interpretive flexibility.

All six of Bach's Cello Suites open with a Prelude in the form of a French overture, consisting of a slow introduction with pronounced dotted rhythms, followed by a fugal Allegro. The Second Suite's Prelude on the low C, the lowest pitch on a cello. The music has a dark cast and somber character at the start, often calling for triple and quadruple stops on the downbeat. The slow introduction cedes to a faster contrapuntal passage in 3/8 meter that proceeds in running sixteenth notes for much of its duration. Double, triple, and quadruple stops flesh out its harmonies as Bach brings the Prelude to a close.

The Fifth Suite is the only one of Bach's six Cello Suites that also exists in a version for lute. It also calls for scordatura, an intentional mistuning. In this case, the cello's top string—the A string—is tuned down to G. The result heightens the dark cast to the instrument's sound; the mistuning also facilitates Bach's occasional use of chords.

Caroline Shaw: *Valencia*

Caroline Shaw

Born: August 1, 1982, in Greenville, North Carolina

Composed: 2012

World Premiere: August 2012 by Lorna Tsai, Caroline Shaw, Sage Cole, and Shay Rudolph at a bookstore in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts.

Duration: 6 minutes

Instrumentation: string quartet

Earlier this spring, the New Jersey Symphony performed Pulitzer Prize-winner Caroline Shaw's *The Observatory*. This weekend we get acquainted with one of her short chamber works. *Valencia* is a paean to the delicious Mediterranean citrus fruit named for a Spanish city. Her evocative composer's note brings the Valencia orange to life.

There is something exquisite about the construction of an ordinary orange. (Grocery stores around the country often offer the common "Valencia" as the standard option.) Hundreds of brilliantly colored, impossibly delicate vesicles of juice, ready to explode. It is a thing of nature so simple, yet so complex and extraordinary. In 2012, I performed at the MoMA with the musician and performance artist, Glasser—a song which she described as being about the simple beauty of fruit. Later that summer I wrote *Valencia*, for a concert I was playing with some good friends in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts. I decided to channel Glasser's brave and intuitive approach to melody and texture, such that *Valencia* became an untethered embrace of the architecture of the common Valencia orange, through billowing harmonics and somewhat viscous chords and melodies. It is also a kind of celebration of awareness of the natural, unadorned food that is still available to us.

Shaw's movement is an exuberant mix of harmonics, *glissandos*, minimalism, and rhythmic games. What starts out as marked contrast between pairs of the string players eventually coalesces into a quasi-symphonic collaboration. Rather than being at odds with one another, they sail forth. Though pizzicato and rapid harmonics surface toward the end, the conclusion is unified—and witty.

Qasim Naqvi/arr. Ben Corrigan: *God Docks at Death Harbor* for Piano Quintet

Qasim Naqvi / Ben Corrigan

Born: April 27, 1977, in New Milford, Connecticut

Composed: 2023; the piano quintet version was completed in 2025

World Premiere: May 19, 2023, at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall. This weekend's performances are the premiere of the piano quintet version, arranged by Ben Corrigan.

Duration: 8 minutes

Instrumentation: piano quintet (string quartet plus piano)

Pakistani-American Qasim Naqvi has a double-pronged career as composer and drummer. He is a founding member of Dawn of Midi, a trio comprising India's Aakaash Israni on double bass, Morocco's Amino Belyamin on piano and Naqvi on drums. Based in Brooklyn, Dawn of Midi has favored composition rather than improvised music. Qasim's works have been performed in Finland, the UK, and Holland, and he is a prolific composer of soundtracks for film. He studied performance at the New School Jazz and Contemporary Music program and California Institute of the Arts. Nimbus Dance and the Symphony have collaborated twice before on chamber music works by Naqvi. His composer's note follows.

This piece was inspired by its title. The phrase, "God Docks at Death Harbor" came to my wife in a dream. She's an extraordinary poet, and one morning she woke up with these words in her mind. At the time I was just starting to think about this orchestra. As soon as I heard the phrase, it immediately conjured some very strong and specific imagery for me. And the words proceeded to serve as a narrative backdrop for the entire work. Through these words, I imagined an earth many years into the future where we no longer exist. I imagined the quiet and peacefulness of this planet without us, as it restores itself. I imagined the sun rising on empty cities and towns. I guess you could say this piece is

about our end, but not in an apocalyptic sense. To me, its tone is one of hope, for a planet that is getting a second chance in our absence. Musically, I wanted to try some different things and deviate from the more abstract and darker sound worlds which my work often exhibits.

