

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**2022-23 Overture Concert Organ Series No. 4**  
**April 18, 2023**  
**J. Michael Allsen**

Our final Overture Concert Organ Series concert features our own Greg Zelek, and the welcome return of cellist Thomas Mesa. They appeared together on this series in 2019, and Mr. Mesa returned in November 2021 for memorable performances of the Dvořák *Cello Concerto* with the Madison Symphony Orchestra. They open with a well-known Romantic work, which they have adapted for the combination of cello and organ: Jules Massenet's famous *Meditation from "Thaïs."* Next is a pair of works by J.S. Bach, the introspective *Prelude* from his *Cello Suite No.1*, and the brilliant *Fugue in D Major*. After an adaptation of the *Trois Pièces* of Nadia Boulanger, each performer takes a solo turn, beginning with the *Boléro de Concert*, a Spanish-flavored organ work by Alfred Lefébure-Wély. Mr. Mesa presents *SEVEN*, an emotional reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic for unaccompanied cello, written for him in 2020 by Andrea Casarrubios. Our finale is the world premiere of the *Sonata for Cello and Organ* by the young composer Daniel Ficarri.

**Jules Massenet (1842-1912)**

***Meditation from "Thaïs" (arr. Zelek/Mesa)***

Massenet was part of the generation of French composers who came into prominence in the years after France suffered a humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. This was a time when the government poured funding into French arts to make them a symbol of France's restored power and prestige. Massenet became a prominent member of the National Society of Music, founded to promote French art music, and he would eventually be a composition professor at the Paris Conservatory. The prolific Massenet was particularly successful in the late 19th century as an opera composer, writing over 25 operas, though only a few of them—notably *Manon*, *Werther*, and *Thaïs*—are regularly heard today. His *Thaïs* (1894) was based upon a popular novel by Anatole France, itself a retelling of a story from the 10th century. The opera tells the story of Thaïs, a courtesan in pagan Alexandria, who is converted to Christianity by the monk Athanaël. She eventually dies in glory as St. Thaïs of Alexandria, while Athanaël is never able to shake his guilt over his sexual attraction towards her. The opera was a bit scandalous in its time, not only for the anti-clerical nature of the plot, but also for the steamy scenes of Thaïs's life before her conversion. (At the first performance,

soprano Sibyl Sanderson, singing the title role, had a notorious—and probably deliberate—“wardrobe malfunction” that exposed her breasts in one scene.)

The famous *Meditation* is drawn from Act II, where it is an instrumental intermezzo that represents the moment of Thaïs’s conversion. It was already being played as an independent concert piece in the 1890s, and remains one of Massenet’s most popular works. It is most often heard in the original version for solo violin, but the piece has since been appropriated by nearly every possible instrument, from cello, flute, and saxophone to euphonium, harmonica, and pan flute. Heard here in an adaptation for cello and organ, it is a gorgeous, long-breathed melody from the cello that develops above a sonorous organ background. There is a moment of turbulence near the middle, probably intended to represent Thaïs’s spiritual struggle, before the opening idea returns and the piece closes in a mood of benediction.

### **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

***Prelude from Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007***

***Fugue from Prelude and Fugue in D Major, BWV 532***

Bach spent the years 1717-1723 in the provincial court at Cöthen, working as Kapellmeister to the music-loving Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Since the prince was a Calvinist, there was little call for the kind of sacred vocal works and organ music that dominated much of Bach’s career, and this was the most concentrated period of secular composition in his life. As the court music director, Bach had an orchestra of 17 fine players to work with, and he responded with many of his finest instrumental works: concertos—including most of the famous “Brandenburgs”—his orchestral suites, and several chamber works. Among the most amazing works he produced during this period were two sets of pieces for unaccompanied strings, the sonatas and partitas for violin, and the suites for cello. Though both sets were clearly composed for Cöthen, precisely when he wrote his cello suites is unclear. Unlike the violin sonatas and partitas, which Bach copied in 1720, the cello suites were not copied until much later, in a manuscript written by his second wife Anna Magdalena in 1728. They were most likely composed for Carl Bernhard Lienecke, a cellist in the Cöthen orchestra, though the sixth suite seems to have originally composed for a Baroque variant of the cello, the five-string *violoncello de spalla*. The suites were known in the 19th century, but it was not until the early 20th century, when Pablo Casals began to make them a regular part of his repertoire, that they became truly well-known. The *Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* are now among the standard repertoire for all cellists. Like all of the set, the *Suite No. 1* includes a prelude and a collection of standard French

dances, each in two sections. Its *Prelude*, certainly the best-known movement of all of the suites, is a lovely series of harmonies laid out in a long series of arpeggios.

