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A CD of a Different Color
CONSUMMATE CONCERTOS BY
CLASSICAL AND ROMANTIC-ERA
BLACK COMPOSERS

The image of European music of the classical and romantic periods rarely, if ever, brings to mind Black composers or performers.

A new CD, *Violin Concertos by Black Composers of the 18th and 19th Centuries*, sheds light on four gifted musicians of mixed African and European descent who made significant contributions to Western classical music. Famous in their day, they've been all but forgotten in our time.

Violinist Rachel Barton performs concertos by French classicists Chevalier J.J.O. de Meudon-Monpas and Chevalier de Saint-Georges, and romantic works by 19th-century luminaries Joseph White and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Daniel Hege conducts Chicago's Encore Chamber Orchestra (Cedille Records CDR 90000 035). Producer is James Ginsburg; recording engineer is Lawrence Rock.

The support of a European parent gave each of these mixed-race musicians access to formal educational and social opportunities unavailable to their African relations. "Excellent training and remarkable talents allowed these artists to take full advantage of a rare opening in the social fabric, yet they remained exotic and exceptional," music historian Mark Clague writes in the CD booklet.

Caribbean-born Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799) was the son of noble French plantation owner and an African slave from the island of Guadeloupe. An almost mythic figure, the dashing young musician (who graces the disc's cover) was a champion swordsman and extraordinary athlete as well as a violin virtuoso. His vibrant 1775 Violin Concerto in A Major, Op. 5, No. 2, displays an uncommon gift for melodic invention, with a virtuosic emphasis that extends five pitches higher than any of Mozart's (exactly contemporaneous) violin concerti. Saint-Georges also took advantage of recent developments in bow design to emphasize fleet and precise passagework. Until now, this concerto has been available only on a hard-to-find French CD reissue of a 1974 recording.

Also offering a rare glimpse into the elegant aesthetic of the *French* classical period is the music of Paris-born Chevalier J. J. O. de Meude-Monpas. Besides composing and authoring books on music, Meude-Monpas was a musketeer in the service of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and a disciple of Rousseau. His 1786 Violin Concerto No. 4 in D Major (world-premiere recording) evokes an unusually broad range of emotion and dramatic intensity for its time -- and an almost romantic sensibility.

Joseph White (1839-1918) was born in Matanzas, Cuba, the son of a French businessman and an Afro-Cuban mother. After studies in Paris, he became a concert sensation in Europe and Latin America. His admirers included fellow composers Rossini, Auber, and Gounod. When he performed in the United States in 1876, one reviewer called him "the best violinist who has visited this country . . . not excepting Wienawski [*sic*]." White's 1864 Concerto in F-sharp Minor (CD premiere) is a grandly virtuosic Romantic work with bel canto-like solo passages. After its Paris premiere in 1867, a critic described the piece as "one of the best modern works of its kind. . . . One feels the presence of a strong and individual nature from the start. Not a single note exists for mere virtuosity, although the performance difficulties are enormous."

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912) was the son of a medical student from Sierra Leone and an Englishwoman. Championed by the likes of Elgar and Stanford in England, he was highly respected in the U.S., especially by cultured African-Americans. A Coleridge-Taylor Society was founded in Washington

D.C. for black choral singers, and the composer was a White House guest of President Theodore Roosevelt. His sweetly nostalgic 1899 *Romance in G Major* (world-premiere recording) is reminiscent of Dvorak, whom he idolized. The work eschews technical display in favor of lush harmonic and melodic beauty: the virtuosity of this piece is compositional, rather than instrumental.

None of these works use African-derived melodies or rhythmic signatures. “These compositions seamlessly adopt the traditions and tropes of the Western European concert tradition,” booklet essayist Clague writes. “They confront the classical tradition and extend it, revealing the creative personality that is the artist and composer.”

A young virtuoso of wide-ranging repertoire and charismatic appeal, Rachel Barton shares Cedille’s passion for attractive yet neglected repertoire. (She made her Cedille debut in May with a program of Handel’s rarely recorded *Sonatas for Violin and Continuo*.)

Between 1992 and 1993, Ms. Barton won top prizes in Europe’s most prestigious violin competitions including the Quadrennial J.S. Bach Competition in Leipzig, the Queen Elizabeth Competition in Brussels, the Kreisler in Vienna, the Szigeti in Budapest, and the Paganini in Genoa. She has soloed with major orchestras including the Chicago, Detroit, Montreal, St. Louis, Vienna, and Budapest symphonies, and collaborated with prominent conductors including Neeme Jarvi, Semyon Bychkov, Zubin Mehta, and Erich Leinsdorf.

Previewing the present recording, *Chicago* magazine said, “It would seem an unusual project in another musician’s hands, which makes it perfect for this celebrated young violinist.” Ms. Barton edited and composed cadenzas for the *Meude-Monpas* and *Saint-Georges* concertos; she plans to publish her own edition of both scores so that they might reach a wider audience.

Rising young conductor Daniel Hege was named assistant conductor of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in 1996. He founded the Encore Chamber Orchestra in 1994 as the professional performing ensemble of the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra and completed a four-year tenure as music director of both orchestras in July 1997. The Encore Chamber Orchestra is comprised in large part of young

alumni of the Chicago Youth Symphony. Alumni of the Youth Symphony include 11 current members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and first-desk players of many of the world's leading orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Among the individuals and organizations who assisted in Cedille's new recording are The Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College (Chicago) and music scholar Dominique-René de Lerma of Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisc., who contributed to the landmark CBS Black Composers Series of LP recordings in the mid-1970s.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing Chicago's most noteworthy classical artists. The label is an arm of the nonprofit Chicago Classical Recording Foundation.

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*Violin Concertos by Black Composers
of the 18th and 19th Centuries
(Cedille CDR 90000 035)*

Chevalier J.J. O. de Meude-Monpas: Violin Concerto No. 4 in D Major
Chevalier de Saint-Georges: Violin Concerto in A Major, Op. 5 No. 2
Joseph White: Violin Concerto in F-sharp Minor
Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: Romance in G Major for Violin and Orchestra

Rachel Barton, violin
Encore Chamber Orchestra, Daniel Hege, conductor