INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC


Jacques Castérède. Sonate pour violoncelle et piano [1996]. Paris: Gérard Billaudot (T. Presser), c1999. [Performance notes, p. 2; score, p. 3–50; and part. ISMN M-043-06322-3; G 6322 B. Duration, ca. 33 min. €23.52.]


Serge Nigg. Duo élégiaque pour violoncelle et piano. (XXᵉ siècle pour les jeunes.) Paris: Gérard Billaudot (T. Presser), 1998, c1985. [Score, 4 p.; and part. ISMN M-043-06438-1; G 6438 B. Duration, ca. 3 min. 30 sec. €16.23.]


In the final decades of the twentieth century, French (or French-published) composers writing for accompanied or unaccompanied cello seem to have adopted one of two approaches for creating new works. Both methods evince their genealogy by referencing a number of strong influences in their creation. The first of these involves
a deliberate or unconscious evoking of the pioneering and seminal works for solo cello or cello-piano duet by György Ligeti (*Sonate für Violoncello solo* [1948–53]), Elliott Carter (Sonata for Violoncello and Piano [1948; rev. 1966]), and particularly Benjamin Britten (Sonata in C for Cello and Piano, op. 65 [1960–61] and the three suites for solo cello, opp. 72 [1964], 80 [1967], and 87 [1971; rev. 1974], all written for Mstislav Rostropovich). The second approach, recalling the early cello music of Krzysztof Penderecki (*Sonata per violoncello e orchestra* [1966] and the First Cello Concerto [1967]) and the American composer Robert Muczynski (*Gallery: Suite for Unaccompanied Cello* [1966] and the Sonata for Cello and Piano, op. 25 [1968]) adopts a more sympathetic and interested view of the instrument’s melodic capabilities, using them to the best advantage of both the cello and piano—and allowing the performers greater artistic freedom. This review will examine thirteen such works for solo cello or cello and piano (harp in one case) composed mostly in the late 1980s and 1990s in a variety of styles.

Born in Paris in 1936, Gilbert Amy studied with Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen at the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique in Paris, and later with Pierre Boulez in Darmstadt (1958, 1960) and Basel. Until 1981, Amy was the chief conductor and artistic director of the contemporary music ensemble Nouvel orchestre philharmonique de Radio France (which he founded). He taught at Yale University in 1982 before being appointed director of the Conservatoire régional in Lyon. Amy’s *Mémoire pour violoncelle et piano* (1979–1989) d’après Shin’ananim sha’ananim follows the first line of compositional thought, and the influence of the sonatas by Ligeti and Carter is apparent in the compositional methods that employ effects layered over pitch groupings woven through rapid tempo and mood changes. The inspiration for *Mémoire* is the liturgical poem for Yom Kippur written by the eleventh-century poet Solomon ibn Gabirol. Through-composed, the work follows a loose A–B–A form in which a calm first section builds into a frenetic contrasting area and then returns again to a more serene mood. An extended cadenza for the cello, mirroring the overall form of the piece, serves as a coda. Technically demanding and rhythmically complex, *Mémoire* challenges the performers to transmit the work’s intricacies and structures to the audience—who face the challenge of discerning the underlying coherence amidst the density of Amy’s piece.

Born in Athens but a resident of Paris since 1963, Georges Aperghis has written many concert works in traditional forms and improvisatory pieces for musical theater. He founded the Atelier Théâtre et Musique (ATEM) in 1976 at Bagnolet, and in 1991 became director of the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers in Nanterre. Like Amy, Aperghis writes for cello in a style reminiscent of earlier composers’ solo works. His *Sonate pour violoncelle seul* (1994) is a highly chromatic and rhythmically knotty piece in five movements. The third movement, Allegro, and the last movement, Largo, take ideas of extended techniques from Britten (especially the Third Suite), including difficult double stops, col legno, various kinds of pizzicato, artificial harmonics, glissandos, and sudden, large dynamic changes. The fourth movement, Presto, however, shows less inspiration than musical larceny from the *Moto perpetuo e canto quarto* of Britten’s First Suite, going so far as to paraphrase by inversion Britten’s leading motive—a repeated ascending half-step in sixteenth notes. Rhythmically, the movement copies Britten’s suite as well—and while Aperghis commits to no time signature, Britten’s groupings of sixteenth notes in three pairs for each measure seem the obvious basis for Aperghis’s Presto. The composer expertly knows the strengths and limitations of the cello, but unfortunately his sonata does not reveal a very original application of them.