Bach's earliest professional position, at age 17, was in Weimar, at the court of Duke Johann Ernst III. Bach later described his position as a "court musician," but the court records actually describe him as a "lackey"—low-ranking musicians were apparently also expected to perform more menial work as well. It is probably not surprising that Bach left Weimar after only six months to take a much more attractive position as a church organist in Arnstadt, where he worked from 1703-07. After serving in a second, more prestigious organ position in Mühlhausen (1707-08), he was lured back to Weimar, where he would remain until 1717, eventually serving as *Konzertmeister* (music director). In his early years at Weimar, Bach concentrated primarily on keyboard works. The court chapel had a fine newly-renovated organ, and the Duke was apparently a great fan of Bach's organ works. According to Bach's obituary, the Duke's encouragement "fired him with the desire to try every possible artistry in his treatment of the organ." Many of the 48 preludes and fugues later published as *The Well-Tempered Clavier* were written there, as were all but three of the 46 Lutheran chorale preludes published in his *Orgelbüchlein*. His *Prelude and Fugue in D Major, BWV 532*, written in about 1710, was one of the most imposing works he composed in Weimar. (The bravura style of this work made it a particular favorite of Romantic pianists, and there are transcriptions by Liszt and Busoni. There is also a colorful orchestral arrangement from 1929 by Respighi.) The *Fugue*, heard here, has a witty 16th-note subject in two parts that becomes particularly impressive when it is laid out on the pedals. Near the end, the pedals have a short cadenza sweeping up two octaves before a surprisingly abrupt conclusion. It is amusing to note that one of the 18th-century manuscript copies of this work includes the remark: "In this piece one must really let the feet kick around a lot."

### **Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)**

#### ***Trois Pièces for Cello and Piano (arr. Zelek/Mesa)***

Teacher, performer, and composer Nadia Boulanger was one of the most influential women in French music for decades. Her father taught composition at the Paris Conservatory, and Nadia herself entered the Conservatory at age 10. Boulanger toured extensively as a piano soloist in the years before World War I, and she was also a fine organist. (Aaron Copland wrote his *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* for her in 1925, and she introduced it during an American tour.) She was the composer of a modest number of works, primarily songs and other vocal works, but stopped composing in the early 1920s. Boulanger was very self-critical,

often revising and sometimes abandoning her own works. Her biographer Caroline Potter suggests that this may have been what led her to teaching composition, and it was in fact as a teacher that Boulanger had the broadest impact. In a career that stretched for well over 70 years, she taught in French conservatories, including the Paris Conservatory, and spent the years of World War II teaching in the United States. In 1921, she was one of the founders of the American Conservatory at Fountainbleau, a program that attracted the most promising composers from the Americas. At Fountainbleau, Boulanger taught Copland and virtually his entire generation of American composers, as well as younger figures like Astor Piazzolla, Leonard Bernstein, Philip Glass, and Quincy Jones.

Boulanger's *Three Pieces for Cello and Piano* were composed in 1914. This brief set opens with a movement marked *Modéré* (moderate): a lyrical cello melody played above a gentle, transparent organ accompaniment. When this melody repeats, it is answered by the organ, leading to a short and more agitated middle section, before a return to the opening character at the end. The second movement, *Sans vitesse et à l'aise* (without rushing and relaxed) has a simple, almost folklike melody in the cello. The tempo and intensity increase momentarily before a return of the placid main theme. The final movement is marked *Vite et nerveusement rythmé* (lively and nervously rhythmic). In its opening section, the cello and organ constantly trade roles, each taking turns playing a blustery dance melody and the simple accompaniment part. There is a new theme in 5/8 that subtly continues the rhythmic drive before a sudden slowing and an expressive cello statement. The piece with a sudden acceleration, a reprise of the opening dance melody by the cello and a wild concluding passage.

**Alfred Lefébure-Wély (1817-1869)**  
***Boléro de Concert, Op. 166***

Alfred Lefébure-Wély was born in Paris, son of the organist at the church of Saint-Roch. He made his public debut there at age 8, and by age 14, when he entered the Paris conservatory, Lefébure-Wély had also succeeded his father as organist at Saint-Roch. He would eventually become organist at the Paris churches of La Madeleine (1847-1858) and Saint-Sulpice (from 1863 until his death). He was a successful composer in his time, publishing some 200 works, including an opera, and was particularly well-known as a composer of lighter works, such as variations on popular opera themes. He also became a fixture at the fashionable artistic *salons* of Paris's wealthy aristocracy. Though Lefébure-Wély was at perfectly at home on the large concert organs of the day, including the enormous Cavallé-Coll

instrument at Saint-Sulpice, he also published many works included intended for the harmonium, the small, foot- pumped organ found in upper-class French homes. One of these is his best-known work, the *Boléro de Concert*, published in 1865 with a dedication to one of his aristocratic patrons, the Comtesse Bois de Mouzilly. Spanish musical style, with its hint of exoticism, was always popular in late 19th-century France, and the *Boléro de Concert* is an adaptation of a triple-meter Spanish dance. Much of the French organ heard at these concerts was written to exploit the resources of enormous concert organs, but this is music that makes effective use of much more restricted palette of musical colors: harmoniums had no pedalboard, and usually just a single manual and a very limited number of stops. (Mr. Zelek has adapted this work to include some pedal-work, but it retains the restrained character of the original.) The *Boléro de Concert* begins with a melodramatic minor-key dance theme and a chromatic second theme. There is a brighter, major-key middle section, before the opening music returns at the end.

