

Program Notes:

Sonata No. 2 for Violoncello and Piano *“Chopin’s Ghost”*

It is over thirty years since I wrote the first sonata for this combination. That piece proved to be a worthy challenge, and I thought that I would never try it again. Any composer finds out that balance issues, which are very different over the registers, are only the beginning. Since the cello does not speak with the same velocity as the violin, tempos and tempo relationships are critical to the success of the piece. One might notice that the piano parts of cello sonatas of the past tend to be more elaborate, because to properly surround and support the string, more complex piano textures are required. This piece pushes the technical abilities of the accompanist to the limit. At the same time, the musical fabric of the piece is in the tradition of Ives, Harris, and Barber, while not really embracing the Ivesian or neoromantic aesthetic. Given the kind of development and fragmentation employed, this is not an “Old Fashioned” piece: it could have only been written in 2014. I think that the time has come for critics to stop asserting that all contemporary tonal music embraces the past.

“Chopin’s Ghost” as a subtext must be explained. I have always had the greatest admiration for Chopin’s *Cello Sonata*, just about his last completed work, and a piece rich in nuance and daunting in its colorful piano accompaniment. I have tried to duplicate the long weaving lines of that piece in my sonata, as well as the variety of opposed instrumental textures. There also happens to be a paraphrase of Chopin’s subsidiary material (measure 34) from the Finale of his work, which occurs early in the fourth movement of mine. It is followed by an exact quote of four measures of his consequent phrase (measures 39-42). These are blended into my parent material. There are also deconstruction techniques, procedures where intact and recognizable structures are torn apart and selectively fragmented: something in the first movement which I call “Chorale gone bad” is an example. The voices of the four-part texture are moved around to produce new harmonic combinations which redefine the dissonance treatment. This chorale reappears in Movement IV with interpolations of Finale material.

In my recent *Composers’ Reminiscences* for unaccompanied violin, each movement bears the name of a composer from the past, like Haydn or Webern. Rather than a series of style compositions, the movements are a speculative essay on what those composers would be writing if they were alive today. *Chopin’s Ghosts* is not full of stylistic reference; rather it tries to evoke the poetic spirit of Chopin. It is also not a collage in the manner of George Rochberg’s *Music for the Magic Theater*, which mixes quotations with imitation of the real thing, often in juxtaposition. It is more an *homage*- like Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. By sleight of hand, Ravel steals the soul of Couperin, while keeping the body intact. It is my hope that *Chopin’s Ghost* will acquit itself in a similar manner.