Born in Paris in 1961, Nicolas Bacri graduated in 1983 from the Conservatoire national in Paris with the first prize for composition after studying with Claude Ballif, Marius Constant, Serge Nigg, and Michel Paul Philippot. He was strongly influenced by Giacinto Scelsi while a resident at the Accademia di Francia in Rome, and in 1987–91 was head of the chamber music department at Radio France. He dedicated his First Symphony (1983–84) to Elliott Carter and his Cello Concerto (1985–87) to Henri Dutilleux. A welcome change from the derivativeness of Amy and Aperghis, Bacri’s First Suite for Violoncello Solo, op.
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31, no. 1 (1987; rev. 1994), subtitled Preludio e metamorphosi, exploits the range and technical potential of the cello while providing the performer with plenty of melodic moments as well. The Prelude comprises three large sections: a somewhat etudelike opening with a steady rise and fall of eighth notes; a recitative, still melodic in nature but more reserved than the opening; and a più mosso, in which Bacri calls upon the performer to display technical bravura with difficult rhythms and wide leaps across the instrument. The Metamorphosis, like the Prelude, is also through-composed in three sections. A beginning similar to the Prelude’s introductory etude gives way to a largo for two low voices, one a near-drone based on C₂, the other a meditative line based on a three-note motive centered on D, combining to form an intense aura of stillness. A vivo alla giga brings the suite to an end with dance gestures and technical fireworks that any audience will enjoy hearing and performers will thrill to toss off effortlessly—after hours of hard practice.

Jacques Castérède (b. 1923) attended the Conservatoire national in Paris where he was a pupil of Messiaen. He won the Prix de Rome in 1953, and later held teaching positions in solfège, analysis, and composition at the Conservatoire national (1960–82), the École normale de musique (1983–88), and the Conservatoire supérieur de région (1988–97). Castérède’s Sonate pour violoncelle et piano (1996) takes a slightly more unusual tactic than either the Britten-Ligeti school or the more cello-appreciative Bacri. It is not a method for any cellist to take lightly with either a valued or even a simply loved cello—for Castérède calls for not only a prepared piano but also a prepared cello. The two-movement sonata, Allegro and Scherzando, is largely percussive, with sharp rhythmic motives, complex meters, and frequent changes of time signatures and tempo in a style that might bring to mind Carter. Carter, however, respects his performers, and more importantly, the tools of their craft. Castérède asks his pianist to gum up designated strings, perhaps with the assistance of the page-turner, as the preparation must be accomplished quickly in performance. Of the cellist he asks no less: “Put a little something under the third and fourth strings [G and C] . . . so that the notes [played on them] have no resonance, no overtones.” Players are wary enough of using scordatura even for established masterworks like Zoltán Kodály’s notoriously difficult and brilliant Sonata for Solo Cello, op. 8 (1915) because of the stress that results from tuning and retuning the cello’s strings to different pitches. Few will be so brave as to prepare their cellos the way Castérède demands, especially when the piece itself offers nothing to recommend it.