**Andrea Casarrubios (b. 1988)**  
*SEVEN*

Spanish-born cellist and composer Andrea Casarrubios has played as a soloist and chamber musician throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. She has enjoyed increasing success as a composer in recent years, and her works have been programmed worldwide, presented by organizations such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, the Sphinx Organization, Washington Performing Arts, Manhattan Chamber Players, the European Parliament, NPR, and the Spanish National Radio. Her *SEVEN* for solo cello was commissioned by Thomas Mesa, for his recording *Songs of Isolation*. Composed in New York City in 2020, it is one of an increasing number of musical works that reflect on the experience of COVID-19. Casarrubios provides the following note:

“*SEVEN* is a tribute to the essential workers during the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to those who lost lives and are still suffering from the crisis. Written in Manhattan, the piece ends with seven bell-like sounds, alluding to New York’s daily 7 PM tribute during the lockdown, the moment when New Yorkers clapped from their windows, connecting with each other and expressing appreciation for those on the front lines.”

One reviewer called the work “a hauntingly beautiful tribute” and “a work that will grip your heart and punch you in the stomach in the most beautiful, cathartic, and absolutely necessary way.” It is a work of quiet intensity, at the beginning working

its way through a series of solemn laments to a tense climax. The opening mood returns briefly, before the seven increasingly quiet “bell-like sounds” that end the work. *SEVEN* is one of the most moving and effective responses to the collective experiences we shared—without being together—during the pandemic that I have yet heard: expressing the isolation, sadness, and fear of the 2020 lockdown.

**Daniel Ficarri (b. 1996)**

***Sonata for Cello and Organ* (world premiere)**

The 27-year-old organist and composer Daniel Ficarri has already accomplished a lot in a short time, and has been named one of the top “20 under 30” by *The Diapason* (the leading trade journal of the organ world). He studied organ with Paul Jacobs at the Juilliard school, and studied composition with Rachel Laurin. Ficarri currently occupies one of the most prestigious organ benches in the United States: he is Associate Director of Music and Organist at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. He also maintains an active career as a soloist, performing with several of the nation’s leading orchestras and in concert halls and churches throughout the country. As composer, he has published some two dozen works for solo organ as well as chamber music for organ and other instruments, and vocal and choral works. His *Sonata for Cello and Organ* was commissioned for Greg Zelek and Thomas Mesa through a generous gift from Fernando and Carla Alvarado. The Alvarados are longtime supporters of the Madison Symphony Orchestra, and the Friends of the Overture Concert Organ. Ficarri provides the following note on the work:

“I composed this cello and organ sonata over a period of about seven months, from March to September of 2021. The first ideas came after listening to a friend’s performance of Strauss’s *Violin Sonata*. I was struck by the feeling of conversation between the violin and piano and felt I had something of my own to say. I had long wanted to write chamber music involving the modern organ, and this sonata is my first substantial work of that type. Being an organist myself, and having grown up as a violinist, I found a great deal of self-expression in the combination of organ and strings.

“The sonata is in three movements. The first, *Allegro moderato*, is a brooding sonata form movement that introduces the key themes or characters. The *Adagio cantabile* offers moments of prayerful tranquility, with a playful and whimsical middle section, *Andante scherzando*. The final movement, *Vivace*, returns to the dark minor key landscape, but with a triumphant conclusion. One of my favorite elements of the sonata – the final

movement begins and ends with a thrilling dialogue between the cellist and the organist's feet on the pedalboard!

“Chamber repertoire involving the modern organ is rather limited, so I pulled inspiration from works of other instrumentation. In studying other cello sonatas, I quickly fell in love with Brahms's *Cello Sonata No. 1 in E Minor* for cello and piano. Perhaps that subconsciously set the tone for me to write a minor-key sonata that begins with sonata form. But in addition, I have the greatest respect for Saint-Saëns's *Organ Symphony in C Minor*, and its expressive use of organ and strings in the middle Adagio section in D-flat Major. As a sort of tribute to Saint-Saëns, not only did I choose C Minor as the key for my sonata, but I chose to make D-flat Major a point of arrival in the first movement, beginning the development or center of the movement. I suppose doing those things inspired me to attempt to write with the thoughtfulness, attention to detail, and sincerity of that monumental work.”