



# Music on the Hill

## — **Big Sky** — Part 2

November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, 2:15 p.m.

Cecilia Belcher, violin

Richard Belcher, cello

Bethel Balge, piano

Violin Sonatina No. 1 in D Major, op. 137.....Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

*Allegro molto*

*Andante*

*Allegro vivace*

Three Pieces for Cello and Piano.....Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

*Modéré*

*Sans vitesse et à l'aise*

*Vite et nerveusement rythmé*

Big Sky Trio (2000) .....Joan Tower (b. 1938)

# Program Notes

by Dr. Stephanie Thorpe

## Sonatina No. 1 in D Major, op. 137, Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

In addition to his virtuosic piano skills, Franz Schubert was also an accomplished violinist, having played in a family string quartet in his formative years. From 1810 to 1811, Schubert composed many string quartets and turned to violin sonatas at age nineteen in 1816, during which time Opus 137, *Sonatina in D Major*, was composed. The piece was published in 1836, after Schubert's death. While Schubert initially titled the work a sonata, the composition was renamed a *Sonatina* by the publishers due to their desire to market the piece to amateur players and its diminutive size in comparison to the sonatas of his contemporaries, Beethoven, Clementi, and others.

Unassuming and intimate with its simple triadic opening motives in both the violin and piano, the melody spins out in arpeggiated musical sequences that swiftly turns minor. The piano and violin quickly separate into two distinct voices, each harmonically supporting the other. Mozartian in brevity and ease of harmonic structure, the violin and piano deftly exchange melodic prominence, key modifications, and restatements of the triadic motive. The piece ends excitedly with two fortissimo chords, punctuating the final recapitulation of the opening theme.

## Three Pieces for Cello and Piano, Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

Nadia Boulanger was a prize-winning French composer and composition instructor of many great composers, such as Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, Elliot Carter, and others. Raised in a musical family of composers, singers, and pianists, Boulanger originally published the *Three Pieces* for organ and later transcribed them for cello and piano in 1914.

Defined as post-impressionistic in compositional style, the pieces are brief and ethereal. The first piece, *Modéré*, opens wistfully with a relatively harmonically static piano line that beautifully supports the singing quality of the cello. A passionate middle section swells like a brief storm and quickly dissipates with a passing recap of the opening temperament before ending a transitory fashion.

The second piece is entitled *Sans vitesse et à l'aise*, which translates to "without speed and at ease." The title clearly fits the composition with a folk-like call and response melodic exchange between the cello and the piano. According to the Hensel Project, Boulanger withdrew the second piece shortly after the compositions were published by Heugel in 1915. Ending with more finality than the first piece, the third

and final piece, *Vite et nerveusement rythmé* ("Quick and nervously paced"), begins with a lively chord that quickly descends in the piano, answered by pizzicato plucking from the cello. Both the cello and piano move independently of each other yet are simultaneously melodically and harmonically supportive. Completely unlike the previous two movements with its animated opening section, the third movement seamlessly shifts to an impressionistic mood similar to that of the first two movements before swiftly returning to the opening theme that concludes with a lively cadence.

### **Big Sky, Joan Tower (b. 1938)**

*Musical America's* 2020 Composer of the Year, Joan Tower is regarded as one of today's most vibrant and important living American composer. She made a career spanning over fifty years as a composer, performer, educator, and conductor. Commissioned by major ensembles, soloists, and orchestras throughout the world for her "dramatic orchestral music and intensely wrought chamber works," she composes from the piano, her primary instrument. She teaches her students at Bard College Conservatory that "music, by necessity, must be deeply attuned to how it is realized by real-life musicians."

Commissioned by the La Jolla Chamber Music Society in 2000, *Big Sky*, is a trio for violin, cello, and piano. According to Joan Tower, *Big Sky* is based on a memory of riding her racehorse, Aymara, around the deep valley of La Paz, Bolivia. The composer recalls the valley as being "surrounded by huge and high mountains of the Andes" mountain range and as she rode, she "looked into a vast and enormous sky. It was very peaceful and extraordinarily beautiful. We never went over one of these mountains, but if we had, it might have felt like what I wrote in this piece."

