

FANTASY AND FAREWELL

MUSIC FOR VIOLA AND ORCHESTRA

Roger Myers, viola

McLean • Schumann • Shostakovich

London Symphony Orchestra

Michael Francis,
conductor

40 YEARS



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viola

London Symphony Orchestra
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Michael McLean:
Suite for Viola and Orchestra (2008)* (19:03)

- 1 I. Prelude (5:29)
- 2 II. Passacaglia (7:06)
- 3 III. Chorale (6:28)

Shostakovich:

Viola Sonata, Op. 147, arr. Vladimir Mendelssohn (33:16)

- 8 I. Moderato (10:50)
- 9 II. Allegretto (7:01)
- 10 III. Adagio (15:25)

Schumann:

Märchenbilder, Op. 113 arr. Michael McLean (14:20)

- 4 I. Nicht Schnell (3:25)
- 5 II. Lebhaft (3:28)
- 6 III. Rasch (2:28)
- 7 IV. Langsam, mit melancholischem Ausdruck (4:59)

*Recording Premiere

Total Time: 66:53

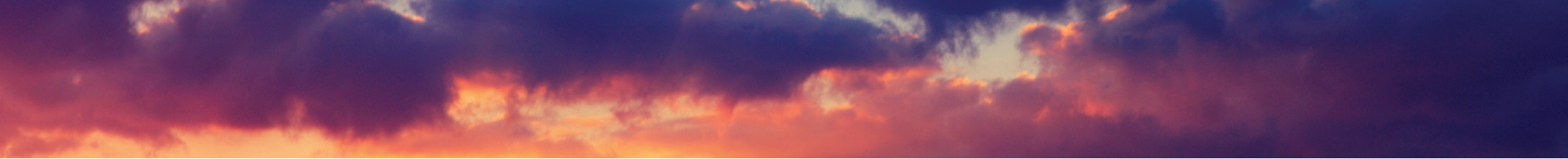
Editor's Preface:

A New Formula for Viola and Orchestra

Throughout its long history, the viola has been mostly used as an orchestral or chamber ensemble instrument. Its solo applications, while they extend to orchestral and chamber roles alike, are more commonly found in recital music: perhaps most wonderfully (especially for violists or their fans) in sonatas or other pieces for solo viola and piano. Concertos or other works for solo viola and orchestra by major composers are relatively uncommon compared to those for violin or piano. This is primarily due to the viola's middle-register sonorities, which don't project above an orchestra as well - making it harder for a composer to orchestrate such works effectively. "Rare beasts" though viola concertos may be, a fair number of mainstream composers have indeed written substantial, high-quality orchestral works showcasing the viola. These include (aside from Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*) prime examples by Bach, Mozart, Bruch, Bartók, Bloch, Vaughan Williams, Britten, Walton, and Hindemith - encompassing the Baroque era through the 20th century. Several of these composers, including Bruch and Bloch, naturally wishing to expand their music's performance possibilities, also supplied piano versions of their orchestral scores.

The reverse process - transforming chamber or recital music for viola into orchestral works - is almost unheard of; that is, until quite recently. Two of this program's three works (the Schumann and the Shostakovich) are just such transcriptions, and both of them gain solid benefits in the process. Firstly, both works are established masterpieces, likely to generate instant interest among the knowledgeable musical public. Secondly, well-done orchestral transcriptions offer greater sonic depth, color and beauty than the original piano parts do, potentially boosting listener appeal. Thirdly, the existing performing repertoire for viola and orchestra grows, and the instrument stands to gain fresh exposure and broader appreciation through concerts ... and recordings like this one. This album demonstrates the savory fruits of such a "new formula," while seeking to redress the widespread neglect of the genre and revealing the rich and mellow sonorities of the solo viola in orchestral frameworks to listeners who have yet to experience them.

