

ROBERT MUCZYNSKI'S MUSIC FOR CELLO

by Paul Vance

It is a well-known fact that the cello has been graced with works by some of the finest composers who ever lived. Twentieth-century composers took an especially warm view of the cello and its capabilities for lyrical expressiveness, and created music that greatly enhanced the literature for our instrument. American composer Robert Muczynski (b. 1929) is one such musician.

Robert Muczynski is a native of Chicago. He earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees at DePaul University, where he studied piano with Walter Knupfer and composition with Alexander Tcherepnin. Muczynski held a few college teaching posts in the Midwest before joining the faculty of music at the University of Arizona in 1965. Most of his compositions date from his tenure at Arizona, which ended in retirement in 1994. Perhaps best known for his music for solo piano and for flute, Mr. Muczynski has contributed two very fine works to the cello repertoire: the *Gallery* suite for unaccompanied cello and the *Sonata*, Op. 25 for cello and piano.

Written in the late 1960s, a period often associated with some rather extravagant musical experimentation, the musical language of both Muczynski's cello pieces is tonal. He makes use of traditional formal schemes, which, in the case of the *Gallery* suite, are compact and simply stated. Despite this, both pieces sound fresh, contemporary, and unmistakably American in origin.

The *Gallery* suite is comprised of nine movements: *Prelude* (Adagio), *Rainy Night* (Andante molto), *Noonday Heat* (Moderato), *Shanty* (Allegretto), *Winter Houses* (Andante), *Ice Glare* (Poco piu mosso), *Black Iron* (Allegro), *September Light* (Moderato), and *End of the Day* (Moderato/Adagio). A composer's note from the printed score explains that, "This suite of movements was suggested by paintings of the American artist, Charles Burchfield [sic]."

Speaking with the composer via telephone about *Gallery*, which I was preparing for performance in January of 2006, I learned that the suite was originally composed as a score for the 1967 documentary film, *Charles Burchfield: Fifty Years of his Art*. Mr. Muczynski told me that he found Burchfield's work to be very lyrical, and, because he believed the cello to be the "ultimate lyrical instrument," immediately thought of using a solo cello to portray

these painted works in musical terms. The opening bars of the *Prelude* provide a good example of this lyricism (example 1). The composer makes effective use of the cello's lower and middle ranges here, with a lovely cantabile line.

In keeping with the cinematic nature of this music, each movement of *Gallery* flows easily into the next (many are marked "attacca"). *Rainy Night* is a simple dance tune in 6/8 meter which, like the following movement (*Noonday Heat*), has a low tessitura.

After an introductory Allegretto, *Shanty*

in duple meter.

September Light contains some of the most technically challenging moments of the piece. There is some shifting in a fairly high register (example 4) as well as a rather lengthy pizzicato section in upper mid-range (example 5). The rhythmic drive and lilting melody of this movement make any slight discomfort well worth the effort.

End of the Day is essentially a reprise of the opening two movements of the suite (in reverse order), which gives the suite a cyclic effect.

The *Gallery* suite takes less than ten

Example 1: *Gallery — Prelude*
Musical notation in bass clef, 3/4 time, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic and markings for *espress.* and *e sost.*

Example 2: *Gallery — Shanty*
Musical notation in bass clef, 4/4 time, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a *marc.* marking.

Example 3: *Gallery — Ice Glare*
Musical notation in treble clef, 3/4 time, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic.

Example 4: *Gallery — September Light*
Musical notation in treble clef, 5/8 time, starting with a *cresc.* marking.

Example 5: *Gallery — September Light*
Musical notation in treble clef, 5/8 time, starting with a *pizz.* marking and a piano (*p*) dynamic.

breaks into a spirited dance (example 2). The music of this section moves deftly from 4/4 to 2/4 and 3/8 throughout. There are moments here where the music is reminiscent of Aaron Copland's ballet scores of the 1940s.

