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CLASSICS

Zlatomir Fung *Fantasies*



Fantasies

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|----------|---|---------------|
| 1 | <i>Fantasy on Jenůfa</i>
– Leoš Janáček, Zlatomir Fung | 14.45 |
| 2 | Fantaisie et Variations sur des motifs de l'Opéra <i>La Fille du Régiment</i> de Donizetti, op. 16
– Adrien-François Servais | 14.34 |
| 3 | Fantaisie sur des motifs de <i>Guillaume Tell</i> de G. Rossini, op. 8
– François George-Hainl | 14.16 |
| 4 | “Walther's Prize Song” from <i>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</i>
– Richard Wagner, arr. August Wilhelmj | 05.12 |
| 5 | “Lensky's Aria” from <i>Eugene Onegin</i>
– Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, arr. Mikhail Bukinik | 07.02 |
| 6 | <i>Fantasia Carmèn</i>
– Marshall Estrin | 19.56 |
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Zlatomir Fung
cello

Richard Fu
piano

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Notes

During the 2020 Covid lockdowns, while my father was learning how to bake bread, I was immersed in another kind of pandemic project: reassessing my approach to cello technique. The natural place to look for inspiration was the great performing cellists of the 19th century: Popper, Grützmacher, Servais, and Piatti, among others. I had long idolised these virtuosos. Aside from being accomplished performers in their day, they were all prolific composers, particularly of études, caprices, and other pedagogical works. As I sifted through their published catalogues, searching for new works to practice, my original intentions were quickly derailed. I encountered, fascinating concert music of all kinds: mazurkas, sonatas, concerti, airs, variations, and more.

What especially piqued my interest was one genre that every composer seemed to have explored at least once: the opera fantasy.

These early- and mid-19th-century opera fantasies used recognisable tunes from famous operas to create a free medley. There were few rules beyond the pure expression of the composer's personality, interests, and strengths as a cellist. I recalled my encounters with opera fantasies as a musical form: I had heard some before, but only for piano or violin. I was playfully envious of violinists, who enjoy three fantasies on Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (my favourite opera); in contrast, we cellists didn't have any (or so I thought!). But I was quickly discovering that the fantasies were indeed out there, ready to be revived.

My first concert of opera fantasies was a digital livestream in February 2021. The challenge of playing these pieces was exhilarating. The composers of these fantasies, mostly virtuoso cellists, had created a circus act of sorts—daring themselves and others to execute high-wire feats of technical prowess, demonstrating that the cello had a broader range of expression than composers previously believed. Performing this forgotten genre was like cello cosplay: I imagined myself sitting in the dusty corners of 19th-century salons, fancifully whipping out these classic tunes and their virtuosic embellishments, emulating the great cellists of the past. These fantasies are a grand expression of musical freedom: the freedom to play, to wander, to risk, and to evolve. This feeling of freedom is what I hoped to celebrate most in the selection of works featured on this album.

The Belgian virtuoso Adrien-François Servais (1807–1866) was one of the most influential creators of operatic fantasies for cello and piano. His *Fantaisie et Variations sur des motifs de L'Opéra La Fille Du Régiment de Donizetti*, featured on this album, is one of the jewels of the genre and brims with the joyful exuberance of virtuosity. The work begins with an elaborate recitativo alternating between dramatic proclamations and wistful musings, loosely based on “La voilà! La voilà...” from Act 1 of Donizetti's opera. Servais then tiptoes into a coy presentation of one of the opera's most famous numbers, “Chacun le sait...” followed by four variations on this tune. These variations are like a high-stakes relay race: each one explores a different virtuosic technique, escalating the demands of the previous. The final minute of the fantasy heightens the virtuosity further yet, requiring the cellist to play a series of figurations

in which the bottom note of an octave is embellished with a triplet. This ornamentation would appear some forty years later in the first movement of Antonín Dvořák's *Cello Concerto in B Minor*—a testament to the influence this work exerted on later compositions for the cello.

