Cellists faced with the task of finding shorter pieces to fill out a program or recording or selecting repertory for students must often turn to flashy (and usually banal) showpieces, such as those by David Popper and Karl Yul’yevich Davïdov, or fall back upon relatively unchallenging, song-based pieces, like Pablo Casals’s “Song of the Birds” or Antonín Dvořák’s “Quiet Woods.” The four new pieces for unaccompanied cello or cello with piano here under review seek to fill this gap in the repertory, with a span of technical requirements ranging from an intermediate to a very demanding level.

Augusta Read Thomas’s Spring Song for unaccompanied cello is a mercurial work, changing mood and approach frequently throughout its five-minute length. Thomas primarily exploits half-step relationships, opening the piece with an eleven-note, nonrepeating row that emphasizes the interval by moving from F♯–F♮, D♭–C, G♯–G♮, C♯–C♮ and so on. Nearly every measure sports its own meter, and Thomas gives special—sometimes seemingly contradictory—directions for phrasing them: “Play measures 16–33 as one long phrase, with subphrases of measures 16–24, 25–27, 28–30, 31, and 32,” or, in m. 14, “freely, introverted, [and] sul tasto,” as though the composer does not trust the performer’s own ability to make correct interpretive decisions. Sonority is likewise carefully dictated, in both English and Italian, italicized and not: sul tasto, non vib., “sting,” sotto voce, fragile, bell-like, al punta; even “spicc.” is found above notes already dotted to indicate this articulation. Tempo, character, bowings, which string to play upon—all are minutely specified by Thomas, who, like many contemporary composers, conveys with these kinds of directions a lack of confidence in the musicians who play her works.

Musically, Spring Song alternates between three ideas: the slow, languorous style of the opening, during which the half-step motif is spun out, with phrases ending on high, drawn-out harmonics; a faster-moving section of showier character, with runs and wide leaps; and a bell-like idea relying on heavily accented double stops that stress, like the first motif, the half step. The work acquires a vague sectional form, with its segments beginning abruptly, but ending all the same: a long held note “like a sigh.” Thomas creates an organic unity throughout the piece with these sustained notes, the half-step motif, and related sonorities, but in the scant five-and-a-half minutes the work lasts, the overall effect is more disjoint than desired in such a short work. A recording by the dedicatee, Scott Kluksdahl, is available on the CRI label (Lines for Solo Cello, CD 762, 1997).
Tania León composed *Four Pieces for Violoncello* following her father’s death—the first piece represents “the image of his presence,” the second is a prayer. Technically demanding, the four pieces require foot stamping, knocking on the soundboard, playing between the bridge and tailpiece, making glissandos to triple stops, and playing the “highest note possible.” Of the four pieces, the two requiring the least of these avant-garde techniques—the second and the fourth—are the strongest and most successful.

The first piece, León’s image of her father, begins rather brutally with harsh chords and runs, but softens as it progresses. There appears to be a dichotomy in the personality of the late man: the frantic energy of the first half is posited against a calmer and more lyrical, if wide-ranging, rocking triplet section in the middle. Unlike Thomas, León does not overdictate musical elements, allowing the performer a freer interpretation of her intentions. The prayer of the second movement is a beautiful and quiet meditation worthy of performance on its own. Harmonics add to the gentle atmosphere created by the slow \( \frac{3}{8} \) pulse and triadic figures that span the range of the instrument. Delicate dynamic shadings ranging from \( ppp \) to \( mf \) will challenge the performer’s command of nuance to bring a convincing performance to an audience. The third piece features the most nontraditional techniques. Marked “Mortuno,” the movement is emphatic and accented, with foot-stampings on main beats to set off the syncopated and jagged lines played by the cello. The effect is that of a ferocious dance accompanied by drums before a crowd—the dynamics are loud, feet hit the ground, the spectators shriek. The melodic lines rise and fall in a steady pattern, usually with a jump in register to mark the beginning of the descent. A two-measure “coda” concludes the movement with an enormous glissando to the top of the cello’s range and a motivic syncopation from the foot. A *moto perpetuo* marks the final piece, punctuated at its opening by suspenseful silences. Repeated *pizzicatos* on C\(^\sharp\) lead to rapid scales to form an introduction to the movement. These quick rises set up a demanding rubato section of tremendous dives and jumps. With a quiet intensity, the rubato becomes more active, with constant figuration in thirty-second notes. An accelerando starting with a pianissimo at the bridge leads to a spectacular conflagration of arpeggios, double stops, and sixty-fourth notes ending with a heart-stopping \( pp \) harmonic and a solid and satisfying C\(^\sharp\)–C\(^\#\) octave played \( fff \). León’s *Four Pieces for Violoncello* is a work that performers and audiences will enjoy discovering.