This program encompasses a range of music that is especially well suited to the viola's seductive and often poignant



“alto” voice. Framing a delightfully evocative central transcription of Robert Schumann’s fantasy-ridden Märchenbilder are two compositions that deal in entirely different ways with the theme of human mortality. The first, Michael McLean’s Suite for Viola and Orchestra, is a touching and heartfelt original composition commissioned by this recording’s soloist, Roger Myers, as a musical memorial to his mother. The second is another chamber transcription: a treatment of Dmitri Shostakovich’s shattering and utterly profound Sonata for Viola and Piano: his final work. It stands as a telling summation of his precarious existence in an often hostile cultural environment as his life drew to its inevitable close; also as his final farewell to the world. Myers’ own cogent program notes below, offering his unique performer’s insights, will serve as a useful guide to this remarkable and affecting music.

- Lindsay Koob

Notes on the Program


I commissioned the Suite for Viola and Orchestra from Michael McLean in 2005, in memory of my mother, Leone Stredwick. It was completed in the spring of 2008, and I performed its world premiere at the Sunflower Music Festival in Topeka, Kansas, on June 11, 2008. Cast in three movements (Prelude, Passacaglia and Chorale), it is written in a neo-Baroque style and is scored for solo viola, flute, French horn and strings.

My mother, affectionately known to her friends as “Billie,” was a fine concert pianist who (as musical mothers often do) instilled a great love of music in me. She revered the great classical masters: perhaps above all, the music of J.S. Bach. As a boy, I had a strong soprano voice – and was privileged to sing in a number of productions with the Australian Opera and in some great choral works, including Bach’s immortal St. Matthew Passion. My mother had, as a student herself, played the continuo parts in that wonderful work and developed a lifelong attachment to it. She therefore took particular care to be sure I knew all of the score’s myriad beauties. The work has been a constant companion ever since, and never more so than when my mother was suffering her final illness. At that time she requested some of this score be played to her,



particularly the chorales – and so, when she finally passed, it was an easy decision to include one of these chorales at her memorial service.

When I approached McLean to write a work for viola and orchestra in her memory, I asked if perhaps something of Bach or from the St. Matthew Passion might be woven into the texture of the work, but made no specific demands. Awhile later, after concrete ideas had been committed to paper, I visited Michael in Los Angeles, and he told me that he had found the perfect



Bach excerpt for the last movement of his now newly titled “Suite”: a chorale to the text and tune from the St. Matthew Passion, “Befiehl Du Deine Wege” (“Entrust your Life’s Course”) – but enhanced by a harmonization he had heard on a recording richer than that found in the Passion.


To my utter astonishment, it turned out to be the exact recording of this chorale that I had played at my mother’s memorial service! This sent chills through me, and we looked at each other in total amazement. The text of this chorale conveys a deep sense of hope that almost no others in the St. Matthew Passion do. Furthermore, the tune – when played by itself – does not immediately suggest that it is cast in a minor key. It could even be cast in the major – and it is perhaps this dual quality that allowed Bach to fit this more hopeful text to the tune. McLean certainly understood the tune’s modal ambiguity, and – knowing that my mother was indeed a believer in hope, redemption and a higher power – confirmed his impulse as to how he would treat the chorale tune in the final movement. I feel that the work’s emotional and religious heart lies in the sentiments expressed in this last movement. This was the spiritual essence of my mother in life – and, knowing the amazing coincidence that determined the course of the movement makes me wonder if, for just one last time, she was helping to guide her son’s musical evolution. I humbly (and joyfully) choose to believe so. The following text from the chorale should help to deepen your listening experience.

German Text:

Befiehl du deine Wege
Und was dein Herze kränkt
Der allertreusten Pflege
Des, der den Himmel lenkt.
Der Wolken, Luft und Winden
Gibt Wege, Lauf und Bahn,
Der wird auch Wege finden,
Da dein Fuß gehen kann.

