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Rohan de Saram, Cello

J. S Bach - Suite no.VI for solo cello
Zoltan Kodaly - Sonata for solo cello Op.8
Recorded at Harrison House



L. to R.: Rohan de Saram, Lena Deneke, Zoltan Kodaly, Sarolta Kodaly, Marga Deneke, Ralph Leavis.

“I was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to play Kodaly’s Sonata for solo cello for him on one of his visits to Oxford in 1960. It was a monumental experience because I consider this to be one of the greatest works written for solo cello since Bach wrote his cello Suites approximately two hundred years earlier.” – Rohan de Saram

“I first heard Rohan perform as a member of the Arditti Quartet at the Almeida Festival in 1984. Nearly three decades later, Rohan was featured at Rassegna di Nuova Musica -Stefano Scodanibbio’s wonderful music festival in Macerata, Italy that I was fortunate to attend. Hearing Rohan play and having conversations with him during many post-concert dinners, it was clear that he was an embodiment of music. Everything about him was musical and he seemed the perfect first artist to invite to record in the acoustically stunning “great room” that composer Lou Harrison designed and built in Joshua Tree, California. It was an honor to have Rohan accept my invitation to record the repertoire of his choosing. It is a joy that after many years, we are finally able to produce this recording as the first Harrison House release.” – Eva Soltes, Founder/Director Harrison House

Rohan de Saram was born in Sheffield, UK, and spent the first ten years of his life in Sri Lanka. He began studying the cello at age 9, and by age 16 was awarded the Suggia Award, allowing him to study with Sir John Barbirolli in London and with the great Pablo Casals in Puerto Rico. Casals later said of his pupil, “There are few of his generation that have such gifts.”

De Saram made his debut at Carnegie Hall in 1960 with the New York Philharmonic, at the invitation of Dimitri Mitropoulos, playing Khatchaturian’s *Cello Concerto* conducted by Stanislaw Skrowaczewski. Throughout his career, de Saram has performed as a soloist with major orchestras in Europe, Asia, and North America under many of the world’s leading conductors, including Sir John Barbirolli, Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Colin Davis, Jean Martinon, Zubin Mehta, Seiji Ozawa, and Sir Malcolm Sargent. Rohan de Saram was a member of the Arditti Quartet from 1977 to 2005, during which time the quartet received a Grammy Award for their recording of chamber works by Elliott Carter. Numerous works have been written for and premiered by Rohan de Saram, including Luciano Berio’s *Sequenza XIV* and, although not written for him, he gave the world premiere of György Ligeti’s *Sonata for Solo Cello* and the UK premiere of Arnold Bax’s *Rhapsodic Ballad* and Xenakis’ *Kottos*.

De Saram received the *Deshamaniya*, one of Sri Lanka’s highest honors, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Sri Lanka Foundation in Los Angeles. He has released many recordings both with the Arditti Quartet, with other artists and as a soloist. Most recently, he recorded works for solo cello by Bax, Cassado, Dallapiccola, Ligeti and others, released by First Hand Records. His book *Conversations* with Joachim Steinheuer, was published in 2013 by Wolke Verlag.

J.S. Bach's (1685-1750) Suite no.VI in D major, for solo cello

J.S. Bach's sixth cello suite was written for the five-stringed *viola pomposa*, which had an extra top string tuned to E above the top A string of the cello. This instrument is said to have been invented by Bach himself. In addition to being the largest of the six Suites for cello, it is also the most "virtuosic" and in D major, Bach's key of jubilation.

The Suite begins with a Prelude designed on a large scale, whose opening bars could perhaps suggest the pealing of bells. This motif, whose structure uses an open string alternating with its own harmony (root, third, fifth and octave) is heard four times, each time centered around a different open string, in the order D, A, E and finally the G string. As a passing observation, the open C string is only played once (a dotted eighth note in the Allemande) during the entire Suite! The Prelude ends in Bach's extemporizing organ style, as do some of the other Preludes, with brilliant passage-work and arpeggios as well as rhetorical triple stopped chords.

