

Program Notes for Monday, July 25
Edgar M. Bronfman *In Focus Series*
Alasdair Neale, Conductor

Debussy Quatre chansons de jeunesse
 Pantomime
 Clair de lune
 Pierrot
 Apparition

Boulanger *Clairières dans le ciel [Clearings in the Sky]*
 Elle était descendue au bas de la prairie
 [She had gone down to the bottom of the meadow]
 Un poète disait [A poet said]
 Vous m'avez regardé avec toute votre âme
 [You gazed at me with all your soul]

Chausson Chanson perpétuelle, Opus 37

Ravel String Quartet in F Major
 Allegro moderato - Très doux
 Assez vif - Très rythmé
 Très lent
 Vif et agité

Quatre Chansons de jeunesse (1881-84)
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

The young Debussy met soprano Marie-Blanche Vasnier in 1880 and soon became infatuated with this married older woman. Between 1881 and 1884, he dedicated 27 songs to her, four of which were later collected into the thematically unified cycle that we hear this evening. Based on Debussy's music here, Vasnier must have had a very high soprano range and an agile vocal style. The affair ended when Debussy reluctantly headed to Italy after winning the Prix de Rome in 1884.

Pantomime opens the cycle with a setting of Paul Verlaine's 1869 poem, a series of verses describing stock characters both within the *commedia dell'arte* tradition (Pierrot, Harlequin, Columbine) and elsewhere. Like the text, Debussy's music shifts moods here, ending with a virtuosic vocal display.

Clair de lune (Moonlight) sets another Verlaine poem that inspired numerous French composers during this period (Debussy himself set the text twice and also used it as the basis for his famous piano piece which we will hear performed on Friday). The text is understandably irresistible to a composer, both for its direct reference to music and for its thematic blurring of happiness and sorrow, which Debussy captures evocatively with an exotic mix of major and minor tonalities.

The light-hearted Pierrot (with text by Théodore de Banville) humorously depicts a flirtatious moment on the Paris Boulevard du Temple after a performance. Jean-Gaspard Debureau is the famed 19th century mime credited with re-inventing the character of Pierrot, who is always

accompanied by his most faithful friend, the moon. Debussy cleverly folds the well-known French children's song *Au clair de la lune* into the melody and accompaniment here.

The cycle ends with a setting of Stéphane Mallarmé's 1863 *Apparition*, a departure from the *commedia dell'arte* theme of the other songs. However, the text does connect to the set with its references to the moon and its general air of joyful, dreamy melancholy.

Selections from *Clairières dans le ciel* (1913-14)

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

Lili Boulanger showed exceptional musical ability at an extremely young age. Her precocious talent partnered with an unusual level of maturity allowed her to begin serious studies before she turned five, accompanying her older sister Nadia to her classes at the Paris Conservatoire. (Nadia Boulanger went on to become the most important musical pedagogue of the 20th century.) At age 19, Lili Boulanger shocked the musical world by winning the prestigious Prix de Rome for her cantata *Faust et Hélène*, the first time in the over 100 year history of the prize that it was awarded to a woman. Years later, Nadia Boulanger speculated that Lili was driven to express what was inside of her early on because "she was aware that her life would be brief, her time measured." (At age 24, Lili died of chronic tuberculosis that had afflicted her nearly her entire life.)

Winning the Prix de Rome in 1913 gave Boulanger the opportunity to travel to Italy and devote herself to composition. Although the outbreak of World War I cut her stay short, Boulanger did manage to complete a number of works, including her 13-song cycle *Clairières dans le ciel* (Clearings in the Sky). The texts for these songs come from a 1906 collection of poetry entitled *Tristesses* (Sorrows) by French poet Francis Jammes (itself part of a larger collection from which Boulanger drew her general title).

Of the moving *Clairières*, Boulanger wrote: "All of these songs should be sung with the feeling of evoking a past whose memory remains crystal clear." The first twelve songs trace a passionate year-long love affair, beginning with the promise of Spring as both the relationship and the young lovers themselves gradually move towards full bloom. The cycle culminates in the dramatic final song in which the lover painfully laments the end of the affair against the natural surroundings that almost mockingly mimic the conditions which had given birth to his love the previous year.

