

NOBLE VISIONS

Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, Series Director Abendmusik Alexandria

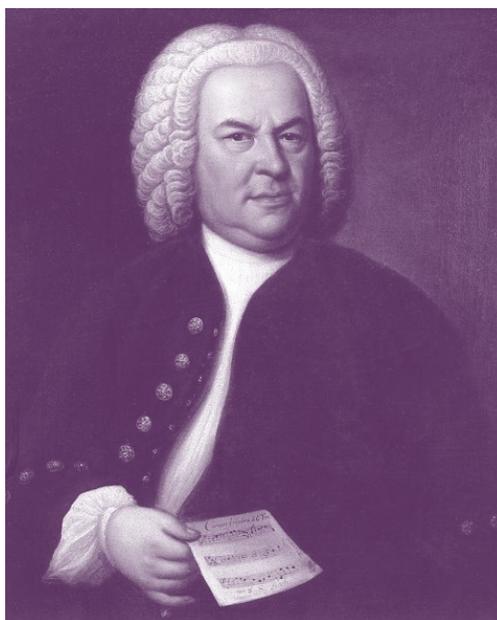
The title of this evening's concert *Noble Visions* makes reference to the composition *Nobilissima visione*, a ballet depicting the life of St. Francis of Assisi written by Paul Hindemith whose music features on our program tonight. The reference is two-fold, however, for both Hindemith and Johann Sebastian Bach whose music begins our concert saw themselves as refining *and redefining* the fundamental elements of the tonal system and musical craftsmanship generally. While Bach's vision – one fashioned amid near obscurity for the glory of God alone (*Soli Deo Gloria*) – has guided musicians for more than two hundred and fifty years, Hindemith's vision led him to seek the musical language of a more hallowed time. These are the *Noble Visions* which violinist and violist Unkyoung Kim and her colleagues explore this evening.

It was during the six years from 1717 to 1723 which **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)** spent as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen that the emerging German master composed much of his chamber and orchestral music. Among these works are the six suites for unaccompanied cello, listed as BWV 1007-1012, as well as the sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1001-1006. The autograph of the violin sonatas and partitas is well-preserved, beautifully handwritten in a manuscript dating from 1720. On the contrary, Bach's original score of the cello suites has been lost, although copies do survive from the composer's lifetime, including one version in the handwriting of his second wife Anna Magdalena which has been dated to either 1727 or 1728.

Musicologist David Ewen has remarked of these twelve ingenious compositions that "the instrument acquires an independence and variety of speech it had not known before." Bach writes contrapuntally for these melody instruments, imagining what a fugue might sound like through the use of double, triple, and occasionally quadruple stops where multiple strings are played at once. Bach was an adept violinist: he knew the technical capacities of the violin, and might have even been able to play his own demanding works for this instrument. Less evidence survives regarding Bach's abilities as a cellist, but he likely learned cello as a boy and, if nothing else, would have known the instrument's technical intricacies.

The Cello Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007 is the first work heard on this evening's program. All six of its movements are performed in alternation between young cellist Danny Kim

and our principal artist Unkyoung Kim. As the title "suite" implies, the First Suite is a collection of stylized dance movements, introduced by a *Prelude*. This *Prelude* is one of Bach's best-known compositions as well as some of the most recognizable music for solo cello. The underlying genius of this music is that a charming motive, at times repeated and at times expanded, is heard clearly through changing harmonies. More grounded is the *Allemande* that follows the flying *Prelude*; the allemande was a stately dance originating from Germany, set in common time and paced at a moderate tempo. Afterwards comes a *Courante*; this livelier dance took its name from the French word for "running" and, here, often seems to find itself rebelling against the written triple meter. The fourth movement is a *Sarabande* – a slow dance in triple meter. Two *Minuets* follow with the first repeated after the second; this moderately-paced, elegant dance form in triple meter was of French origin and later became part of the Classical-era symphony. A lively *Gigue* concludes the Suite; this fast, galloping dance genre originated in England, and was often employed as the final movement in Baroque suites.



Johann Sebastian Bach

Even after many of Bach's works had been rediscovered in the nineteenth century, the cello suites remained neglected until they found an important advocate in cellist Pablo Casals. He had discovered the then unknown works in a music shop around 1890 and, only after privately rehearsing them for a dozen years, did Casals begin introducing them to the public in the early years of the twentieth century. Now each of the six cello suites is a staple of the professional cellist's repertoire.

