

Reno Chamber Orchestra presents
The 20th Nevada Chamber Music Festival

L'Après-Midi Avec Debussy

Saturday December 30, 2023 2:00pm

Debussy: Violin Sonata

Composed: 1916-17

Duration: 13 minutes

Debussy's Violin Sonata was the third work in what was going to be a series of six sonatas for diverse instruments (the first two were the Cello Sonata and the Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp). But it proved to be Debussy's last major composition. Written while he was already deteriorating from the cancer that soon killed him, the Sonata was also much affected by the war going on around him. As he put it, "This sonata will be interesting from a documentary point of view as an example of what may be produced by a sick man in time of war." Dedicated to his wife Emma, Debussy's Violin Sonata received its premiere on May 5, 1917, with Debussy as pianist, in his last public performance, and violinist Gaston Poulet.

This work often has a sad, nostalgic tone. That feeling of nostalgia is evident with the work's opening chords from the piano, and the violin's expressive melody. Often rhythmically and harmonically surprising, the movement is in sonata form, with a short development and a return of the main melodies. Marked "light and fantastic," the second movement brings playfulness and humor to the forefront. Its second theme is lovely, tranquil, and sensuous. The final movement, described by Debussy as "full of a joyous tumult," was actually written a few months before the other two, in October 1916. Hints of the previous movement's second theme are heard along with bravura runs from the piano. Soon the violin enters with a variation on an idea from the first movement. Delicate piano passages accompany a wide-ranging violin part that spans the available range of the instrument.

Liszt: *Transcendental Étude* No. 11 "Harmonies du soir"

Composed: 1852

Duration: 9 minutes

The origin of Franz Liszt's twelve *Transcendental Études*, or *Études d'exécution transcendante*, is complex. As early as 1826, the fifteen-year-old Liszt composed a set of pieces titled *Étude en douze exercices* (Study in twelve exercises); they were the first of what were to be a larger set of 48 *Études*. Ten or so years later, Liszt borrowed ideas from those pieces and expanded on them for his *Douze Grandes Études* (Twelve Grand Studies) published in 1837. The *Transcendental Études*, published in 1852, are revisions of those *Douze Grandes Études*.

Leslie Howard, perhaps the only pianist to have recorded all three versions of Liszt's *Études*, writes that "Harmonies du soir" (Evening Harmonies) "conjures up far more than peaceful

scenery and distant bells, creating almost an orchestral dimension of sound as each theme is extended to cover the whole compass of the keyboard in the fullest Romantic grandeur." Somber tolling in the left hand accompanies a gradual ascent in the right, introducing a lovely, flowing theme, with delicate chords and rolling harp-like arpeggios. A new central section unfolds hesitantly at first, then more assertively, with drone fifths accompanying a melody in a pentatonic (five-note) scale. A climax builds passionately to fast-paced chords in both hands, then calms again to a wandering passage and a closing, delicately arpeggiated variation of the work's opening theme.

Debussy: *Brouillards* and *Bruyères* from *Préludes*, Book II

Composed: 1912-13

Duration: 3 minutes each

Debussy, unusually for him, wrote his two books of *Préludes* rather quickly: Book I was written between December 1909 and February 1910, and Book II between the last months of 1912 and early April 1913. Although Debussy hated the term Impressionism, its concept of depicting the physical world and spiritual experiences in objective, yet personal terms really applies well to his music, including the *Préludes*. Unlike Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the *Préludes* of Frédéric Chopin, or other such similar sets, Debussy's *Préludes* aren't arranged by key. Instead, Debussy's musical blurring of lines, both through his free use of tonality and generous use of the piano's pedals, evoke a new sonic world.

Interestingly, in the score of the *Préludes*, Debussy places the descriptive titles at the end of each piece, not at the beginning, giving both performer and audience a chance to experience the music on their own terms. *Brouillards* (Mists or Fog), the first work in Book II, might reflect Debussy's recently-formed friendship with Igor Stravinsky in its use of polytonality, pitting one key in the left hand against another in the right (Stravinsky uses a similar technique often, including in his ballet *Petroushka*). Debussy's friend Robert Schmitz wrote of the piece, "Many are the combinations, successive and simultaneous, of this plurality of keys, in constant friction, never resolved – like fog, the harmonic texture is in constant evolution, but recognizes no beginning or ending." *Bruyères* (Heather), the fifth *Prélude* from Book II, employs something like a pentatonic scale in its evocation of the out-of-doors, or as pianist Craig Sheppard puts it, "pastoral bliss, an Arcadian landscape of peace and contentment."

Messiaen: *Île de Feu I* from *Quatre Études de rythme*

Composed: 1950

Duration: 2 minutes

Olivier Messiaen was one of the most influential and important composers of the twentieth century. His very personal musical language, a combination of adventuresome musical techniques, bird song, Asian styles, and more, had a lasting influence on other composers. The middle two of his *Quatre Études de rythme* (Four Rhythm Studies) were composed in 1949 at Darmstadt, and the outer two, *Île de Feu I and II*, in 1950 in the United States, while

Messiaen was attending the Tanglewood Festival. The title *Île de Feu* (Island of Fire) refers to Papua New Guinea, and Messiaen stated that *Île de Feu* has "all the violence of the magic rites of this country." This virtuoso piece opens with a powerful gesture on the low end of the piano, followed by bird song-motifs (even marked *oiseau* in the score in some cases) on the upper end. Arpeggios and chords race up and down the keyboard, alternating with dramatic chords.