The Allemande is an eloquent and very ornate recitative on a very large scale, especially considering that it is only one of the movements of a six-movement Suite. It has even less connection with the traditional Allemande characteristics than its close relative, the great Allemande of the D major Partita for keyboard. In fact I would go so far as to say it has no connection at all with the Allemande as such, but the very clear delineation of the bass line and harmonies supporting the highly expressive melodic line add to the impact of this unique movement.

The brilliant trumpet-like figures of the fast Italian Courante are eminently suited to this bright key (D major) and make a wonderful contrast to the Allemande before it and the richly chordal Sarabande after it. The comparatively high tessitura of this Sarabande, and indeed most of the Suite, reminds us that Bach is using his top E string to maximum effect.

The two Gavottes are among the most popular of Bach's smaller movements and are well known in many transcriptions for a wide variety of instruments. The second Gavotte especially, with its drone-based passages, and the rustic, virtuosic Gigue which ends the Suite, remind us of the microcosmic foreshadowing of a united Europe by the Suite form as often used by Bach: Allemande (Germany), Courante (Italy or France), Sarabande (Spain), Minuets, Gavottes or Bourrées (France) and Gigue (Ireland and England).
- Rohan de Saram

Zoltan Kodaly (1882-1967): Sonata for solo cello Op.8 (Budapest 1915)

I was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to play this work to Kodaly himself on one of his visits to Oxford in 1960. It was a monumental experience because I consider this to be one of the greatest works written for solo cello since Bach wrote his cello Suites approximately two hundred years earlier.

Kodaly's Sonata Op. 8 is unique in many ways. "Unique" was the word used by Kodaly's close friend and illustrious compatriot Bela Bartok,

when he wrote about this Sonata in the early part of the 20th century. He went on to write, "This is not mere imitation of Bach's polyphonic style". With this sentence Bartok expressed his insight into the fact that Bach's influence is noticeable in practically all composers brought up in the European classical tradition, who wrote for unaccompanied violin, viola or cello. This would include Bartok himself, when he came to write his magnificent solo sonata for violin, nearly thirty years later. Not that one could call Bartok's Sonata or any of the best works for this genre "mere imitation", but the influence is there nevertheless.

Given Kodaly's predominantly tonal language and his non-polyphonic style in this Sonata, one of the greatest inspirations in the work occurs before a single note of the piece has been played, namely backstage, when the cellist tunes his C string down to B and his G string down to F sharp, thereby providing him with three open strings producing the B minor triad, which is the basic tonality around which the work evolves.

Although on first acquaintance the Sonata gives the impression of being rhapsodic, even improvisatory in style, and above all very strongly stamped with the Magyar character, as one gets to know the work more intimately it is clear that certain aspects of the Classical tradition underlie the structure of the piece. For instance, the first movement obviously has its structural roots in the concept of sonata form, even if the key relationships are not what one would call orthodox. There is a first and second subject, a development and a recapitulation starting with the second subject. The climax of the movement comes at the very end of the development where the opening first subject is heard *fortissimo* in quadruple stopping.

The second subject has a characteristic accompanying figure of a group of five notes, which is heard intermittently. It consists of an oscillating minor second, and plays an important role throughout the second subject material, both in the exposition and recapitulation.

In the large central slow movement, strangely modal melodic material reminds one of the Eastern origins of the Magyar race and folklore. The broad and sonorous introductory phrase, largely built on the interval of the perfect fourth, has the germs of what later in the movement become the huge, slow-moving, arch-like melodic phrases (with their left hand pizzicato accompaniment) which are such a prominent feature of this movement. The Eastern sounding material, with its rapid ornamental figures immediately followed by long sustained notes, alternates with this slow-moving music at the beginning of the movement. This is followed by an improvisatory episode of great splendour, marked "feroce", before the music returns to the Eastern-sounding material, but this time in a densely varied version with tremolos, trills, short repeated figures and arpeggios. A final, very impressive appearance of the slow-moving music leads into a coda based on the initial mordent of the Eastern-sounding music, with the natural high harmonics of the four strings playing a prominent part.

The finale of this Sonata is one of the most astonishing virtuoso pieces ever written for a single instrument. It is to the cello what some of the virtuoso pieces of Paganini, Chopin and Liszt, not to mention Rachmaninov, are for the violin and piano respectively. It exploits every facet of virtuoso cello technique known until the first half of the 20th century.

- Rohan de Saram