The Yiddish Suite by Netherlander Alexander Comitas (pseudonym for Eduard de Boer, b.1957) departs slightly from the cello pieces by French or French-based composers discussed in this review. Composed in 1995, commissioned in retrospect by the Fonds voor de Scheppende Toonkunst, and premiered a year later by Comitas and cellist Maaike Deckers, this four-movement suite is that rara avis among contemporary cello works—one that is both a challenge and pleasure to learn, and equally enjoyable for an audience of almost any age, level of musicianship, and appreciation to experience. A deliberate aesthetic underlies the style of the Yiddish Suite, since Comitas is connected with the “As You Like It” Foundation, which he briefly describes on his Web site, www.comitas.org/as-you-like-it.html (accessed 10 January 2002):

The Foundation’s name is symbolic for its aspirations. Referring to Shakespeare’s famous play, the “As You Like It” Foundation holds the view that contemporary art can be of high quality while at the same time speaking directly to and being enjoyed by the same people that love the great art from the past. It is the Foundation’s goal to promote such contemporary art—with an emphasis on music—and by doing so to play a part in closing the gap between today’s “serious” art and the public at large.

Presented in four movements, each with a Yiddish title, the suite begins with “Lechajim!” (To Life!), a lively and accessible introduction that could stand alone as a recital piece or encore. Melodically based around A minor and composed in a tripartite form, “Lechajim!” is not too technically overwhelming and is an ideal piece for advanced intermediate students of both the cello and piano. The adagio second movement, “Vankele” (i.e., Jack, who is often a
bumpkin) presents an attractive interplay and dialogue between two motivic ideas played by both instruments. Eighth and sixteenth notes flow gently into a dual cadenza of scalar patterns, with the pianist given a moment to shine as a soloist at the end. A moto perpetuo, “Bagleyta” (Greeting), forms the third movement, beginning with the cellist and pianist trading off running notes between them. A passing andante of thickened textures in the piano serves as a contrasting section, and a syncopated allegro, returning to the mood of perpetual motion, winds up the movement with a rhythmic diminution of the original ideas. Comitas ends his Yiddish Suite with an adagio “Hommage à Brauck” (the movement is dedicated to Willem Brauckmann), with quickly changing moods progressing from a march to ultraromantic textures to plaintive lyrical songs. This adagio uses more textural variation than the preceding three movements and demands a more advanced technique from the cellist. All in all, the Yiddish Suite is a well-constructed and entertaining set of pieces that will appeal to both performers and audiences.

Thierry Escaich’s Nocturne pour violoncelle et piano (1997) is a more demanding work for cellists and pianists than the suite by Comitas, but no less satisfying. Born in 1965, Escaich won eight first prizes from 1983 to 1990 (for organ and organ improvisation) at the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique in Paris, where he presently holds a faculty position. The Nocturne demands significant technique from both cellist and pianist. Although necessary for expressing the composer’s intentions, the melodic double stops are occasionally undiomatic and require awkward fingerings and shifts; moreover, the high tessitura reached by the cello demands perfect ears and the most precise and nimble of fingers. Through-composed, the Nocturne divides into roughly three movements. The opening adagio non troppo presents a plaintive and wandering line in the cello accompanied by short pulsations in the piano; these roles are then exchanged before the overall texture becomes denser. A vivace subito section in $\frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{4} + \frac{3}{8}$ exploits the inherent syncopations of the meter, while a rolling stepwise figure tunnels through the section. Sudden shifts of tempo and mood lead to a denouement with the return of the opening motive. A bombastic lento marks the final section of the work—both piano and cello are asked to sustain a dynamic of $f f f f$ in a violent adaptation of earlier motives. The Nocturne will challenge audiences more than a piece like the Yiddish Suite, but for a good purpose—it is compelling music and well worth the struggle.

