

# NSU Faculty Recital

## Paul Christopher, cello

### Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The four composers represented on tonight's recital by Paul Christopher, although outwardly quite diverse, find their music here united by several common strands. One such strand, as evidenced in the selections by Arthur Honegger and Christian Wolff, is a reappraisal of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, whose well-known suites for solo cello often feature on recitals like this one. The Swiss composer **Arthur Honegger (1892-1955)** spent much of his life in France where he was considered one of his generation's foremost composers. Following studies at the Paris Conservatoire, Honegger and several former classmates were dubbed *Les Six* in a newspaper article published by Henri Collet in 1920. Although Honegger shared with these colleagues a renewed interest in formal and harmonic clarity, he never sympathized with the mocking wit and satire evidenced by Francis Poulenc and Darius Milhaud, especially in their initial works. This difference in aesthetics would be evident at least as early as *Le roi David* (1921), Honegger's breakthrough piece. Toward the end of the decade, Honegger would comment, "My great model is J. S. Bach... I make no attempt, as do certain anti-impressionist musicians, to return to harmonic simplicity... Bach uses the elements of tonal harmony as I should like to use the harmonic, modern, and polytonal equivalents." Honegger's appreciation for the music of his predecessors and, in particular, that of Bach endowed his nevertheless forward-looking compositions with a foundation sometimes lacking in the works of other composers.

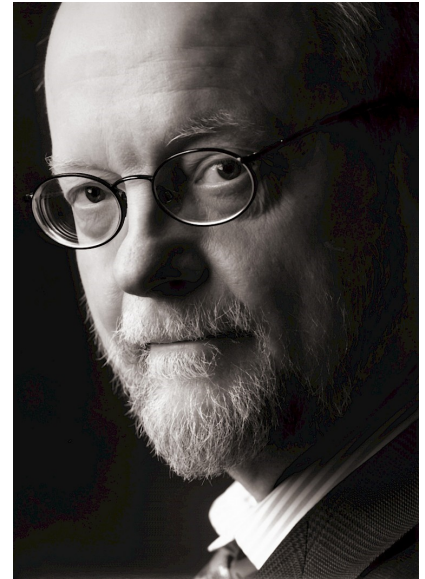


Arthur Honegger

Honegger's *Paduana* for solo cello was written in July 1945. Only three minutes in duration, this short work is believed to have been created for a full suite for solo cello which, unfortunately, was never brought to completion. In fact, *Paduana* remained unpublished until 1992, but since that time has begun to win attention owing to its tremendous beauty. The aural impression of *Paduana* is certainly reminiscent of Bach's Cello Suites: specifically, Honegger's work shares their reserved, meditative quality as well as their timbral purity. It helps also that like the First Cello Suite – arguably, the most iconic of the six – *Paduana* is in the key of G major. The title probably refers to the Italian city of Padua, and thus could exhibit a regional character, real or imagined, as do the dance movements of the Bach suites. It is one of these dance movements that *Paduana* most clearly resembles, especially the moderately-paced *allemande* which like *Paduana* was also in common time.

**Charles Wuorinen (born 1938)** is regarded as one of the foremost American composers of contemporary music. His allegiances, however, are neither with the minimalist nor neo-tonal idioms which dominate so much of American musicmaking at present, but with the American academic tradition of serialism and post-serialism associated with Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Stefan Wolpe, and others. Wuorinen's music came to national attention early in his career when in 1954, while still a teenager, he won the New York Philharmonic's Young Composers' Award. Studies at New York's Columbia University followed, and there his teachers included the electronic music pioneers Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachevsky. In 1962, while he was a graduate student at Columbia, Wuorinen and his classmate Harvey Sollberger co-founded the Group for Contemporary Music, America's first professional ensemble solely dedicated to the performance of contemporary music. This ensemble, still active today, has been praised for raising the standards of new music performance in this country and has inspired the creation of similar groups. In 1970, Wuorinen became the youngest composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for his electronic work, *Time's Encomium*. Since then, he has also received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and been inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The premiere of his 2014 opera *Brokeback Mountain* was an event celebrated worldwide.

Wuorinen composed his work *Grand Union* for cello and drums in 1973 in honor of cellist Fred Sherry's twenty-fifth birthday. Sherry, known for his activity with the ensemble *Speculum Muiscae*, gave the premiere with percussionist Richard Fritz on November 5, 1973 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Wuorinen's work in the early 1970s was concerned with the possibility of establishing pitch centers in chromatic music, feeling that perhaps early serialists had been too eager to dismiss this aspect of tonality. A new interest in timbre had also encouraged him to give percussion instruments a new emphasis in his compositions of these years. We hear both of these concerns on display in *Grand Union* as well as an application of classical rondo form in which familiar material returns after interjections of unfamiliar material.