Servais' brilliant forays into the genre inspired me to search for other lesser-known fantasies of the same era. I first encountered the name François George-Hainl (1807–1872) while perusing the online International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP). Hainl's lone work on the website, *Fantaisie sur des motifs de Guillaume Tell de Rossini*, immediately intrigued me, partly owing to the conspicuous absence of music from the opera's famous overture. Biographical information about Hainl is so scant that I had to reference French-language periodicals from the 1840s and 50s to find context about his work.

I learned that Hainl was born to an Austrian father and French mother and began his musical career as a virtuoso cellist, touring Europe throughout the 1830s. By the end of that decade, he had become weary of the itinerant performing life and shifted his focus to conducting. After an impressive tenure at the opera house in Lyon, Hainl prominently served as the chief conductor of the Paris Opera, leading many essential premieres of the era, including those of Verdi's *Don Carlos* and Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*.

The copy of the *Fantaisie sur Guillaume Tell* in the Bavarian State Library is dated circa 1830, one year after *William Tell*'s premiere at the Paris Opera. The young Hainl's work adheres to the standard blueprint of fantasies of the time, favouring a series of discrete sections. The piece features three significant musical numbers from the opera¹, all originally for male voices.

Nestled between the first two numbers is a charming original theme, followed by a tender variation in which the cellist plays brisk harmonic arpeggios above a piano melody. Hainl's most virtuosic writing in the *Fantaisie* is imbued with a graceful, lyrical sentimentality rather than the bombast customary in the genre—perhaps a reflection of Hainl's disposition as a musician and cellist.

The two shorter selections on the album exemplify another closely related tradition of instrumental transcription: the aria as a cantilena showpiece. These lyrical excerpts from operas effectively contrast more technical showpieces, allowing performers to exhibit their poetic sensibilities and ability to imitate vocalists' detailed inflections. August Wilhelmj (1845–1908) was a close associate of Richard Wagner, notably serving as the concertmaster for the premiere of the *Der Ring des*

Nibelungen. His paraphrase of Walter's Prize Song from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is a soulful amalgamation of Walter's various verses throughout the opera. The paraphrase was originally transcribed for violin and piano, but here it is performed on cello and piano in a slightly abridged version that is nearly identical to the one recorded by cellist Raya Garbousova and pianist Erich Itor Kahn for RCA in the 1940s. Mikhail Bukinik (1872–1947) was a prominent Ukrainian cellist known for his hyper-virtuosic concert etudes. His sensitive arrangement of "Lensky's Aria" from Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin* demonstrates the expressive potential of the cello's tender middle register.

When the time came to assemble the works for this album, I was intrigued by the idea of writing a fantasy of my own. The genre's loose parameters meant I could write almost anything

I wanted to play and tailor the fantasy to my tastes as a cellist. As a starting point, I was drawn to Leoš Janáček's (1854–1928) *Jenůfa*, which enthralled me with its dark storyline, creative orchestration, and unconventional uses of repetition. The traditional 19th-century opera fantasy had long fallen into obscurity by the time *Jenůfa* premiered in 1902. I felt it would be an exciting challenge to adapt *Jenůfa*'s idiosyncratic musical language while still working within the fundamental framework of a showpiece. In *Fantasy on Jenůfa*, my goal was to highlight the music I love most from *Jenůfa* and arrange it in a way that felt logical and true to the spirit of the opera. During the composition process, I avoided referencing the opera's plot or libretto, instead searching for moments in the opera that I believed would be interesting in purely musical terms. The music of *Jenůfa* favours a continuous flow of musical ideas without clear structural breaks (an

idea I wanted my fantasy to reflect), so I structured the work into four sections connected without pause, framed by an introduction and coda.

Marshall Estrin's (1996—) *Fantasia Carmèn* is the final track on the album. I had floated the idea of a new Carmen fantasy to Marshall as early as 2018. While fantasies on *Carmen* for cello and piano exist (such as those by Joseph Hollman and Buxton Orr), I felt that none fully captured the cello's capacity as a virtuoso instrument. When Marshall ultimately wrote the piece in 2022, he delivered a work that thoroughly surprised me. It is a score written in the tradition of the most outstanding examples of the genre; its extensive technical demands are like an encyclopedia of cello virtuosity – there were multiple passages I believed to be genuinely unplayable at first glance – and it contains a show-stopping lyrical aria I have already excerpted as an encore in live performance. But its more



unconventional elements reimagine the notion of the fantasy itself, proving that the genre's possibilities are far from exhausted—and, indeed, may only be in their infancy.

