

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2019-2020 chamber music season

Chamber series 2: slow dreams of eternity

Saturday, December 7, 2019, 8 PM, First Church in Boston

Sunday, December 8, 2019, 4 PM, First Church in Boston

Program:

Arthur Benjamin, *Le Tombeau de Ravel* “Valse-caprice” for clarinet & piano

Helen Grime, *Luna* for flute, oboe, clarinet, French horn, piano & percussion

Gabriel Fauré, *La chanson d'Ève* for soprano & piano, Op. 95

Theo Verbey, *Four Preludes to Infinity* for oboe & string trio

Robert Schumann, Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 47

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur

Arthur Benjamin (1893-1960) was born in Sydney, Australia and raised in Queensland. He was something of a prodigy pianist, giving recitals starting at age six, and at eighteen won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London. There he studied piano with Frederic Cliffe and composition with Sir Charles Stanford. Benjamin served in World War I beginning in 1915, initially fighting in the trenches and then transferring to the Royal Flying Corps as a gunner. Shot down over Germany in 1918, he spent the rest of the war in the prison camp at Rùheleben.

Benjamin returned briefly to Australia following the war to teach piano at the New South Wales Conservatory, but resumed composition studies in England in 1921. His first published work, the *Pastoral Fantasy* for string quartet, won the Carnegie Award in 1924. In 1927 he was appointed professor of composition and piano at the Royal College, where Benjamin Britten, among others, was one of his piano students. A growing reputation as a conductor led to the post of music director of the newly-formed Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Symphony Orchestra, and he relocated to Vancouver in 1938. From 1946 until his retirement in 1953, Benjamin taught again at the Royal College, serving as a quiet but important influence on contemporary British music. Diagnosed with cancer in 1957, he lived long enough to see his major opera *A Tale of Two Cities* produced by the San Francisco Opera in 1960.

Growing up far from the cultural capitals of Europe, Benjamin recognized no distinction in his early appreciation of music for the perceived quality of different genres or styles. Until moving to London he quite literally had no idea that Beethoven and Chopin were considered more “important” than British composer of musical comedies Sidney Jones or American popular song composer Ethelbert Nevin. Later, upon traveling the world as an adjudicator of contests, he became infatuated with the Jazz, Latin and Afro-Caribbean music he heard. Not coincidentally, his most famous piece is the breezy *Jamaican Rumba*. He was also a pioneering figure in film music, most notably composing the *Storm Clouds* cantata used in both versions of Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Benjamin’s impeccable craft and seemingly

effortless invention was equally obvious in his five operas and concert music. In the article “Arthur Benjamin and the Problem of Popularity,” Hans Keller wrote: “Untouched in the most formative years by the conceptions of ‘great’ and ‘deep,’ and not having to intend, therefore, to be either, his mobile mind grew to incorporate modern moods and methods and to attain the modern marvel – light music which is not slight, and serious music which renounces depth without risking shallowness.”

Le Tombeau de Ravel “Valses-caprices” was composed initially in about 1949 for clarinetist Frederick Thurston, who hadn’t performed it by the time he passed away in 1953. Benjamin reworked it for the violist William Primrose, but this time Primrose’s illness delayed performance again. He decided to publish two versions, consulting with Thurston’s pupil Gervase de Peyer on revisions to the clarinet part. It was de Peyer who finally gave the first performance in October 1958. Obviously a tribute to Ravel along the lines of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, the piece actually bears more resemblance to Ravel’s *Valses nobles et sentimentales* for piano or orchestra.

Helen Grime (born 1981) studied oboe with John Anderson and composition with Julian Anderson and Edwin Roxburgh at the Royal College of Music. In 2003 she won a British Composer Award for her Oboe Concerto, and was awarded the intercollegiate Theodore Holland Composition Prize in 2003 as well as all the major composition prizes in the RCM. In 2008 she was awarded a Leonard Bernstein Fellowship to the Tanglewood Music Center, where she studied with John Harbison, Michael Gandolfi, Shulamit Ran and Augusta Read Thomas. Grime was a Legal and General Junior Fellow at the Royal College of Music from 2007 to 2009.

Grime has had works commissioned by ensembles and institutions such as the London Symphony Orchestra, Barbican Centre, Aldeburgh Music, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, Britten Sinfonia, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Tanglewood Music Center. Conductors who have performed her work include Sir Simon Rattle, Pierre Boulez, Daniel Harding, Yan Pascal Tortelier, Oliver Knussen and Sir Mark Elder.

Between 2011 and 2015 Grime was Associate Composer to the Hallé Orchestra. This fruitful period resulted in a series of new works and a recording of her orchestral works released by NMC Recordings. This disc was awarded “Editors Choice” by *Gramophone* Magazine on its release and was nominated in the Contemporary category of the 2015 Gramophone Awards. In 2016 her *Two Eardley Pictures* was premiered at the BBC Proms and in Glasgow, winning the prize for large-scale composition in the Scottish Awards for New Music and a nomination in the British Composer Awards the following year.

Grime was Composer in Residence at the Wigmore Hall for the 16-17 and 17-18 seasons. Highlights of this period include the premieres of a Piano Concerto for Huw Watkins and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group conducted by Oliver Knussen and a song cycle *Bright Travellers* for soprano Ruby Hughes and Joseph Middleton.

Recent works include *Woven Space*, which was commissioned by the Barbican for Sir Simon

Rattle's inaugural season as Music Director of the London Symphony Orchestra, and a Percussion Concerto for Colin Currie, which was given premiere performances in January 2019 by the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, both conducted by Marin Alsop.