Charles Wuorinen

The music of composer **Christian Wolff (born 1934)** belongs to the American experimental tradition associated with John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and others. Wolff, who was almost entirely self-taught as a composer, instead studied classics at Harvard where he gained his doctorate and continued teaching until 1970 when he was appointed professor at Dartmouth College. Throughout his career, Wolff has sought ways of engaging the performer as co-creator in his music, granting the musician freedom to shape the flow of the music while reacting to the sounds produced. From the late 1950s, this interest has often expressed itself through a form

of cueing where the choices made by one performer limit the choices available to the next performer, so that the music becomes a chain of actions and reactions. From the early 1970s, Wolff began integrating political subjects into his compositions, selecting texts which address political issues and borrowing musical material from protest songs. In the 1990s, Wolff began to engage with the wider history of music, for example, alluding to such Renaissance composers as Josquin and Ockeghem within his own compositions.

Wolff wrote his *Cello Suite Variation* for solo cello in 2000. Its unusual title is actually quite straightforward: the piece is a variation on the First Cello Suite by Johann Sebastian Bach. Each of its three sections correlates to a movement of the familiar work by Bach. Their titles – *Tempo of Prelude*, *Tempo of Sarabande*, and *Tempo of Gigue* – establish that the allusion goes at least as far as the tempo of the respective movements of the Bach. The final section also begins by quoting Bach's *Gigue*, albeit in a harmonically-fractured manner. Wolff composed his *Cello Suite Variation* at the suggestion of Daniel Matej, a Slovak composer who like Wolff in recent works is interested in the transformation of some artifact of music history as the foundation for a new composition. For Wolff and Matej, linking the music of earlier centuries with performance practice in contemporary music is not as much of a stretch as it might at first seem. In a 1998 interview, Wolff remarked, "In earlier music, the scores are in fact not that explicit. Bach hardly ever tells you to play loud or soft or rarely ever gives you a tempo, often doesn't give you instruments. It's been part of the tradition of music to leave certain things open to the performer." This is the mindset which comes across in *Cello Suite Variation* where the historical borrowing is more important as a structural element or framework than as an aural quotation, readily identifiable to the listener.



Humphrey Searle

The English composer **Humphrey Searle (1915-1982)** studied at the Royal College of Music with the establishment figures John Ireland and Gordon Jacob, and also received private tutelage from Anton Webern while on a six-month scholarship to Vienna. The music of Webern proved to be a decisive influence on Searle's compositional style: he would utilize twelve-tone serialism from the late 1940s and also learn from Webern to regard each sound as vital. Searle's approach, however, would not follow the trend towards abstraction predominant among such avant-gardists as Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Instead, he would follow Arnold Schoenberg by adapting Classical genres and Romantic expression to the new twelve-tone idiom – as we saw with Wuorinen then, Searle's intention was also to establish a wholistic context for the serial method. Among Searle's larger works are three operas, three ballets, five symphonies, and several melodramas for narrator and orchestra. Franz Liszt was also a major influence, and Searle attempted in his book *The Music of Liszt* (1954) to draw connections between this composer's works and the twelve-tone idiom. Among his students at various teaching posts were several of today's leading composers, including Michael Finnissy and Wolfgang Rihm.

Searle composed his *Three Cat Poems* for speaker, flute, cello, and piano between 1951 and 1953. The first of the *Three Poems* sets “The Owl and the Pussycat,” a poem by Edward Lear published in his 1871 collection *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets*. It tells of four anthropomorphized animals: an owl and cat who are lovers, the pig they buy their wedding ring from, and the turkey who marries them. Searle would often remark of the piece, “It is strange, people like my setting of ‘The Owl and the Pussycat’ and find it amusing – then they tell me they don’t like any serial music. Should I tell them that this piece is, in fact, serial?” The other two poems, known collectively as *Two Practical Cats*, set poetry by T. S. Eliot as excerpted from his 1939 collection *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. This same collection was the source for Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Cats*. The specific poems Searle sets are “Macavity: The Mystery Cat” and “Growltiger’s Last Stand,” both of which feature familiar characters for those who know the Webber musical. Searle’s music suits Eliot’s poetry well as it underlines the fiendish Macavity’s sneaky and deceitful nature and gives life to Growltiger’s seafaring adventures up and down the River Thames.

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**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars’ College located in Natchitoches, Louisiana in May 2013 after completing his undergraduate thesis “Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers.” As series director of the successful Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series from May 2014 to April 2016, Jackson played a vital role in the renewal of interest in chamber music across Central Louisiana. This interest has encouraged the creation of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival and the new series Nachtmusik von BrainSurge, both of which Jackson remains active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. He also blogs at MusicCentral where he shares concert experiences, gives listening recommendations, posts interviews with contemporary composers, and offers insights into his own compositions. As a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into pieces which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. In fall 2016, Jackson began graduate studies in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has recently been awarded the Gerhard Herz Scholarship in recognition of his accomplishments. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He also sings with the University of Louisville Chorus and participates in the School of Music Composition Seminar. Learn more about Jackson Harmeyer, his scholarship, and his compositions at [www.JacksonHarmeyer.com](http://www.JacksonHarmeyer.com).