God Docks at Death Harbor is a reverent, shimmering movement, suffused with chimes and gently blurred harmonies that grow more complex. A repeated bass line anchors the seamless flow of this atmospheric piece.

Igor Stravinsky: Divertimento from *The Fairy's Kiss* (1949 revision)

Igor Stravinsky

Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Composed: 1928; revised in 1934 and 1949

World Premiere: November 27, 1928, in Paris.

Duration: 22 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, harp, and strings

For all the astonishing diversity of his genius, Stravinsky's most lasting contribution is in the realm of ballet. Yet, in the popular imagination, his substantial reputation continues to rest primarily on three early masterpieces: (*The Firebird* (1910), *Pétrouchka* (1911), and (*The Rite of Spring* (1913). Stravinsky lived more than half a century after the last of that stunning trio of ballets, continuing to compose until the mid-1960s. Many of his subsequent scores were also written for the ballet stage and have remained in the repertoire with double lives as both dance and concert scores.

Two of these, *Pulcinella* (1920) and *The Fairy's Kiss* (1928) hold a special place in Stravinsky's oeuvre because they are based in large part upon the works of earlier composers. Clearly a musician of Stravinsky's ingenuity and originality had no need to rely on others for his musical material, and indeed in both cases he was paying tribute to one of his predecessors. The story behind *The Fairy's Kiss* is particularly engaging.

Late in 1927, Stravinsky was approached by the dancer Ida Rubinstein, who was starting a new ballet company. For its inauguration, she wished to commission a new work inspired by Tchaikovsky's music. Stravinsky was a great admirer of Tchaikovsky and was strongly drawn to the project because of the timing: 1928 was the 35th anniversary of Tchaikovsky's death. Ironically, Stravinsky's mentor and colleague Serge Diaghilev was greatly offended that Stravinsky accepted a commission from someone else. What he perceived as an insult stung deeper because Ida Rubinstein was a former dancer with Diaghilev's incomparable troupe, the Ballets Russes. (In fact, of Stravinsky's stage works, only three—*L'histoire du soldat* (1918), *Apollon musagète* (1928), and *The Fairy's Kiss*—came to fruition independent of Diaghilev.)

Nevertheless, the project went forward. Stravinsky's musical approach was to take fragments of melodies, or entire themes, from Tchaikovsky's music, endowing it with freshness through piquant orchestration and the

addition of some original material. He selected all the excerpts from Tchaikovsky's lesser-known piano works, much of it frankly salon music: *Humoresques*, *Nocturnes*, *Valses russes*, *Scherzos*, an *Evening Reverie*, an *Album Leaf*, and several songs, among others. None of his choices was orchestral. Stravinsky knew this music well, since childhood, and Tchaikovsky was his favorite Russian composer. (In *Expositions and Developments*, one of his collaborative books with Robert Craft, the composer detailed his borrowings, and adaptations).

The challenge he faced was to sustain the dramatic interest of a long ballet with the vehicle of the lighter raw material of salon miniatures. He kept the texture light, despite tripling the woodwinds in the orchestration, by using smaller groups of instruments in combinations rather than drawing upon the massive sound of full orchestra. Consequently, the entire score has a more chamber-like feel to it. Also, the borrowings are carefully intermingled with Stravinsky's own original writing. His acerbic style cuts through any danger of sentimentality in his treatment of Tchaikovsky's music; the innate theatricality, and simple appeal of the tale delivers the rest.

In his 1936 autobiography, *Chroniques de ma vie*, Stravinsky discusses Hans Christian Andersen's tale, "The Ice Maiden," and its transformation into a ballet.

I chose ["The Ice Maiden"] as my theme, and worked out the story on the following lines. A fairy imprints her magic kiss on a child at birth and parts it from its mother. Twenty years later, when the youth has attained the very zenith of his good fortune, she repeats the fatal kiss, and carries him off to live in supreme happiness with her forever afterward. As my object was to commemorate the work of Tchaikovsky, this subject seemed to me to be particularly appropriate as an allegory, the muse having similarly branded Tchaikovsky with her fatal kiss, and the magic imprint has made itself felt in all the musical creations of this great artist.