English Text:

Commend your life’s course
And all that burdens your heart
To the unwavering care
Of him who rules the heavens.
He who gives the clouds, air and winds
Their courses, paths and orbits
Will also find pathways
That your feet may follow



Michael McLean, based in Los Angeles, is an internationally noted violinist, pedagogue and composer of orchestral, chamber and film music. Trained at Northwestern University and the University of Southern California, he serves on the faculty of the Colburn School of Performing Arts. His violin concerto, *Elements*, was featured on a 2006 Delos release (DE 3357). McLean's own description of his *Suite for Viola and Orchestra* follows:

"An exploration in style and texture, the Prelude hints at the biography of the performer and is essentially a "coming to America" story. The movement begins with the Asian pan-Pacific sounds of Australia, and the principal motif slowly transforms itself into the traditional sounds of American blues. Historically, the Prelude served the function as an introductory movement, setting up the next piece, and structurally consists of an improvisation over a series of chords, the traditional first movement of a Baroque suite. The rendering of this Prelude uses the same devices of flowing chords in the orchestra and improvisatory textures for the viola solo.

"The central movement, the Passacaglia, is the emotional fulcrum of the Suite, and sets an austere mood with its repeated ground bass and slow moving harmonies. Similar to the Sarabande, with its emphasis on the second beat, this movement serves the function of a funeral march, slowly picking up emotional momentum as the music

moves through each variation. The movement consists of an ongoing dialogue between viola and orchestra, working through - in a symbolic way - the various challenges of life, love and loss. Although the passacaglia theme is transformed at the end to a more peaceful, fluid effect, this emotional journey to final acceptance is interwoven with a mixture of interlocking feelings exploring grief and quiet resignation.

"The final movement is based on the Bach chorale "Befiehl Du Deine Wege." This movement is an updated version of an old musical tradition: the weaving of a chorale tune (Lutheran hymn tune) within the musical texture of a free-standing piece. Bach employed many harmonizations for this chorale - his most popular versions, however, being part of the St. Matthew Passion. The orchestra states the first stanza of the chorale in traditional harmony and quickly moves to introduce the viola solo. The violist states each stanza of the chorale tune and is given the opportunity, following each statement, to give a personal commentary in extemporaneous fashion. Musical tension is built with each phrase, as their structures flow further afield from traditional harmony. A cadenza serves the emotional purpose of "clearing the air" before the final stanza is stated at the cadenza's conclusion. The coda, or last section, is a restatement of the first stanza and serves the true purpose of establishing the feeling of peace and transcendence in the music. Here, the tune is rendered

by the full orchestra, and the soloist is given a fluid, obligato-like passage, contentedly bringing the Suite to its conclusion.”

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) composed his *Märchenbilder*, Op. 113 (here arranged for viola and orchestra by Michael McLean), in 1851 for Wilhelm Josef von Wasielewski, the concertmaster of the Düsseldorf Orchestra, to play on the viola; the work was thus originally scored as a series of fantasy pieces for viola and piano. Its title translates as “fairytale pictures,” or (more poetically) “pictures from fairyland.” The work contains four untitled movements for which – considering the work’s official title – it is left to the listener to imagine settings and images suggested by the music. Since no other official program is imposed by the composer, this new orchestration has inspired me to offer my own imaginary titles for (and characterizations of) each of the four movements; they may well serve to aid listeners in understanding their nature and my interpretive approach to them.

Movement 1: “Melancholic Musings.” This is essentially music of darker hues, interspersed with lighter moments. Listen for the many sweeping lines between viola and orchestra constantly overlapping each other, evoking a fantasy-world of successive emotional outpourings.

Movement 2: “Toy Soldiers.” This more upbeat music, in

rondo form, projects a distinctly martial mood. It’s built upon a theme that recurs three times, with contrasting episodes of different character. The opening section is very rhythmic, suggesting galloping cavalry and toy soldiers coming to “attention.” Timpani riffs suggest toy cannons being fired. The first contrasting episode is more rhapsodic, with a sense of scurrying (perhaps escaping the battle on horseback?); the second episode is a more rhythmic cavalcade of overlapping entrances, again suggesting a stylized battlefield. The movement fades away softly, never quite losing its pervasive martial rhythms.