Chanson Perpétuelle, Opus 37 (1898)

Ernst Chausson (1855-1899)

Though he was brought up surrounded by art, literature, and music, Chausson did not turn to composition until he was in his 20's, after completing a law degree. His relatively late arrival to music coupled with a modest family affluence made Chausson acutely aware of possible accusations of amateurism in his music, perhaps contributing to his perfectionism. His relatively small output covers many genres, but song figured prominently throughout his life, matching well with his gift for writing luxurious melodies.

Chanson Perpétuelle is the final work Chausson completed in his 21-year composition career, cut short by a freak bicycle accident. Written originally for voice and piano, Chausson quickly arranged his setting of Charles Cros's sorrowful poem for orchestra, and finally for piano quintet. This haunting song resonates musically and thematically with both the Debussy and Boulanger on our program tonight. The music projects two contrasting moods: one somber and melancholic as the singer reflects on her missing lover and her broken heart, and the other bright, excited, then tender to accompany her reminiscence of the time she spent with him. In

the final section of the song, these two moods are alternately presented in quick transition, as if the singer's bitter sadness has led to an emotional juxtaposition of love and death, sacrificing herself to the whims of nature which itself comes to represent her lost lover.

String Quartet in F Major (1902-3) **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

Ravel was in and out of the Paris Conservatoire during his early years. He entered the school as a teenager, studying piano performance. Despite initial success, Ravel's progress was slow, and he left the Conservatoire at age 20. He returned in 1897 to pursue composition studies primarily with the forward-thinking Fauré, who would become a close friend and champion of Ravel's music. Despite enthusiastic evaluations by Fauré, Ravel was dismissed from the Conservatoire in 1900, mainly due to his unwillingness to conform to the requirements of the highly conservative establishment there. Undeterred, Ravel continued his studies with Fauré as an auditor. In 1902, Fauré's composition class decided to pay tribute to Debussy by writing a string quartet collectively in honor of the tenth anniversary of the composer's groundbreaking String Quartet (which we will hear performed Thursday evening). In the end, Ravel was the only student who was able to contribute to this daunting project, and the work became the only string quartet he would complete during his lifetime.

The piece is unabashedly modeled on Debussy's work, using the traditional ensemble and largely standard organization but creating a sonic experience that paints with broad brushstrokes of color that explode our traditional notions of the genre. Even Fauré (to whom the piece is lovingly dedicated) was tentative about Ravel's newest work at first, which worried the young composer. But Debussy reportedly reassured him, writing, "In the name of the gods of music, and in mine, do not touch a single note of what you have written in your quartet." Ironically, this tribute piece was perhaps the beginning of the estrangement between these two giants in French Impressionism, as it encouraged public comparison between the two and inevitably led to separate factions supporting one and disparaging the other.

The first movement is a remarkable achievement by the young Ravel. The exotic harmonies and flowing texture proclaim the composer's unique sensibility, but he hangs his effortless creativity on a surprisingly traditional sonata form construct. Two main themes, one in a major key and one in minor, provide the wealth of melodic material, with the second returning in the home key at the end following a free-wheeling development section. The wide ranging, amiable first theme that opens the piece is accompanied by an extraordinary scale that rises two octaves in the cello, and then meanders back down. This scale will reappear throughout the movement, most notably at the climax just before the return of the initial theme.

With its rhythmic flair and pizzicato, the second movement was inspired by the second movement of Debussy's String Quartet. The first theme is a varied form of the second theme from the first movement and is also obliquely related to the catchy theme from Debussy's movement. This is contrasted with a languid middle section full of chromatic slithering.

The third movement is a reflective meditation organized into short blocks that seem to progress with the logic of a dream. It is as if Ravel is encouraging us to lose ourselves in the rich soundscapes that he is creating. Ideas, including a reworking of the main theme from the first movement, flow in and out with mesmerizing effect.

We are abruptly awoken from our reverie with a burst of buzzing energy in the finale. The frenetic first theme gives way to a lyrical melody whose second part recalls the second theme from the opening movement, tying the entire work together (and revealing the work's direct

lineage from Franck). The ideas are explored separately and together in seamless fashion, coming to a crisp conclusion.