Born in 1947, Renaud Gagneux studied piano and composition with Alfred Cortot and Henri Dutilleux at the École normale de musique in Paris. He also studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the Cologne Musikhochschule before continuing his studies under Messiaen at the national conservatory in Paris (1967–72), where he won a first prize in composition in his final year. His works were awarded numerous prizes in the 1980s and 1990s. Gagneux’s Trois bagatelles pour violoncelle seul is derivative of the Britten-Ligeti “school” and comprises improvisational or randomly chosen virtuosic fragments that move with no apparent coherence or plan from dynamically opposing bursts separated by compound rhythms. There is seemingly only arbitrary movement between passages exploiting artificial harmonics, $p p p$ trills, quarter tones adhering to no system, and pizzicato notes given specific instructions for executing vibrato. Triadic and chordal arpeggios in a serene style, aggressive double stops, and aimlessly placed effects contribute to an air of incoherence that ultimately strikes me as trivial. Like other composers writing for the instrument, Gagneux knows the cello’s potential for impressive maneuvering, but he unfortunately wastes this knowledge in his Trois bagatelles. The Seven Sketches pour violoncelle seul (1989) by Australian cellist Ingrid Guimer is reminiscent of Muczynski’s Gallery, but this contribution to the late-twentieth-century cello repertory is fresh and original, and each of the seven vignettes succeeds in capturing a single character in a different compositional style. The sketches, which range from a playful “Enigma” to a melancholy “Solitude” and an aggressive “Argument,” are suited for versatile performers with an inherent sense of whimsy and a penchant for playfulness. The second sketch, “Incantation Dance,” will seem especially flashy to audiences, with its sul ponticello tremolos and open-string double stops. Marked “slowly, reflectively,” “Solo-
“tude” is an excellent work for evoking gentle colors and sonorities. Occasional repeated rhythmic motives, such as the similar ones appearing in “Escape,” “Argument,” and “Scherzo,” impart a sense of holistic structure to the work. The technical demands and high tessitura make the Seven Sketches suitable only for advanced players—who will immensely enjoy the quirky personas Guymer depicts in these effective vignettes.

As charming and fun as her Seven Sketches are, Guymer’s Chainmail pour violoncelle solo (1995) is a dismal patchwork of devices and poorly thought-out transitions. Through-composed, the piece is full of leaping lyrical lines that entwine themselves with frantic tremolos, awkwardly placed artificial harmonics, glissandos that form transitions into sections full of left-hand pizzicatos, bombastic assaults on the cello and the ear, and contrived rhythmic complexities that relate not a bit to any of the other material. All of these jumbled ideas fill the work with innumerable chances for displays of technical virtuosity, but no soul. Performers needing a work to display their “chops” might find Chainmail useful, but for me this musically unsatisfying mélange simply does not hold together.

Georges Migot (1891–1976) represents an earlier generation from that of the other composers discussed in this review. A pupil of Charles-Marie Widor and Vincent d’Indy at the Conservatoire national in Paris, Migot, who was also an accomplished painter and essayist, pursued his own course of composition after World War I that eschewed the neo classical trends then prevalent in Paris. His sonata and rhapsody for cello solo come to publication under unusual circumstances. Marc Honegger, who has written extensively on Migot and oversees Les Amis de l’Œuvre et de la Pensée de Georges Migot in Strasbourg, makes Migot’s solo Cello Sonata of 1954 available for the first time in a well-prepared edition based on a photocopy of the lost original manuscript. This four-movement work requires moderately advanced technique and presents an effective vehicle for a student to exploit good tone and interpretive character. The Prelude is marked by a supple, melodic flow that avoids complex harmony or difficult rhythms, and in the Allègre, the steadily moving pulse of dotted eighth-note patterns, combined with a sense of play, gently push along the melodic lines. The Andante sports more depth than do the previous movements, and the melodic setting gives the performer a real opportunity to show off beautiful tone. The Final divides into sections marked “refrain,” “librement,” and “strophes.” The refrain is a motive that begins and ends each strophe, while the librements are free sections between the refrains that form the body of each strophe. These five librements are not true variations, but more like related improvisations that use wide-ranging patterns, ornaments, runs and figurations, and various devices to provide constant motion and keep the audience engaged as well. Migot’s Rhapsodie (1974) is much like the Final of his Cello Sonata. Through-composed, it is based on a loose notational spelling of “Alain Courmont,” and similar to the sonata, there are few pauses or breaks in the rhythmic and melodic motion. This very accessible piece is improvisational in nature, with the motive slipping away and returning again and again. Neither too deep or difficult, Migot’s Sonata and Rhapsody create their own charm.

