Arizona Philharmonic
March 15, 2026
Colors in Spring: Fire, Dance, and Shadow
James D'León, piano
Luke Hill, violin
Wesley Skinner, cello

Program notes by J. Michael Allsen

JENNIFER HIGDON *Piano Trio*

Pale Yellow
Fiery Red

Luke Hill, violin
Wesley Skinner, cello
James D'León, piano

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF *Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor, Op. 19*

Lento—Allegro moderato
Allegro scherzando
Andante
Allegro mosso

Wesley Skinner, cello
James D'León, piano

INTERMISSION

FELIX MENDELSSOHN *Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66*

Allegro energico e fuoco
Andante espressivo
Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto
Finale: Allegro appassionato

Luke Hill, violin
Wesley Skinner, cello
James D'León, piano

This springtime concert is our annual chamber music program featuring pianist James D'León and members of the Arizona Philharmonic: here featuring violinist Luke Hill, our acting associate concertmaster and principal cellist Wesley Skinner. They open with the expressively colorful *Piano Trio* by American composer Jennifer Higdon. Then we have the romantic *Sonata for Cello and Piano* by Sergei Rachmaninoff, a work in which lush writing for the cello contrasts with more virtuosic music for piano. Mr. D'León and friends played the Mendelssohn *Piano Trio No. 1* at these concerts in March 2022. After intermission tonight, they play his masterful *Piano Trio No. 2.*

Jennifer Higdon (b.1962) is among America's most successful contemporary composers. Born in Brooklyn, she studied flute at Bowling Green State University and composition at both the University of Pennsylvania and at the Curtis Institute, where she taught until 2021. In 2010, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her *Violin Concerto*, one of many honors she has garnered in the past twenty years. In just the last few years, her first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the prestigious International Opera Award for Best World Premiere in 2016—the first American opera to do so in the award's history. Within the past few years, Higdon has had successful premieres of her *Double Percussion Concerto* with the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the *Cold Mountain Suite* with the Delaware Symphony, and *The Absence, Remember*, a choral work commissioned by several choruses. She is among America's most frequently-programmed composers, and her ethereal *blue cathedral* is among the most often-played pieces of contemporary music, receiving well over 600 performances since its premiere in 2000.

Higdon posed the following questions in discussing her 2003 ***Piano Trio***:

> Can music reflect colors and colors be reflected in music? In my composing, I often picture colors, as if I were spreading them on a canvas, except I do so with melodies, harmonies, and through the instruments themselves. The colors that I have chosen in both of the movement titles, and in the music itself, reflected very different moods and energy levels, which I find fascinating, as it begs the question, can colors actually convey a mood?

This work was composed for the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival, in Vail, Colorado.

Higdon seems to have answered all of her questions in her *Piano Trio*. In the opening movement, titled *Pale Yellow*, the music conveys a sense of calm reserve with its lyrical string lines above brittle piano harmonies. Near the middle, all three instruments join in passionate music that reaches an emotional climax before subsiding into a reprise of the opening mood. The effect is astonishingly similar to one of the canvases of American painter Mark Rothko (1903-1970), abstract, seemingly enigmatic blocks of color floating above one another. However, for those who don't simply dismiss one of his works, but instead spends time with it, it becomes obvious that. Rothko (for whom color certainly did have strong emotional associations) builds up his areas of color with layer upon layer of paint, with threads and thin layers of slightly contrasting colors, combining to form an overall impression of a solid block. In the second movement, titled *Fiery Red*, it takes little imagination to conjure up images of flames from the fierce interplay of the three instruments. There is a contrasting section in the middle, when the

flames seem to die down momentarily, as if the conflagration is momentarily starved of oxygen. However, the burning starts again in a fierce character that lasts until the end.

The ***Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor*** (1901) by **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)** has the dual distinction of being the only work he ever composed for a solo instrument other than piano, and his very last chamber work: for the next 40 years, he concentrated exclusively on works for solo piano and orchestral music. It was written in late 1901, during a period of renewed self-confidence following the phenomenally successful premiere of his second piano concerto. (Rachmaninoff had spent three years prior to this in the grip of a deep depression.) It was written for his friend, cellist Anatoly Brandukov, and the two of them played its premiere in Moscow on December 15, 1901. The title of the work is telling: this is clearly a sonata for cello *and* piano, in which the two instruments are equal partners: in fact, most of the difficulty in performing this work lies in the virtuosic piano part.