Delius: *Romance* for cello and piano

Composed: 1896

Duration: 7 minutes

Born in Yorkshire, Frederick Delius was part of a wealthy, musically-inclined merchant family. After a brief stint working at an orange plantation in Florida, he pursued his musical studies in earnest in Leipzig. He had his first successes in Germany, especially in the realms of opera and orchestral music. Later his works received much attention in England. He continued composing into his last years, even as blindness and paralysis forced him to employ an amanuensis, Eric Fenby, to help create his music. The *Romance* for cello and piano was composed while Delius was at work on his opera *Koanga*. It laid unplayed until its rediscovery and publication in 1976. The cello's melancholy, beautiful song unfurls over delicate piano accompaniment. Some chromatic twists and turns in the melody and harmonies lend additional interest, particularly in the lead up to the brief central climax. But then the opening idea returns to close out the work. In 2020, the *Classic FM* website ranked the *Romance* #2 on its list of "The most relaxing music written for the cello," calling it "wonderfully reflective and sombre."

Takemitsu: *A Bird Came Down the Walk*

Composed: 1994

Duration: 7 minutes

Toru Takemitsu initially became familiar with Western classical music by listening to U.S. Armed Forces radio while serving in the Japanese military. Almost entirely self-taught, he started writing music at age sixteen. He was attracted early on to the avant-garde and electronic music. Eventually Takemitsu also found his way to traditional Japanese music, which became a big influence. By the 1970s, Takemitsu was well-known worldwide. He wrote hundreds of compositions, published around twenty books on music theory and aesthetics, and became one of the greatest of composers for film, producing scores for around one hundred films.

Takemitsu likely drew the title of *A Bird Came Down the Walk*, one of his last compositions, from the similarly-named poem by Emily Dickinson. In *A Bird Came Down the Walk*, Takemitsu uses numbers to organize the different parameters of the work, also employing sounds evoking the traditional Japanese wind instrument the *shō* as well as the musical modes of his mentor Olivier Messiaen. Spare, subtly dissonant chords and occasional hints of birdsong from the piano accompany the viola's angular song, which maintains itself

throughout the composition and occasionally employs special techniques like harmonics, glides between notes, multiple stops, and *sul ponticello*.

Debussy: String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10

Composed: 1892-93

Duration: 26 minutes

In 1892, at the age of thirty and still in the early stages of his musical career, Debussy abandoned work on an opera, *Rodrigue et Chimène*, and decided to take up what were slated to be two string quartets. He only completed the one, the present Quartet in G minor, which he had planned to dedicate to composer Ernest Chausson until Chausson expressed reservations both about the work and about Debussy's various romantic attachments. The Quartet was premiered in Paris on December 29, 1893 by the Ysaÿe Quartet, to whom the work is dedicated. At the time of the Quartet, Debussy was still formulating the very personal musical language – including unusual harmonies, use of modes and the whole-tone scale, and delicate textures – which soon made him famous in the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, composed the year after the Quartet. While the Quartet shares some qualities with the *Prelude*, Debussy also looks backward to composers like César Franck in his use of cyclic form, in which musical ideas recur in each of the work's movements.

The first movement starts assertively, with a main theme in Phrygian mode that recurs throughout the Quartet, but very quickly moves to a more languorous idea accompanied by ascending and descending arpeggios. That swirling motion continues as variations on the opening theme spin out. The music builds to a unison, leading to a sweet new theme, even as the cello quotes the opening theme again. That opening theme is subjected to a number of variations that build in intensity, then recede, then build again, leading to an exciting conclusion. *Pizzicati* open the energetic second movement, as what becomes the main theme of the movement (also a variant of the first movement's opening idea) is introduced by the viola. That figure moves to the first violin, then the cello, and never quite disappears even as new figures and phrases are introduced. A bit of further turbulence arises in the movement's central section as the violin takes the melodic lead. Commentators have heard influences in this music from such diverse sources as flamenco and the gamelan of Java.

A melody from the second violin, then the viola, opens the hushed, sensuous slow movement. An achingly melancholy melody is then introduced and mused on. Subtle dissonances give the music extra color. The viola then introduces a new theme over spare, quiet chords. That idea is developed further before the melancholy song returns, and slowly fades to silence. Themes from earlier in the work again recur in the finale, which begins in a restrained manner before picking up speed as the instruments enter one-by-one, leading to a turbulent new idea. Intensity and restlessness seem to be the dominant mood, even as the music ebbs and flows. A variant of the first movement's opening theme takes over, as the music builds to a powerful conclusion.

Program notes by Chris Morrison