

Notes on the program

Claude Debussy **Piano Trio in G Major**

Debussy's music is often associated with the contemporary impressionist movement in painting, and his approach shares some characteristics of this style. "The primary aim of French music," Claude Debussy wrote in 1904, "is to give pleasure." Debussy, more than anything, was interested in the sensuous quality of music. Even as a student he let his concept of sound override many of the rules he was so assiduously taught by his teachers (much to their consternation). From this he developed a style that was wholly his own, but that also owed much to a wide variety of disparate influences. He also was a passionate champion of a purely French style, and he proudly referred to himself as "Claude Debussy, musicien français."

Debussy was educated at the Paris Conservatory, and in 1885 he won the coveted Prix de Rome. His period in Rome, however, was not pleasant for Debussy and he longed to return to Paris. His early works show his desire to break the constraints of Western harmony and form (he especially disliked sonata-allegro form, which he came to see as overly Germanic and not fitting for a French composer).

The reconstruction of Claude Debussy's Piano Trio in G Major, once thought to be among those early works either destroyed by the composer or lost during the ensuing hundred years, surely must count among the musicological triumphs of the 1980s. Though a certain amount of recomposition was necessary, most of the work was pieced together from a variety of authentic sources, including several partial manuscripts and a copy of the original cello part. Debussy composed the work during the summer of 1880 while employed by Madame von Meck (the legendary sponsor of Tchaikovsky). Debussy traveled through Interlaken, Paris, Nice, Genoa, Naples, and Florence with Madame von Meck, teaching her children piano lessons, accompanying her 27-year-old daughter in vocal recitals, and playing piano duets with her. While in Florence, von Meck's entourage was joined by a violinist and cellist, recent graduates of the Moscow Conservatory, who were asked to perform piano trios with Debussy every evening. It was during this time that he composed his only piano trio, his Piano Trio in G (at age 18). The first movement, instead of the usual sonata form of an exposition, development and recapitulation, is more episodic and free-flowing. The Scherzo-Intermezzo which follows is very playful, with all three players tossing the sparkling melodic lines back and forth. The Andante espressivo third movement is very romantic and simply constructed with long, lyrical melodies and countermelodies, and the Finale, marked *Appassionato*, has a fervent intensity throughout.

-Jason Duckles

Dinuk Wijeratne Love Triangle

"This fourteen-minute, single-movement piece entitled *Love Triangle* is not autobiographical, nor is it similar to the many concept-driven pieces I write. The music evolved rather rhapsodically from two distinctive features: the Middle Eastern-inspired melody heard in the strings at the outset, and the underlying rhythmic pattern inspired by a seven-beat Indian Classical 'time cycle'. It also attempts to integrate a Western Classical sense of structure with three very improvisatory *cadenzas* from each instrument - the musicians and I are aiming for an effect akin to that glorious 'out-of-time'-ness that occurs when an Arabic *Oud* solos over the unyielding fixed groove of the band. There are several other melodic and rhythmic devices that are Middle Eastern and North Indian. The Gryphon Trio, with their staggeringly diverse résumé of collaborations, are no strangers to music that is about the meeting of cultures, or about blurred boundaries between what sounds improvised and what does not. I was utterly thrilled to have this opportunity to write for them!"

--Dinuk Wijeratne

Maurice Ravel Trio for violin, cello and piano in A minor (1914)

With Ravel, born of Swiss and Basque parentage, we have the real thing: Busoni's ideal of the Latin attitude toward art; "its cool serenity and insistence on outer form."

Tristan Klingsor, whose poems Ravel set to music in *Shéhérazade* (1903), wrote, "He was classical in his desire for order in all things, in the placing of his periods, in the melodic design, in harmony, in instrumentation. When he innovated – and certainly as a harmonist he did this frequently – it was in drawing unexpected but logical consequences from older principles." (David Ewen. *Ewen's Musical Masterworks* 1954.) This "cool serenity" was bought at great price. He produced a relatively small body of finely wrought works - Stravinsky referred to him as a "Swiss watchmaker"- and Ravel consigned much that he did not feel up to his standards to the fireplace.

The *Piano Trio* (1914) seems to have been a particularly troublesome work to him, though external circumstances could be partially to blame for this. As can be seen from the date of composition, the First World War had broken out. Ravel was anxious to serve his country. He had hoped to become a pilot; however, his physical condition was an obstacle to this. Ravel was physically a very small man (an attribute he shared with other twentieth century musical giants – Stravinsky, Schönberg, Mahler and Bartok), and besides being small and underweight the doctors said that he had an "enlarged heart." From his letters of the time we find that he was worried that he would be given a desk job shuffling

papers. Nevertheless, he did serve as an ambulance driver. In the course of his service he was wounded and later discharged. The *Piano Trio* was the last composition he completed before his enlistment. About its composition he wrote to his friend Misia Godebski, "Before going to Bayonne I spent a month working from morning to night without even taking time off for a bath in the sea. I finished my Trio, treating it as a posthumous work. That doesn't mean I lavished genius on it, but that the manuscript and the notes relating to it are so tidy that no matter who corrected the proofs...." (Hans Gal, *The Musicians World*.) Igor Stravinsky reminisced, "He was dry and reserved and sometimes little darts were hidden in his remarks, but he was always a good friend to me. He drove a truck or ambulance in the war, as you know, and I admired him for it because at his age and with his name he could have had an easier place – or done nothing. He looked rather pathetic in his uniform; so small, he was two or three inches smaller than I am." (Igor Stravinsky & Robert Kraft, *Conversations With Stravinsky*). He wrote; "The thought that I would go away forced me to do five month's work in five weeks. I have *finished* my Trio."

In his Piano Trio, Ravel draws on heterogeneous elements; from Basque folk music, Malayan verse forms, to Baroque dance forms transforming these diverse elements into his own colorful and bittersweet sound world. The lovely first movement, a masterpiece of musical economy, *Modéré* is written in a compound meter of 3+2+3 derived from a Basque folk dance. Ravel has the violin and cello play their lines in widely spaced octaves, bracketing the piano, achieving a unique texture and sonority.

The second scherzo-like movement, *Pantoum*, is based on a Maylay verse form *Pantun*, utilized by such French poets as Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire. "The word has been adopted by English and French poets and denotes a special kind of verse, a group of quatrains where each stanza repeats as its first and third line the second and fourth line of the preceding stanza. Ravel follows a similar scheme with the separate phrases of his music." (Article by Eric Blom in *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Fifth Edition. St Martin's Press. 1954.) The third movement, *Passacaille: Très large*, is felt by some to be the highlight of the Trio. Here Ravel uses the *Passacaglia*, a slow Baroque dance, usually in triple meter where the melody, usually first heard in the bass, (in this instance given to the piano then passed on to the cello) undergoes continuous variation. It is in this movement that the work builds to its emotional climax. Ravel's next work *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, written on his return from the war and dedicated to friends killed in battle, would be a further exploration of Baroque dance forms.

The last movement, *Finale: Animé*, opens with those marvelous "squeaky wheel" sounds used to good effect by the composer in his Mallarme songs, followed by a variant of the first movement theme capped by Ravelian fanfares.

The work was dedicated to Ravel's former counterpoint teacher André Gédalge. It received its first performance in Paris on January 28, 1915. The Italian composer Alfredo Casella played the piano part, with Gabriel Willaume on violin, and Louis Feuillard on cello.

--Notes by Joseph Way