– Zlatomir Fung

(1) "Asile Héréditaire" from Act 4, scene 1; "Ses jours qu'ils ont osé proscrire..." from Act 2, Scene 4; and "Où vas-tu?" from Act 1, Scene 5.

Fantasia Carmèn by Marshall Estrin – Liner Note

Fantasia Carmèn is about what music sounds like to a musician.

It is an opera fantasy about opera fantasies which explores the act of adapting and recontextualising music from a preexisting work. In *Fantasia Carmèn*, we see and hear the process of a cellist making creative decisions about music using George Bizet's opera *Carmen* as their source. The cellist creates a fantasy within their own imagination, pursuing what gives them pleasure as a musician. The theatrical premise of the work is that the music takes place entirely within the mind of the cellist who is performing it as though they are creating the fantasy spontaneously.

In addition to being a theatrical concert piece, *Fantasia Carmèn* explores the possibilities of musical narrative in the opera fantasy genre. One of the most common issues among instrumental opera fantasies is the lack of compelling musical structure. Too frequently, virtuosic fantasies are a mere succession of familiar melodies without much connection between them. *Fantasia Carmèn* is written to be a self-sufficient piece of chamber music with a musical structure that reflects dramatic elements from Bizet's opera. The purpose of the music in this piece is not only to provide an opportunity for virtuosity but to be compelling musical storytelling.

While this work experiments with the musical form of the opera fantasy, *Fantasia Carmèn* still emphasises the virtuosity of cello performance. The piece is an attempt to reconcile the dual desires for both the spectacle of omnipotent virtuosity and the communicative power of instrumental musical narrative. In adapting the many sections of Bizet's opera, *Fantasia Carmèn* uses nearly all of the available performing techniques of the cello. Throughout the piece, there are passages based on intricate left-hand passage work, mixed double stops, extremes of register and speed, and complex bow techniques, among other devices.

Fantasia Carmèn was written with stage performance in mind. This recording is an adaption of the piece into an audio-only format. The live version contains many visual elements that cannot be translated into an audio recording. For the purposes of this album, the piece

has been modified so that it can be understood by listening alone.

– Marshall Estrin

Zlatomir Fung

Cellist Zlatomir Fung burst onto the scene as the first American in four decades (and youngest musician ever) to win First Prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition Cello Division. He has since garnered accolades, critical acclaim and standing ovations at performances around the world, more and more widely recognized as one of the preeminent cellists of our time. Astounding audiences with his boundless virtuosity and exquisite sensitivity, the 25-year-old has already proven himself a star among the next generation of world-class musicians.

In the 2024–2025 season, Fung gives recitals in New York City, Boston, and St. Louis, and performs the complete Bach Cello Suites at Mechanics Hall in Worcester, Massachusetts and in Arcata, California. He returns to

the Aspen Music Festival and makes his debut at the Ravinia Festival. As concerto soloist, he joins the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, the San Antonio Philharmonic and the Billings Symphony Orchestra, among others. Internationally, he performs with the Barcelona Symphony in Spain, the Evergreen Symphony Orchestra in Taiwan with Jaap van Zweden conducting, and he returns to the London Philharmonic Orchestra; he also appears in France, Poland, Romania, Korea, Japan, China, and Italy.

Fung served as Artist-in-Residence with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra for the 2023–2024 season, appearing at London's Cadogan Hall and touring the UK with the orchestra. Other notable appearances of late include

his debuts with the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Orchestre National de Lille, and BBC Philharmonic, as well as the Baltimore, Dallas, Detroit, Seattle, Milwaukee, Utah, Rochester, and Kansas City Symphonies.