Winter Houses and *Ice Glare* (example 3) are short, song-like movements in which the cellist gets to play in the upper register. *Black Iron* is another dance, this time mostly

minutes to perform, with several movements being less than a minute in length. Aside from one or two spots mentioned above, it is not terribly demanding technically, and would make an excellent introduction to the twentieth-century repertoire for a student who is nearing the advanced stage of development. There is quite a range of expression in this music, which allows a teacher many opportunities to address

phrasing and sound production. This piece also presents a few rhythmic challenges. The published score (by G. Schirmer, Inc.) was well edited by the late Gordon Epperson.

A bit more technically demanding, though equally engaging is the *Sonata* for cello and piano, Op. 25. This piece was the result of Muczynski's first meeting with his then-new University of Arizona School of Music colleague, cellist Gordon Epperson. At that time (summer, 1966), Dr. Epperson was preparing for his debut recital at his new post. Muczynski — an outstanding pianist — agreed to “accompany” Epperson in a program that was to include one of the Brahms sonatas and the Rachmaninoff sonata. When Epperson expressed a desire to play something more recent than the 1901 Rachmaninoff piece on this recital, Muczynski undertook to compose a new work. Epperson premiered the piece with

commonly used to close a multi-movement work than to open it. As if to amplify this unusual turn of events, Muczynski has the cello present the movement's theme unaccompanied by the piano until the final cadence of this section (example 6). There are nine variations that follow. Each variation has a short closing section that provides a smooth transition from one to another. Variation 8 is piano solo (*Andante espressivo*). The final variation is cello solo, which seems to bring the movement full-circle.

At my first read through of this piece, I couldn't help thinking of Shostakovich as I played the opening bars of the second movement (example 7). True to the nature of a scherzo, this movement has some very interesting rhythmic activity, and some wonderful dialogue between the two instruments. It is in an ABA structure, the middle portion of which is in 5/4 meter for

is much in evidence in the third movement *Andante sostenuto* (example 8). The cello governs most of the first half of this movement. There are lengthy sections in which the piano provides a basic accompaniment to the cello, and a brief “soliloquy” in which the piano punctuates rather than accompanies the cello's parlando material. The two instruments achieve parity in the *agitato* section that brings the movement to a close.

The fourth movement of the *Sonata* (*Allegro con spirito*) brings the piece to a rousing finish (example 9). There are frequent changes of meter here, most of which flow easily but require a well-organized bow scheme from the cellist. The melodic line is sometimes quite angular, making for some tricky shifting here and there.

In my opinion, the *Sonata* is a more technically demanding work than the *Gallery* suite. The second and fourth movements are very active rhythmically, and are a good workout for the bow as well as the left hand. Although the piece is extremely well written for both instruments, there are a few places where careful rehearsal is required to insure good ensemble playing. Taking about twenty minutes to perform, this piece would fit nicely into a program comprised mostly of standard works. Like the *Gallery* suite, the *Sonata* is published by G. Schirmer, Inc. Again, Gordon Epperson, to whom the piece is dedicated, has edited the cello part.

Both of these pieces have been recorded by cellist Carter Enyeart, joined by pianist Adam Wodnicki for the *Sonata*, and are available on Centaur Records, or on iTunes. Mr. Muczynski has expressed his pleasure with both recordings, and indeed they are quite well done.

Cellists with an interest in playing chamber music should note that Mr. Muczynski has written a *Trio* for violin, viola, and cello, a *Fantasy Trio* for clarinet, cello, and piano, and three *Trios* for violin, cello, and piano. Each of these works is very satisfying for players and listeners alike (the *Piano Trio No. 3* is a personal favorite!). These five works are published individually by the Theodore Presser Company.

Muczynski in Tucson in the fall of 1966.

The *Sonata* is in four movements: *Theme and Variations*, *Scherzo* (*Allegro grazioso*), *Andante sostenuto*, and *Allegro con spirito*. The cello and piano are treated very much as equal partners throughout this piece.

Theme and Variations is a form more

the most part.

As with the *Gallery* suite, the *Sonata* shows Muczynski's affection for the cello's lyricism. Although the cello is used as a singing instrument throughout most of the *Sonata*, this predilection for lyricism

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