Movement 3: “Damsel in Distress.” Again, we have music of a darker nature – but more energetic than in the first movement, with highly virtuosic runs from the viola. Again, Schumann cast this one in rondo form, with four substantial sections alternating with contrasting episodes. The opening material is ominous and stormy, suggestive (to my mind) of an evil villain who has imprisoned a fair damsel. A more heroic passage at the end of this section might suggest the approach of a “knight in shining armor,” on a quest to save the distressed “lady fair.” A contrasting episode carries this scene over, only to dissolve again into the fearful world of the evil villain. Another episode paints a picture of our imprisoned damsel’s great and noble beauty. Again, the music dissolves into the terrors of her captivity, relieved only by the final appearance of her valiant hero – who rescues his damsel and slays her cap-



tor as the piece ends in glorious triumph!

Movement 4: “The World of Dreams and Slumber.” This is a scene of great tranquility, evoking repose and sleep – or perhaps a heartfelt lullaby of mother to child. The richness of the viola register is matched by the orchestra’s wind section, and many beautiful and dreamy duets between the two predominate. The middle section seems more overt and passionate; maybe an affirmation of love of the mother for her infant and her hopes for its happy life. The music of the opening section returns, in even more hushed and poetic fashion, drawing the work to a delicate and peaceful close.


The Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 147 (here arranged for viola, strings and celeste by Vladimir Mendelssohn, 1991-1992) was Dmitri Shostakovich’s (1906-1975) final work, completed only four days before his death; it is dedicated to Fyodor Druzhinin, violist in the Beethoven Quartet. Understandably a dark and somber work, it is one of the composer’s most personal compositions, in part because he felt he was freed at last from the constraints of writing music to please the Soviet regime. It is, in essence, his very intimate and soulful final testament in music; as he realized the certainty of his imminent death.

While by no means a happy work, it is, however, one containing moments of great peace and resignation that – from beginning

to end – explore every conceivable aspect of one man’s journey to the inevitable. As such, there is a highly epic – even pictorial – quality to this immensely powerful creation. The work is relentlessly symbolic of the composer’s life and (as with much of his music) shot through with quotations from his own earlier works as well as the music of other composers.

The first movement begins with just the solo viola playing pizzicato on the open strings, inviting direct comparison with Alban Berg’s Violin Concerto (written in memory of a departed friend); the atmosphere is at once stark and subdued. An anguished duet with a solo cello further depicts a scenario of great despair. The entire string section soon joins the viola in a much more active and violent section suggesting anguish and terror. This ultimately gives way to a section where both orchestra and soloist play *sul ponticello* (on the bridge), which produces a very icy and eerie sound. The solo viola then plays a cadenza in which many motives from the movement are again explored in succession, sustaining the music’s overriding emotion of austerity and despair. The orchestra joins the viola to end the movement in the same vein, while setting up the movement to come.

The following movement commences in great emotional contrast to its predecessor. It quotes largely from Shostakovich’s unfinished opera of 1942, *The Gamblers*: a work that could never be performed in its day, as its main char-



acters would have instantly drawn comparison with Stalin and his regime, to the composer's deadly peril. This fast movement takes the role a scherzo would in a traditional classical sonata - though here in 2/4 time, and with a decidedly sarcastic and demonic tone. It is a snarling, biting and caustic dance of death: rhythmically compelling and exciting, but misshapen and ugly at the same time. The overall effect, especially in the orchestration, is immensely exciting and theatrical, propelled intermittently by bursts of great virtuosity from the viola. Not only can one imagine Shostakovich sardonically thumbing his nose at the Soviet regime - but ultimately at the specter of death itself.

