

# California Festival: Cello Duos

**Peter Ko and Robbie Bui, cellos**

Monday, November 6th, 2023 - 7:00 p.m.

Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

Ochres and Bones (2023)*	Aaron Mencher
Jackson Pollock (ca. 1951)	Morton Feldman
Ayre (ca. 1600s)	John Ward
Fantasia (ca. 1600s)	Christopher Gibbons
Capricious Combinations (2023)* i. Hit the Spot ii. Just Like That iii. Hit the Spot Just Like That (duet)  iv. Rush Headlong v. Unto the Breach vi. Rush Headlong Unto the Breach (duet)	Jordan Kuspa
Extensions #5 (1953)	Morton Feldman
Fantasia (ca. 1600s)	Christopher Gibbons
Fantasia (ca. 1600s)	William White
Madrigal (1998)	Viktor Suslin

\*world premiere

## Program Notes

In regards to *Ochres and Bones*, Aaron Mencher writes:

“When I first met Peter, many of our conversations revolved around his preoccupation with the intricacies of producing the perfect cello tone. I am not a cellist, but I was endlessly inspired by his singular focus.

*Ochres and Bones* draws its title from two of the earliest known pigments. Even with limited sources of pigment, ancient painters still created enormous varieties of color and art. Similarly, the limited musical palette of this piece focuses the listener on the many possible timbres of a cello. The music grows out of a single note with the players creating gentle rhythms out of small fluctuations in sound. Over the course of the entire piece, the music gradually expands within every parameter—the colors of the cello mixing like paint.”

In 1951, a young Morton Feldman composed the film score for the short movie *Jackson Pollock*. Feldman received this commission thanks to John Cage, who was originally asked but was unavailable at the time. A curious aspect of this music is how Feldman combines and juxtaposes the two celli against each other, deliberately choosing dissonant intervals and chords, forcing the cellists to play in awkward configurations and move through disjunct gestures. There is no preconceived organizational scheme that determines the pitch or rhythmic structure of the music, other than perhaps the editing of the film. All of which defamiliarizes us from what we typically associate with conventional cello playing, that of beautiful tones and graceful movements, placing the listener in confrontation with the material and reality that is present before them.

It is through this channel that Feldman links his composition to some of the underlying philosophies of Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionism visual art movement—the abandonment of symbolic representation, of illusory depth. Through this pure abstraction, there is the provocation to simply engage with the materials and colors for exactly what they are on the surface. It is well known that Feldman was keenly aware of the work of other avant garde visual artists of his time, and that his work was steeped with those influences. The music for *Jackson Pollock* may not exactly mirror the aesthetic outcome of Pollock’s painting on the surface, but instead emerges from a deeper connection, to achieve a similar outcome.

The Jacobean consort music featured in this program derives itself from the *Musica Britannica* collection, featuring select music from the Jacobean Renaissance era. All of these pieces are originally written for viola de gamba, specifically for two of the same type of viols, be it the bass viol or the lyra viol. These viols were often played in more intimate settings, as opposed to outward public presentations, so that the players could more fully enjoy the gentle resonances produced by their instruments. It can then be seen that these consort pieces were composed with this quality in mind, focusing on the interplay between the two players, as the voices trade melodies and figures, echo each other in canon, and support accordingly. It is through setting the music through two of the same instrument, where the sameness invites one to listen more sensitively, to attenuate to the fine differences that emerge.

Jordan Kuspa's *Capricious Combinations* are a set of solo caprices that then can be combined into duets. The caprices in general are fun, groovy works, as evidenced by the musical language and titles of each movement. Each caprice functions well on their own, varying greatly from one another—yet they work surprisingly well when layered together as intended, creating a depth and complexity that extends beyond the sum of their parts. Instead of an emphasis on sameness, there is a maximal pointing towards differences, a coherence built upon the juxtaposition of different extremes of technique and rhythmic proportions. It is perhaps the fact that this difference is built upon a common ground, the cello, that acts as a glue that holds the individual caprices together as duets even with such stark differences. In a sense, one could relate to the cubist paintings like of Picasso, where multiple perspectives of the same subject are imposed upon the same plane, albeit in a friendlier and more easily digestible fashion.

When asked about the title, Feldman is quoted to have said "By extensions I do not mean continuities. I had the feeling of a bridge where you don't see the beginning or the end, where what you see seems transfixed in space." *Extensions #5* is a rather curious work in Feldman's oeuvre, as by this point he was already deeply immersed into his excursions with indeterminacy and graphic scores such as that of *Projection 1*, *Extensions 4*, and *Durations 2*. This piece is fully notated, full of figures that call back to the awkward difficulty of *Jackson Pollock*, but with more intricate rhythms that seem to allude towards his later works that feature complex polyrhythmic variations, like that of *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*. The music switches between moments of frenzied activity, rhythmic hocketing, unison figuration, and static sustain and silence—but not necessarily in a

logical nor predictable fashion. Unlike the *Jackson Pollock*, there are moments of consonance that fill the space, which ironically becomes its own unsettling and defamiliarized experience in the contextual landscape of the music. In line with the preoccupation and experimentation with the sense of time and relation that the New York School was known for, the music places the listener in an experience where one is never certain what to expect, with no sense of where the beginning nor end exists, even up to its point of conclusion.

Viktor Suslin was a composer associated with the Soviet Union avant garde circle, friends with composers such as Sofia Gubaidulina and Galina Ustvolskaya. Of particular note was his involvement as a member of the free improvisational ensemble Astrea, which was of great importance to the Soviet avant garde composers. As a composer himself, Viktor was blacklisted from the Soviet Union in 1979, and shortly emigrated to West Germany thereafter. His approach to composition was “consistently undogmatic”, using a variety of compositional methods ranging from the experimental (dodecaphony and serialism), to the conventional.

*Madrigal* seems to be a work that features a mix of these different styles and influences, drawing from inspiration from spectralism, aleatoric elements, atonality and modality, all presumably framed through an inspiration of the Renaissance madrigal. Perhaps one can keep in mind the idea of a “madrigalism”, the idea of freely shaping sound to more vividly express and evoke different emotional states—regardless of dissonance or musical proportions—as a way to make sense of this music.