Serge Nigg (b. 1924) composed his Duo élégiaque for cello and piano in 1985. This short work, published in the series XXᵉ siécle pour les jeunes, is intended for intermediate players, with simple, slow-moving lines that span the cello’s range from C1 to c1. The piano part is easy as well—the plain chords and melodic lines, a regular pedal pattern, and the function of timekeeper fall well within the grasp of most young pianists. While the Duo élégiaque does not have the bittersweet melodic sweep of Sergey Rachmaninoff’s Vocalise—a standard arrangement for cellists progressing from beginner to advanced—it does offer the opportunity for students to work on their bow arms and vibrato. Audiences may find it pedestrian, but teachers may well keep this duet in mind as a good exercise for their young students.

Born in Hué, Vietnam, in 1933, Ton-That Tiêt emigrated to France in 1958 (a French citizen since 1977), studying at the national conservatory in Paris with Jean Rivier and André Jolivet. His works are profoundly influenced by Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese thought and draw heavily
upon traditional Vietnamese music. He has collaborated with director Tran Anh Hung, writing scores for films such as *L’odeur de la papaye verte* (Scent of Green Papaya, 1993) and *A la verticale de l’été* (At the Height of Summer, 2000). Xuân Vy for cello and piano is, alas, a veritable catalog of what composers should not do when composing for the cello—and another work that appears to use Britten’s three cello suites as a starting point. The opening material, for cello solo, is particularly derivative of the Third Suite, with ornamented single pitches set in a sea of complex rests and sustained pitches over left-hand pizzicatos. This, however, is where the resemblance ends. While Britten’s works are well-planned and built over clearly defined structures, Xuân Vy is long-winded and lacks formal coherence, continuing on and on in a concoction of ideas and approaches until finally ending with a piano solo. Ton-That outdoes Carter and other composers in his insistence upon complicated rhythmic structures that, ultimately, musicians will be unable to execute with precision and whose intent the audience will be unable to discern. The work is vaguely impressionistic in style, varying quickly in texture and character. Dense writing for the piano poses thirty-second notes against triplets, groupings of six against unevenly numbered combinations, and keyboard-smashing clusters against the cello’s most gossamer lines in the upper atmospheres. Other compositional problems recur throughout the work—the early impressionism gives way to a bizarre collection of technical requests, including badly written and unidiomatic artificial harmonics, pizzicato notes, and quarter-tone temperament.

Ton-That’s use of quarter tones is one of the more bewildering features of the piece. Many performers have grown accustomed to expressive intonation and the quarter-tone harmonic systems that, in better works, seem a natural outgrowth of it. Ears and intellect alike, however, demand some kind of rational system when quarter tones are requested in a work. The quarter-tone passages in Xuân Vy provide none, and the microtonalities seem scattered throughout almost as an afterthought. Indeed, the work reads as if the composer had finished the piece, then gone back and altered standard pitches to be quarter-tones, as if thinking that their use would somehow make Xuân Vy more complete, or perhaps simply more complex. Other poorly considered features include directions to “hit the body of the instrument,” meaning the cello, and the composer’s own notational system for tempo changes. While invaluable in more experimental works, such as Penderecki’s early symphonies and cello works, the introduction of a new method for indicating accelerandos and rallentandos in this case is totally unnecessary and seems, like the quarter-tones, an afterthought.

*Clair–obscur pour violoncelle et harpe* (1996) by harpist-composer Jean-Jacques Werner (b. Strasbourg, 1935) is a brief but idiomatic, showy, and impressive work for virtuosos of both instruments. Marked “quasi improvisando,” this through-composed miniature offers not only improvisatory moments to both performers but also opportunities for cellists to be harpists and vice versa. Throughout the work, the two instruments function more as paired soloists than as cellist and accompanist. Set in the upper registers of the cello, melodic fragments, runs, and fantastically long glissandos allow cellists to explore tone and articulation in new ways. Meanwhile, the harpist is given quick chromatic finger work and constant pedal changes to accommodate the flights of the composer’s imagination.