The violin sonatas and partitas are likewise key to the violinist's repertoire but, contrary to the cello suites, they were some of the few works by Bach which required little rediscovery. For the first hundred years after Bach's death, they were in fact well-known to violinists who remained intrigued by their technical challenges. Not until the late 1830s and early 1840s did the solo violin works begin becoming known to the public, however, when amid the Bach Revival he had launched Felix Mendelssohn began presenting these works publicly. In particular, Mendelssohn composed a new piano accompaniment for the demanding *Chaconne* which he performed with his friend the violinist Ferdinand David at the "Third Evening of Musical Entertainment" held in Leipzig on February 8, 1840. Mendelssohn felt the new piano accompaniment would help clarify the music for the audience as well as realize hidden elements in Bach's solo part. By 1843 David had published the entire solos with



Paul Hindemith

added fingerings, bowings, and other edits. The violinist Joseph Joachim would learn from Mendelssohn and David's editions, but his long career would allow him to better comprehend Bach's original material and share this understanding with the listening public.

The *Chaconne* from the Second Partita in D minor, BWV 1004 is heard after the First Cello Suite. The term "partita" means the same as "suite," so these

compositions too consist primarily of abstracted dance movements. The chaconne genre had also begun as a dance, but by Bach's day had evolved into a theme and variations over a repeated harmonic progression. In Bach's *Chaconne*, the composer subjects the initial theme to an amazing sixty-four variations! This uninterrupted, fifteen-minute *Chaconne* serves as the final movement in Bach's Second Partita. Arguably the most difficult movement in the set of sonatas and partitas, it is also the most famous, as successive generations of violinists have attempted to master its challenges and perform them for an awestruck audience.

Complementing these works by Bach are several compositions for strings from the early twentieth century, beginning with one by the Austrian-born violinist and composer **Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962)**. Following the example of earlier violin virtuosos, Kreisler composed his own showpieces. His *Recitative and Scherzo-Caprice* for solo violin, Op. 6 is one such showpiece. Published in 1911, the piece is dedicated to another great master of the violin, Kreisler's slightly older contemporary Eugène Ysaÿe. The opening *Recitative* is slow and dramatic just like an operatic recitative. The *Scherzo-Caprice* which follows accelerates the tempo, but also lightens the mood as extreme virtuosity becomes a plaything to the violinist. After a few reminiscences of the *Recitative* material, the piece ends on several laughable *pizzicati*.

If Kreisler's encores are full of Viennese charm, it is the Hungarian folk tradition which informs the *Forty-Four Duos* for two violins by **Béla Bartók (1881-1945)**. Nine excerpts from this collection are heard this evening as played by Unkyoung Kim and niece Eugene Kim. Written in 1931 with educational purposes in mind, the *Forty-Four Duos* are designed for teacher and student to practice together. The *Duos* are more than bland study pieces, however, and Bartók went as far as to suggest possible groupings of excerpts for concert performances. Part of what makes these pieces interesting to the listener is that Bartók does not shy away from the Modernist elements of his compositional language: he often writes sharply dissonant intervals and even has the

violinists explore polytonality. Moreover, all include some element of Hungarian folk music and the rhythms which abound in this tradition. Nine duos are heard on this evening's program, and these capture much of the same variety heard among the larger collection.

German composer **Paul Hindemith (1895-1963)** makes the final contribution to this evening's program – and our second season of Abendmusik Alexandria – with his Sonata for solo viola, Op. 25 No. 1. Respected for a variety of reasons as one of the twentieth century's most iconic composers, Hindemith was also a violist and wrote prolifically for this often neglected instrument. He ultimately composed no less than seven viola sonatas and another four concerti for viola; unsurprisingly much of this music would have been created for his own use as a performer. Written in 1922, Hindemith's Viola Sonata, Op. 25 No. 1 dates from approximately the same time as his *Kammermusik* series. The sonata like those works is a post-war composition which rejects the emotional excesses of late Romanticism and Expressionism in favor of what Calum MacDonald calls "the objective musical values of strong polyphonic interest, firm structure, and Baroque sensibility." Balanced and succinct, each movement of this sonata employs a loose ternary form where material from its first section returns somewhat altered in the final section after contrasting material is heard in between. The unfamiliar German movement titles indicate tempo or articulation just as more familiar Italian titles might have; of particular interest is the title of the fourth movement which in English means "Furious tempo, wild, beauty is incidental." Unkyoung Kim plays the first four of the Sonata's five movements to close our program this evening.

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Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. He is a graduate of the Louisiana Scholars' College – Louisiana's designated honors college located on the campus of Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. While there, Jackson completed an undergraduate thesis entitled "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." He has followed classical music around the world, attending the BachFest Leipzig in Germany, Colorado's Aspen Music Festival, and many concerts across Louisiana and Texas. Resident in Alexandria, Louisiana, Jackson works with the Arts Council of Central Louisiana as Series Director of the Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series. He also writes the program notes for the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, blogs at MusicCentral, and continues to study other aspects of music in his spare time. His four-movement Suite for Solo Guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 at Abendmusik Alexandria.



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