It opens with an introduction (*Lento*), that features a moody cello line and a piano part that lays out ideas that will be developed throughout. The body of the opening movement (*Allegro moderato*) is set in a broad sonata form that works with two ideas, a lyrical melody introduced by the cello, above a stormy accompaniment, and simpler theme heard first in the piano. The intense development section culminates in a passionate cadenza for the piano. In a brief recapitulation, Rachmaninoff brings back his main themes in the opposite order, before closing with a terse coda. The scherzo movement (*Allegro scherzando*) is in a three-part form. The outer panels feature brief bursts of cello above a turbulent piano part, and a brief moment of lyrical contrast. In the middle, Rachmaninoff provides a lovely Major-key song for the cello. The *Andante* that follows is also in a three-part form, beginning and ending with a thoroughly romantic song introduced by the piano. For contrast there is a second, melancholy idea, once again introduced by the piano and expanded upon by the cello. This rises to a grand, emotional peak before subsiding into a return of the opening idea and a quiet conclusion. The fourth movement (*Allegro mosso*) is set in sonata form, beginning with an exuberant cello main theme above a forceful piano background. The contrasting second idea is a flowing songlike theme led by the cello. The development section is concerned almost entirely with the main theme, while the recapitulation treats mainly the second idea, leading to a brilliant conclusion.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) composed his ***Piano Trio No. 2*** in 1845, six years after he completed *Trio No. 1*. This was a very busy period of his life. He spent a few, ultimately frustrating years in Berlin at the request of the newly-crowned King of Prussia, Wilhelm IV. (His mother, Lea and his sister Fanny both lived in Berlin as well.) He also made three wildly successful tours in England. By 1843, he had largely returned to his beloved Leipzig, where he founded a conservatory that still exists today, the Hochschule für Musik und Theatre "Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy." He composed the *Trio No. 2* in the spring of 1845, when he was enjoying a relatively quiet sojourn with his family in Frankfurt. Like the *Trio No.1*, the *Trio No. 2* is the work of a mature master. Writing to his sister Fanny, Mendelsssohn noted that "The Trio is a bit nasty to play, but not really difficult." Indeed, the piano part clearly dominates throughout, but without the almost heavy-handed virtuosity of the Rachmaninoff *Sonata*.

It opens with a movement in sonata form (*Allegro energico e fuoco*), whose main theme—a nervous idea presented above a turbulent background—is presented by the strings and the piano in turn. This leads into a second theme, much more lyrical though with its own darker shadings, and a rather aggressive closing idea. Angry figures from the piano signal the opening of the development, much of which is taken up by violin and cello, for the first time in the piece treated as an independent parts, as they work out the second theme. The recapitulation is rather abrupt and concentrated, coming to an end in a wild coda on the closing theme. The piano introduces the gentle, lilting main theme of the second movement (*Andante espressivo*). The cello begins a more pensive middle section, before a return of the opening mood. The scherzo (*Molto allegro quasi presto*) is also in a three-part form; its outer sections dominated by lively, flitting minor-key music that is clearly a close cousin to his dancing fairies in the early *Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream."* The brief major-key trio is scarcely less energetic. It comes to an end in a tongue-in-cheek passage for *pizzicato* strings.

The finale (*Allegro appassionato*) is rondo form, with a rollicking main idea heard at the beginning, and repeated throughout surrounding contrasting ideas. The first of these is a brief, upbeat episode. In the second, piano quietly introduces a solemn chorale tune. This was clearly a tribute to Mendelssohn's "great master" J. S. Bach, and possibly to the composer's own adopted Lutheran faith. The chorale is *Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit* (*Before Thy Throne I Now Appear*), a prelude on which (*BWV 668*) is often referred to as Bach's "deathbed chorale"—his final completed work. After a stormy transition, this tune returns *fortissimo* in all three instruments, before a final development of the main theme.

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