Fung made his recital debut at Carnegie Hall in 2021 and was described by *Bachtrack* as “one of those rare musicians with a Midas touch: he quickly envelops every score he plays in an almost palpable golden aura.” Other recent highlights include returns to Wigmore Hall and appearances at the Verbier, Dresden, Leoš Janáček International, and Tsinandali Festivals, Cello Biennale Amsterdam, Bravo! Vail, Grant Park Music Festival and the Aspen Music Festival.

In addition to demonstrating a mastery of the canon with his impeccable technique, Fung brings exceptional insight into the depths



of contemporary repertoire, championing composers such as Unsuk Chin, Katherine Balch, and Anna Clyne. In 2023, under the baton of Gemma New and with the Dallas Symphony, Fung gave the world premiere of Katherine Balch's

whisper concerto with “jaw-dropping brilliance” (*Dallas Morning News*) as the dedicatee of the work; he gave its UK premiere in February 2024 with the BBC Philharmonic, conducted by Joshua Weilerstein.

A winner of the 2017 Young Concert Artists International Auditions and the 2017 Astral National Auditions, Fung has taken the top prizes at the 2018 Alice & Eleonore Schoenfeld International String Competition, the 2016 George Enescu International Cello Competition, and the 2015 Johansen International Competition for Young String Players, among others. He was selected as a 2016 US Presidential Scholar for the Arts and was awarded the 2016 Landgrave von Hesse Prize at the Kronberg Academy Cello Masterclasses.

Fung was a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship Winner in 2022 and awarded an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2020. As a participant in

WXQR's Artist Propulsion Lab in 2023, he wrote *The Elves and the Cello Maker*, a radio play in which he also performed. Fung has been featured on NPR's *Performance Today* and has appeared six times on NPR's *From the Top*. He performs on a circa 1730 cello by Domenico Montagnana, on loan from a generous benefactor. 2024–2025 marks Fung's first season on the cello faculty at his alma mater, The Juilliard School.



Richard Fu

Chinese-born American Richard Fu is currently a pianist at the Royal Ballet and Opera and formerly of the Vienna State Opera. An aspiring recitalist with special affinity for Lieder and chamber music, Richard grew up wanting to be a lawyer and studied political science at Dartmouth College, yet fell in love with classical music while abroad in Vienna and decided to pursue music. He continued his studies at the Royal College of Music, University of Oxford, the Juilliard School, and in Graz with Julius Drake.

Richard began his concert career by performing 30 concerts on tour across America with violinist Timothy Chooi. He collaborates frequently with cellist Zlatomir Fung, concertizing across Europe and on tour in Italy and America. Richard is

the winner of multiple pianist prizes at the International Helmut Deutsch Lied Competition, and took part in the Wigmore Hall International Song Competition with duo partner Anja Mittermüller, where Anja became the youngest winner in competition history. Other performances have taken him to Carnegie Hall, Wiener Konzerthaus, BBC Radio 3, WQXR radio, and Teatro della Pergola. In February 2025, Richard returns to Italy on tour with Zlatomir, where they will perform in venues including Conservatorio “Giuseppe Verdi” di Milano and Teatro La Fenice.

As a member of the Jette Parker Artists Artists Programme and Wiener Staatsoper Opernstudio, Richard has played rehearsals and performed in the orchestra pit for productions such as *La traviata*, *Tosca*, *Aida*, *Eugene*

Onegin, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Carmen*, *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, and *The Tempest*, with conductors including Bertrand de Billy, Pier Giorgio Morandi, Antonello Manacorda, and Thomas Adès.

Richard is the recipient of fellowships from Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme, Tanglewood Music Center, Aspen Music Festival, and Music Academy of the West. He has been a pianist for Riccardo Muti’s Italian Opera Academy, Renée Fleming’s Songstudio at Carnegie Hall, Thomas Hampson’s Mahler course at Royaumont Fondation, and participated in masterclasses with Antonio Pappano, Franz Welser-Möst, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Anne Sofie von Otter, and Maxim Vengerov.

Richard is deeply indebted to his family, teachers, and colleagues for how they have shaped him as a person and musician.



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– Zlatomir Fung and Richard Fu

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