

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. MICHAEL FINK  
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## Ibert, *Theater Pieces*

Jacques Ibert (1890-1962) is one of those French composers of the 20th century who defy classification. Although he was at times associated with Honegger, he was not one of Les Six. His style sometimes bordered on impressionism, yet it was different from Ravel's. His procedures often resembled Stravinsky's, yet he was not entirely neo-Classic.

Ibert's musical studies took place chiefly at the Paris Conservatoire, where he matriculated in 1910. Fauré was one of his teachers. World War I interrupted his studies, and he served in the navy. His naval experiences in the Mediterranean became the basis for his most popular orchestral work, *Escapes*, composed in 1922. That work was written during Ibert's Prix de Rome years, which provided the springboard for his later career. In fact, in 1937 Ibert became director of the Academy of Rome, the first musician ever to hold that post.

### *Deux interludes suivi de Carillon [Two Interludes after a Carillon]*

Ibert originally wrote these two Interludes as incidental music to Suzanne Lilar's 1946 play *Le Burlador* ("The Seducer"), the Don Juan myth from a feminist viewpoint. The first piece is "period" music, a minuet-style piece in keeping with Ibert's classical tendencies. However, his rich harmonies add a touch of sensuousness in keeping with the play's subject. The brilliant second interlude is unmistakably Andalusian Spanish in flavor. At times, the harp imitates a guitar, while flute and viola perform melodies in the extempore-style of Andalusian Gypsy Flamenco music.

*Entr'acte for Flute and Harp*

*Entr'acte* was composed in 1935 as part of Ibert's opera, *Le médecin de son honneur* (His Honor's Doctor), originally by Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681) and adapted by Alexandre Arnoux (1894-1973). Two years later the *Entr'acte* was extracted and published for flute/violin and guitar/harp.

The Spanish flavor of the opera is unmistakable in Bizet's short piece. In fact, in form, it is a pastiche of aspects of flamenco style. The music ranges from the wild, repetitive rhythms of the opening and closing to the more introspective, lyrical "copla" [verse] style at first for the string instrument and then for the flute. In a short space of time, we hear a fleeting panorama of musical Andalusia.

## **Bax, *Elegiac Trio***

The music of Sir Arnold Bax (1883-1953) is not performed frequently in the United States, yet Bax was probably the most important British composer between Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Like Elgar before him, Bax was knighted and in his later years was “Master of the King's (/Queen's) Musick.” In the early years of his life, Bax became fascinated with Ireland and its culture. He wrote stories, plays, and verse about the country. His music was likewise influenced by Ireland, but rarely did he quote any actual Irish folk tunes.

The *Elegiac Trio* of 1916, though not outwardly expressed, was undoubtedly a response to the bloody Easter Rising also of that year, involving the controversy between Home Rule and Irish independence. Bax's music is very impressionistic with only a few ephemeral themes and lots of cascading passagework. We hear few references to the musical style of Irish folk music, yet the melancholy mood of most of the piece expresses a brooding grieving easily associated with the tragic Ester Rising.

Only by coincidence, the *Elegiac Trio's* instrumentation is identical to Debussy's Sonata for Flute, Harp, and Viola. The Debussy work was premiered in Paris six months after Bax completed his score and was not heard in London until six weeks after the premiere of Bax's trio.

## Ravel, *Sonatine en Trio*

A “Baroque/Classical” thread weaves through the piano music of Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). Just as Debussy’s piano music had bowed in the direction of the French *clavecinistes* in the *Suite bergamasque* (1890) and *Suite: pour le piano* (1901), so Ravel composed the *Menuet antique* (1895), *Pavane for a Dead Princess* (1899), *Sonatine* (1903-5), and *Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17). All of these used more or less strict forms from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and all contained classical restraint in the area of expression.

The *Sonatine* became a project “by default.” In 1903, the *Weekly Critical Review*, an Anglo-French magazine sponsored an international composition competition. For a prize of 100 Francs, composers were to submit the first movement of a piano *sonatine*. Ravel entered. Unfortunately, the magazine shortly went bankrupt. Ravel’s piece, an exercise in adapting his style to sonata form, then took on a life of its own, and over the next two years, he continued to dabble with it, eventually completing all three movements in 1905.

Ravel himself was fond of making arrangements of his music for other instruments. However, he apparently never touched the *Sonatine* himself. That task was left for American virtuoso harpist-composer Carlos Salzedo (1885-1961), who arranged the work as the *Sonatine en Trio* for flute, viola, and harp, using the Debussy Sonata as a model.

The first movement of the *Sonatine* is so clearly in sonata form that it could appear in a textbook. The principal, secondary, and closing themes are extremely distinctive in melody and texture. After the repeated exposition of these, a carefully controlled development takes us through contrasting keys in an emotional crescendo that has to cool a little before the recapitulation of themes — now less restrained than at first and rounded out at the end with a charming, refined coda.

The second movement, a graceful minuet, begins like a typical French harpsichord piece: with a repeated *couplet*. A new theme digresses, but soon we hear a reprise of something like the *couplet*. Another digressive theme leads us back to a general reprise of the movement's main ideas.