A combination of impressionism and a quasi-modern version of serialism, *Big Sky* begins with a plaintive motive that moves from violin, to cello, to piano before restarting. The violin and cello move in contrapuntal motion with each other, entwined with the contrary motion in the piano before often cadencing with each other. Tower's many compositions are closely intertwined with colors. Tower feels that she tries "to choreograph a landscape of sound that reaches people in an emotional, visceral, and formal kind of way. The "formal" being the sense of coherence of this [colorful] landscape."

## Musician Bios



Cecilia Belcher, violin



Richard Belcher, cello



Bethel Balge, piano

### Cecilia Belcher

Violinist Cecilia Belcher joined the Minnesota Orchestra in fall 2014 and was named Assistant Principal Second Violin in January 2017. Previously, she performed regularly with the St. Louis Symphony and has also performed with the Pittsburgh and Houston Symphony Orchestras. She is principal second violin of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra in Houston. As concertmaster, she has led the Reno Philharmonic, New World Symphony, Aspen Music Festival Opera Orchestra and Mississippi Valley Orchestra. Music festivals in which she has participated include Aspen, Banff, Beijing International Music Festival, Tanglewood and Verbier. In addition, she has toured Germany and the U.S. with the New York City-based chamber orchestra The Knights.

A St. Louis native, Belcher began violin studies at the age of three. She earned a bachelor's degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music, where she studied with Paul Kantor, and a master's degree from the Shepherd School of Music, studying with Kathleen Winkler. She and her husband Richard Belcher, a cellist in the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, love living in Minneapolis with their two young children.

### Richard Belcher

New Zealand cellist Richard Belcher joined the SPCO in 2019 after a twenty-year career as founding cellist of the Grammy-nominated Enso String Quartet. With the quartet he earned highly critical accolades from recording and concertizing in many of the world's major concert halls such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and Kennedy Center in the United States, as well as abroad in Europe, South America, Australia and New Zealand.

Richard is the Artistic Director of Music on the Hill in Mankato, Minnesota, and since 2008 has been Principal Cellist of River Oaks Chamber Orchestra in Houston, Texas. He has taught and performed at many festivals including St. Bart's, Festival d'Aix en Provence, Prussia Cove, Madeline Island, Campos do Jordao International Winter Festival, SummerFest La Jolla, and the San Miguel de Allende International Chamber Music Festival.

In demand as a teacher and chamber music coach, Richard has previously served as Adjunct Faculty at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music and has given numerous masterclasses around the world. Richard moved to the United States in 1998 to study with Aldo Parisot at Yale University, and it was while there that he founded the Enso String Quartet. Richard's other principal teachers include Norman Fischer, Marc Johnson, and Alexander Ivashkin. He plays an N.F. Vuillaume cello made in 1856, and is married to Cecilia Belcher, Assistant Principal 2nd Violin of the Minnesota Orchestra.

## Bethel Balge

Winner of the Louis B. Sudler Prize in the Arts and of the McKnight sponsored Artist Grant, pianist Bethel Balge has performed in Germany, including at Frankfurt's Alte Oper, in Russia as soloist with the Voronezh Philharmonic, as well as in various American venues. Balge's "highly concentrated, technically secure and captivating interpretation" of Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit attracted notice from a reviewer at the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung after a performance at the Alte Oper. As a doctoral student of Lydia Artymiw, Balge performed in a Minnesota Public Radio live broadcast in the Bach Birthday concert organized by MPR host Michael Barone. She is founding Artistic Director of the Summit Avenue Music Chamber Music Series and Co-Artistic Director with Peter McGuire of the ProMusica Chamber Music Festival. After six years in Germany, Balge received a *Diplom* degree from the University of Frankfurt's Staatliche Hochschule fuer Musik und darstellende Kunst. Previously she received her Master of Music M.M. from the University of Wisconsin under Howard Karp. She is a cum laude graduate (Bachelor of Music) of Michigan State University, where she studied under Van Cliburn gold prize winner Ralph Votapek. Balge teaches piano and music history courses at Bethany Lutheran College (Mankato, MN) and is executive director of the Mankato Symphony Orchestra.

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