The music is divided into five principal sections. Two lullabies frame the ballet: in the first, "Lullaby in the Storm," the child is separated from its mother. The closing section is its reprise, retitled, and reworked as "Lullaby of the Land Beyond Time and Place," with a peculiarly tranquil aura of wide open, heavenly space. In between, Stravinsky provides musical interest by contrast: notably a boisterous village *fête*, in which the music vividly illustrates country peasant dancing. In snatches here, we can sense the echo of certain Russian operas, and also perhaps the spirit of *Pétrouchka*.

Igor Stravinsky: Suite from *The Firebird* (1919 Revision)

Igor Stravinsky

Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia, near St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Composed: 1909–1910; revised 1919

World Premiere: The original, full version of the ballet was premiered on June 25, 1910, at the Opéra de Paris with Ballet Russes.

Duration: 23 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, xylophone, triangle), harp, piano, celeste, and strings

Stravinsky had developed exceptional skills in writing for orchestra studying with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. He put those skills to superb use in *The Firebird*, commingling Russian folk tunes with original themes and adorning both in sumptuous orchestral garb. He captures the scintillating character of the magic bird and the menace of the terrifying Kashchei. *The Firebird's* final tableau remains one of the symphonic literature's most splendid conclusions.

Remarkably, *The Firebird* was Stravinsky's first ballet, and the first of the trio of ballets that established him as a composer of international stature. The new work was an instant success, placing Stravinsky on the musical map virtually overnight.

Tamara Karsavina, the ballerina who created the title role in the 1910 production of *The Firebird*, wrote an article in 1948 recalling the young composer's participation and demeanor as the new ballet went into rehearsal.

Often, he came early to the theatre before a rehearsal began, in order to play for me, over and over again, some specially difficult passage. I felt grateful, not only for the help he gave me, but for the manner in which he gave it. For there was no impatience in him with my slow understanding; no condescension of a master of his craft towards the slender equipment of my musical education. It was interesting to watch him at the piano. His body seemed to vibrate with his own rhythm; punctuating staccatos with his head, he made the pattern of his music forcibly clear to me, more so than the counting of bars would have done.

With *The Firebird's* brilliant and lush orchestration, Stravinsky proved how well he had learned from his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov. Relying heavily on Russian folk tunes, he also acknowledged some debt to all the "Russian Five." The *Ronde des princesses* shares the orientalism of Borodin's lyrical *Polovtsian Dances*; Stravinsky's grandiose and triumphant finale is surely related to Mussorgsky's "Great Gate of Kiev" from *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

In a sense, though, *The Firebird* also marked Stravinsky's break with his homeland. Thereafter he was a citizen of the world, living largely in France and Switzerland, and eventually in the United States. The ballet is at once a traditional work and a turning point, marking both the end of an era and the beginning of a brilliant, lengthy career.

The Firebird was premiered by the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris in 1910. The following year, Stravinsky derived a suite from the ballet, concluding with Kashchei's "Infernal Dance." He re-orchestrated the Suite in 1919 for a somewhat smaller orchestra, using the finale of the complete ballet for his

conclusion; that is the version we hear. For a third version in 1945, he composed some additional connective music.

In his 1936 autobiography, Stravinsky described the circumstances that led to his composing *The Firebird*.

In the summer of 1909, I returned to [my opera *Le Rossignol*] with the firm intention of finishing it...But a telegram then arrived to upset all my plans. Diaghilev, who had just reached St. Petersburg, asked me to write the music for *L'Oiseau de feu* [*The Firebird*] for the Russian Ballet season at the Paris Opera House in the spring of 1910.

Only 27, Stravinsky was keenly aware of both the learning experience and prestige he would gain by accepting the assignment.

It was highly flattering to be chosen from among the musicians of my generation, and to be allowed to collaborate in so important an enterprise side by side with personages who were generally recognized as masters in their own spheres.

With the instinct for theatre and sense for life's adventure that served him admirably for the next six decades, he embraced his new colleagues, dizzy with ideas.

At the moment when I received Diaghilev's commission, the ballet had just undergone a great transformation owing to the advent of a young ballet master, Fokine, and the flowering of a whole bouquet of artists full of talent and originality: Pavlova, Karsavina, Nijinsky. Notwithstanding all my admiration for the classical ballet and its great master, Marius Petipa, I could not resist the intoxication produced by such ballets as *Les Danses du Prince Igor* or *Carnaval*, the only two of Fokine's productions that I had so far seen. All this greatly tempted me, and impelled me to break through the pale and eagerly seize this opportunity of making close contact with that group of advanced and active artists of which Diaghilev was the soul, and which had long attracted me.

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