Culminating the *Sonatine* is a toccata-like movement that begins with flashy passagework, fast-moving broken chords, and a fanfare motive. Then, Ravel the modernist steps forward with a section in alternating meters. The unusual 5/4 meter predominates. For classical balance, the composer here introduces the movement's first *real* melody. Bringing back a variant of the first section, Ravel now occupies the remainder of the movement working out and combining elements from the first (flashy) and second (melodic, mixed metered) sections. The accelerated coda fuses these together in a frenzied series of repetitions that end the *Sonatine*.

**Devienne, *Duo in C Minor, Op. 3, no. 1*  
for Flute and Viola (arr.)**

The life of François Devienne (1759-1803) ran roughly parallel to that of Mozart, though, unlike Mozart, Devienne did not travel but probably stayed in France (in Paris most of the time). He picked up a musical education wherever he could and began his career as a bassoonist. Only after he had joined the orchestra of the Paris Opéra in 1789 did he take up the flute. Devienne composed extensively for woodwinds, especially the flute, and he published a now famous flute method in 1794, a year before he was employed to teach the flute at the Paris Conservatoire. In the same decade, he also became successful as an opera composer. In his day, he was called “the Mozart of the flute.”

The Duo in C Minor was first made known in our time by Jean-Pierre Rampal, performing and recording it in its original version as a flute duet. Cast in the 3-movement plan of a classical sonata, the work is lively and satisfying despite its somewhat limited pitch range. The first movement has attractive, contrasting themes, presented in interesting ways. The *Adagio* possesses an irresistible prettiness that could be called “very French.” The rondo finale sparkles with great energy, bringing the Duo to a close in high spirits.

## A Fauré Group

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) came from a family of minor aristocrats and educators. Historians consider him the greatest French composer between Berlioz and Debussy and one of the greatest song composers in history. In 1896, he was appointed professor at the Paris Conservatoire, and in 1905, he became its director. However, his fame arrived late, and in concert life, he is still underrated.

### *Après un rêve*

Fauré composed 97 songs (*mélodies*), the core of which was published between 1879 and 1908. The crowning work of the first collection (1879) is *Après un rêve* (After a Dream), one of Fauré's most famous songs. Against a simple chordal piano part, the ravishing melody represents a poem about a love that can only be dreamed of.

### *Impromptu for harp in D flat major, Op. 86*

Music critic Adrian Corleonis informs us:

Though no one but Fauré could have written it, not the least curious thing about the Impromptu for harp is how atypical of Fauré it seems, despite the expansive length at which its slender materials are worked... Composed in July 1904 for a harp *concours* [contest] at the [Paris] Conservatoire, it was heard there for the first time on the 25th of that month...

For Paris Conservatoire instrumental contest pieces, composers usually concentrate on having the contestant display both technical ability and expressive sensitivity. These two goals are usually expressed alternately in highly contrasting sections of the piece. The student who can most convincingly achieve these goals is likely to win First Prize on the instrument for that year.

Broad chords, complex harmonics, and cascading runs challenge the player's technique and force in Fauré's piece. By contrast, brief expressive melodies (some involving soft harmonics) must be articulated. Other melodies present various characters: heroic, passionate, dreamy — some played in the left hand, others carried in the right. A broad, heraldic final section brings the piece brightly, yet forcibly, to its conclusion. The whole work stretches out in unpredictable patterns, expressing the quasi-improvisatory meaning of the title "Impromptu."

*Morceau de Concours [de Lecture] for Flute and Harp (arr.)*

A *concours* at the Paris Conservatoire also served as the students' final examination on their chosen instruments. As such, the ability to "sight read" (*lecture*) a piece of music expressively was tested along with the performance of prepared music. Fauré's *Morceau* (Piece), written in 1898, was originally for flute with a piano accompaniment of simple chords. The composer's consummate mastery of melody can be heard here in a continuous thread that spins out for half the piece. At that point, the music repeats, leading to an unpretentious conclusion.

Fauré's manuscript of this piece was long believed to be lost. However, it was found toward the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is now in the care of the Paris Conservatoire. The first printed edition appeared as recently as 1999.

## **Debussy, *Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp***

In 1915, Claude Debussy (1862-1918) planned a set of six sonatas for various combinations of instruments, following the example of French Baroque composers of the 17th and 18th centuries (e.g., Leclair and Couperin). In plan, form, and content Debussy purposely eschewed Germanic sonata models, partly no doubt because France was at the time at war with Germany. Debussy lived to complete only three sonatas of the set. During a burst of creative activity in the fall of 1915, he composed the Cello Sonata and the Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp.

Biographer Léon Vallas has called the three sonatas Debussy's "last will and testament." They have periodically come under critical fire as inferior works when compared with Debussy's other output. True, the harmonic language is usually simple, and the forms are unremarkable. However, the perfect craftsmanship we associate with Debussy is always present, and in these sonatas the composer seems to be exploring new stylistic directions.

Concerning the Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp, critic-biographer Oscar Thompson comments that the first movement ("Pastorale") sets an 18th-century tone continued in the Minuet character of the second movement ("Interlude"). However, this is counter-balanced by 20<sup>th</sup>-century polytonality. Thompson goes on,

There are suggestions of Gregorian chant, and French commentators have found in the melodic substance a heritage from the *trouvères* and troubadours. The work exemplifies Debussy's love of the arabesque and is rhythmically one of his most complex compositions. The mood is one of gentle melancholy, evoking from the composer the comment that he hardly knew whether to laugh or cry — "perhaps both."