A powerful cadenza for solo viola introduces a series of falling intervals of perfect fourths, which - though vigorously stated here - ultimately become, in the final movement, a unifying feature of great calm and peace. This is, in fact, Shostakovich's quotation of the classic Russian Hymn for the Dead, known as the Kontakion. How appropriate that, in this dance of death, a feature emerges that will later take us from death and all its terrors to the world of repose and resignation. The movement ends abruptly and "up in the air," seemingly seeking an answer - which comes at the beginning of the third and final movement, in the form of yet another cadenza for solo viola that states our newly encountered Kontakion theme in quieter and more contemplative fashion.

After the reflective viola cadenza that opens the third and final movement, the orchestra ushers in a somber mood, quoting Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata with all its attendant associations; there's also an additional rhythmic similarity to the "Eroica" Symphony's funeral march. Funereal motives, in dialogue between the viola and orchestra, pervade the following sections: some reflective, some dreamlike. We hear evocations of weeping, the pealing of funeral bells, rhythmic suggestions of a faltering heartbeat, moments of anguish, and passages of peaceful resignation. While many solo viola cadenzas interrupt this action, everything flows to and from these moments. Following a particularly aggressive and tormented cadenza is a sudden, even more tortured episode for both soloist and orchestra. But just as quickly, the music subsides again into a more translucent texture and mood, with both soloist and orchestra exploring alternating sentiments of despair and resignation. This conflict eventually subsides into feelings of final acceptance - and, ultimately, peace. The orchestral textures gradually thin out as the music's rhythmic pace gradually slows until the end comes with a peaceful C major chord (a musical "flatline" of sorts), with stubborn rumblings of disquiet finally giving way to utter stillness.


- Roger Myers



ROGER MYERS was born in Sydney Australia; he has performed to international critical acclaim on four continents, in countries including Austria, Norway, Scotland, China, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico and the USA. He performed with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra while still a student, and later studied in the United States on scholarships with Donald McInnes at the University of Southern California. Roger is Professor and Chairman of Strings at the

University of Texas at Austin, and recently received the school's Teaching Excellence Award. In 2009 he held a Visiting Professorship at the University of Southern California.

The Toronto Star described his playing as "spirited," and the New Zealand Evening Post proclaimed him a "fine violist" whose playing was "various and entertaining."



He has collaborated with such distinguished artists as Suren Bagratuni, Jean Barr, Yehonatan Berick, Steve Doane, Jorja Fleezanis, Michael Francis, Lynn Harrell, Daniel Heifetz, Alex Klein, Ronald Leonard, Brian Lewis, Martin Lovett, Felicia Moye, Anton Nel, Kurt Nikkanen, Mark O'Connor, James Parker, Tsuoshi Tsutsumi, Kathleen Winkler and Zvi Zeitlin; also the Brentano, Cavani and Miro String Quartets. He has also performed with the London Symphony Orchestra, LA Chamber Orchestra, Santa Fe Pro Musica, Camerata Pacifica and Da Camera of Houston. In 2005 Roger enjoyed a successful Carnegie Hall debut.

Roger has been in steady demand at some of the nation's most prestigious summer festivals, including Music Academy of the West, Bowdoin Summer Music Festival, Festival Institute at Round Top, Niagara International Chamber Music Festival, Marrowstone, and Green Mountain; he also appeared at the Festival de Musique in St. Barthelemy. He served as Artistic Director of the XXV Silver Anniversary International Viola Congress, and was a featured soloist on the 100th birthday tribute concert to the great violist William Primrose at the XXXII International Viola Congress in Minneapolis.

He has performed several notable world premieres, to include Kevin Puts' Piano Quintet with the Texas Piano Quartet in 2006, and Michael McLean's Suite for Viola and Orchestra in 2008. In the summer of 2009 he performed in the Mid-West premiere of violinist Mark O'Connor's String Quartet No. 3 with the composer; and performed Peter Askim's Viola Concerto at Walt Disney Concert Hall in 2011.

Roger plays a rare and beautiful J.B. Guadagnini viola made in 1763. This is his first release on the Delos Label.

Session Photos:

Julie Edwards Photography



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