Clearly, cellists looking to France and/or French publishers for new works have a wide selection of styles, approaches, and multinational heritages from which to choose when programing for recitals. Performers focusing on the development of the late-twentieth-century repertory may find intellectual amusement in discovering the obvious influences of seminal works in the repertory on many of the more recent compositions. Twentieth-century French composers have long labored under the shadows of their predecessors, whether they be Gabriel Fauré at the start of the century or Messiaen and Boulez near the end. In the works discussed in this review, however, I am struck by how many French (or French-published) composers working in the medium of cello or cello and piano are looking not to their countrymen but back to Britten and Ligeti—and with mixed results. The composers truly contributing to this repertory are not treating the instrument as a vehicle for effects and explo-
ration but treat it in a manner that is more compatible with the cello’s nature and more rewarding to the player. By taking advantage of the melodic capabilities of the cello to convey original ideas, composers are more likely to find champions—and audiences—for their music.

Kendra Preston Leonard
Cincinnati, Ohio

CHORAL MUSIC


Though the seminal Russian composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries composed sacred music, much remains unknown about the historical sources and contexts of their work. Research has been hampered by a paucity of data on performance practices, the indecipherability of the notation of the oldest sources, limited funding, and, until a decade ago, restricted access to archival collections (the Soviet government curtailed research into the Orthodox Church). Regrettably, much of the research that has been conducted is unduly narrow, focusing largely on problems of notation. Political and social change in Russia has provided music historians and theorists with unprecedented research possibilities. These in turn have revealed a pressing need for critical editions of the music of composers associated with the Imperial Chapel in Saint Petersburg, the Synodal Choir in Moscow, and the liturgical institutions that preceded their founding.

One positive development in this direction has been Monuments of Russian Sacred Music, a decade-old series of bilingual Russian-English editions published by Musica Russica under the partial sponsorship of the Russian Choral Society of New York. The volume under review follows the publication in 1991 (ser. 1, vol. 1) of a collection of sacred pieces (One Thousand Years of Russian Church Music, 988–1988) dating from between 988 (the year that the Christian faith and its cultural attachments were imported to Kievan Rus’ from Byzantium) and 1917 (the year of the Russian Revolution); a gathering of choral works by the baroque composer Vasily Polikarpovich Titov (1995, ser. 13, vol. 1); and editions of the sacred music of Sergey Rachmaninoff (1995, ser. 9, vol. 1–2) and Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (1996, ser. 2, vol. 1–3). This series, along with the series Russkaia dukhovnaia muzyka v dokumentakh i materialakh (Russian Sacred Music in Documents and Materials, founded in 1998 by the State Institute for Art Research in Moscow) and the serialized publication of writings by the nineteenth-century chant scholar Dmitry Vasil’evich Razumovsky in the journal Musikal’naia akademii (Musical Academy, 1992–), represents a revival of the discipline of (what the Russian chant authority Johann von Gardner dubbed) “liturgical musicology,” which flourished in the conservatories and seminaries of fin de siècle Russia (see Gardner’s seminal Bogosluzhebnoe penie russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi [Liturgical Singing of the Russian Orthodox Church], 2 vols. [Jordanville, N.Y.: Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Monastery, 1978–82]; and Vladimir Morosan’s translation published as Russian Church Singing, 2 vols. [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980–2000]). Morosan, founder of Musica Russica, and Marina Rakhmanova, deputy director of the Glinka Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow, are leading figures in this revival.

This new volume of the complete sacred choral works of Nikolay Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov includes full-score critical editions of the three collections of sacred music that the composer created during his rather unhappy tenure in the 1880s at the Imperial Chapel. (The unhappiness