Barbara Heller’s *Lalai: Schlaflied zum Wachwerden?* for cello and piano is based on an Iranian resistance song in which a woman sings to her child, explaining what has happened to his missing father. The work was composed in 1989 as a “public declaration of solidarity for their rescue and release from prison” for fifty Iranian women, all of whom were later executed. *Lalai* is dedicated to them and to others executed or held in prison by the regime.

The song, presented by the cello with a sparse piano accompaniment, is simplicity itself—mournful and clearly vocal, with a range of only a sixth (d–b\(^\flat\)) centered on D. Following the statement of the song, the cello performs a set of three variations, which may be played solo, or with an accompaniment played inside the piano that replicates an indigenous instrument’s drone on D. The three variations are quite similar, treating the melody to dotted rhythms, double stops, and sudden dynamic alterations. The piano also takes a turn at a solo variation, using as its drone A, but retaining the original pitch center of D. After the piano variation, the cello returns with a recapitulation of the song in the same form as the beginning. While the song itself is quite lovely in its plaintiveness, there is not enough creative work in any of the variations, which, since they do not even change key, are monotonous. The writing is simple and spare and would be ideal for advanced-beginner or even intermediate-beginner students of both instruments, introducing the student pianist to alternative piano techniques; but there is little to hold the attention of advanced players beyond a reading or two. Though the spirit in which *Lalai* was written is admirable, the music itself does not satisfactorily develop the promising potential of the original song.

Diana Burrell’s *Heron* for cello and piano raises the issue of the futures of minimalism and inside-the-piano writing, as it relies
heavily on both elements so popular thirty or more years ago. Dedicated to Burrell’s mother, Heron requires the pianist to use fingernails, a stick, and flat hands to create the desired sonic effects. The directions themselves are not very clear; in fact, why they are even needed remains unaddressed. While the cellist does not have to thump the cello or use it as a piece of percussion, the instrument is relegated the minimalist lines that the pianist perhaps longs for after the under-the-hood work is done. The piece is long and, from an audience’s standpoint, would seem unending, as soon as one section of patterns is brought to a climax and an end seems near, yet another begins. Heron divides into three sections in different tempos: in “Tempo I: Not too fast,” the cellist introduces dotted and straight sixteenth- and thirty-second-note patterns while the pianist strums fingernails up and down the strings and plays them with a stick. Later, the piano and cello present an overlapping pattern on three notes, followed by some flat-hand-work on the piano and the cello picking up a few more notes to add to the original three. “Tempo II: A little faster” gives the cello a new set of notes and some syncopated rhythms to play joined by seconds sounded at the top of the piano. Occasionally the seconds become larger intervals and once in a while they are given up for the sake of playing inside the piano with the stick. A measure rest in the piano heralds a return to the repeated sounds à la Phillip Glass of “Tempo I,” with the seconds held over. Ten measures of flat-hand clusters at both ends of the piano accompany a repeated figure in the cello and “Tempo II” segues into “Tempo III: Slow,” where the pianist holds down the pedal while playing inside the piano with a stick and the cellist has a long line of half notes rising from A–G to e♭—and the audience has already gone home. If the schools of minimalist and inside-the-piano composition are to gain new audiences, or regain the respect of old ones, they will have to evolve. The same effects and techniques that were new and interesting when Terry Riley’s In C was first heard or John Cage’s prepared pianos were all the rage, are no longer original or appealing. Minimalism now seems to be best suited for the cinema, and without a convincing explanation—

musically or in commentary—of the necessity of inside-the-piano techniques, few pianists will be willing to strain their instruments or themselves with the use of sticks, fists, and nails.

One shared trait of all these four examples of recently composed cello music is that each composer has chosen in some way to exploit the nontraditional uses of the cello and piano, to varying degrees of success. It is also interesting to note that while all four composers are women, none presents works in an obtrusively “feminist style” that is so often to the detriment, rather than the advantage, of pieces by women composers. It will be the merits of each individual piece, as opposed to the gender of the composer or trends in restructuring the canon, which will determine the work’s eventual place—or lack thereof—in the repertory.

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