Composer's program note:

I took my starting point for *Luna* from a poem by Ted Hughes called *Harvest Moon*. The piece is cast in one continuous movement but falls into a number of well-defined sections. As I was working on the piece, I started combining the instruments in small groups. Although there is much interaction between all members of the ensemble, the instrumental groups became a defining characteristic of the piece. The piano and percussion often form a duo, breaking into somewhat virtuosic solo passages scattered throughout. The flute, oboe and clarinet form a sort of unified trio, sometimes playing a unison line or combining lyrical lines in the slower final section of the work. The horn takes on a distinctly soloist role, with solo passages building to a mini cadenza, which eventually leads the piece into its final section.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was born to the minor French aristocracy. His father, recognizing early musical talent, sent him to the newly established *École Niedermayer*, a Parisian training school for church musicians. It was there that he met and studied with Saint-Saëns, who broke from the school's curriculum to present his students with the latest in contemporary music. Fauré worked, often unhappily, as a church musician for most of the next three decades, serving at Notre Dame and as Saint-Saëns' assistant at the Madeleine. In 1896 he became chief organist there, and then took over from Massenet as teacher of the composition class at the Paris Conservatoire, where his pupils included Ravel, Enescu, Koechlin, and Nadia Boulanger. The appointment brought him much more acclaim as a composer. He was named director of the Conservatoire in 1905 and proved effective in reforming and modernizing the institution, much to the displeasure of older, more reactionary faculty, many of whom resigned. Retirement in 1920 finally allowed him uninterrupted time to compose. Fauré is often considered the most advanced composer of his generation; his career spanned from the end of Romanticism to the second quarter of the twentieth century, a time in which musical language underwent tremendous changes. His very personal and innovative harmonic palette had wide-ranging influence, even, arguably, towards Debussy. Fauré's reputation has never matched the high quality of his music, perhaps due to the small number of large-scale works in his output.

The songs that make up the cycle *La Chanson d'Ève* were composed between 1906 and 1910, on texts selected from a collection of poems of the same title published in 1904 by the Belgian symbolist Charles van Leberghe (1861-1907). Leberghe's work is much longer – over a hundred poems – and Fauré selected and edited them freely, sometimes shortening or otherwise altering the sources in order to convey his own idealized vision of the first woman and her place in the first days of the earth. Adam is conspicuously absent from Fauré's vision, but the wonder of Creation is ever-present, the reflection of God in every aspect of nature, from the sun to the wind and water, to flowers and fruit, and finally to the return of the body and soul in death, “that it might perfume/The dark earth and the breath of the dead.”

Theo Verbey (1959-2019) received wide acclaim for his elegant and rhythmically transparent compositions characterized by careful and rich instrumentation. His first work, an orchestration of Alban Berg's Piano Sonata op.1, completed in 1984 while still a student at the Royal Conservatory in the Hague, put him immediately on the front line of Dutch composers of his generation.

He has twice received commissions for new works from the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (*Alliage* and *LIED*). Recently, Verbey was invited to be composer-in-residence for the Brabant Philharmonic Orchestra's 60th anniversary season. His *Orchestral Variations* was written to commemorate that festive celebration. Verbey's works have provided the musical basis for two highly successful ballets by Dutch choreographer Regina van Berkel: *Memory of a Shape* with Ballet Mainz in 2008, and *Frozen Echo* with Ballet am Rhein in 2011. Verbey's completion of Stravinsky's 1919 version of *Les Noces* (the only authorized completion) was chosen for performance of the "Queen's Day Concert" broadcast live on Dutch television in 2010.

Verbey's compositions have been performed repeatedly by almost all the Dutch orchestras including: Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Rotterdam and The Hague Philharmonic Orchestra, Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, ASKO|Schönberg Ensemble, Nieuw Ensemble and string orchestra Amsterdam Sinfonietta. Outside the Netherlands his works have been performed by orchestras and ensembles including the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Gewandhausorchester, Beijing Symphony Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Ensemble Musikfabrik, Klangforum Wien. Conductors such as Riccardo Chailly, Oliver Knussen, Markus Stenz, Robert Spano, Neeme Järvi, Jac van Steen and Reinbert de Leeuw have performed Verbey's works.

Verbey has been a guest at festivals such as the Donaueschinger Musiktage 1992 and had his music performed at Tanglewood New Music Festival 1993, Holland Festival 1996, Ultima Festival Oslo 1996, Music Tapei 1998, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival 1999, La Biennale Venezia 2007, Cello Biennale 2008 Amsterdam.

Theo Verbey passed away on October 13th of this year following a long illness. The Chameleon Arts Ensemble was deeply saddened by this news and dedicates this performance to his memory.

Composer's program note:

"The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness." This quote – the opening of the autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1947) by Vladimir Nabokov – can be considered to be a splendid formulation of our inability to face up to our own lives. If there is anything since 2007 that has risen to the surface, then it is our poor capacity to face uncertainties.

During the Great Recession, from one moment to the next, we became conscious of how remarkable our life is. Certainties on which we relied our whole lives proved to have no guarantees. Banks can fail and from one moment to the other, prosperous countries can land in deep economic crisis. In addition, we can also develop not only a fear of heights, but a fear of great distances, as when on the beach of a remote holiday destination, we

suddenly see a starry sky on a clear night. And the idea of human life in 100, 1,000 or 100,000 years can make our heads spin.

Four Preludes to Infinity was composed in 2013 for oboe, violin, viola, and cello and consists of four movements, each separately expressing one possible aspect of infinity. It is not about what infinity is but which facets we are able to differentiate.

I. *Mysterious* recalls the world of the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg and Webern) by the use of mutes for the string instruments and the so-called *sul ponticello*, or bowing near the bridge.

II. *Restless* has an agitated movement and is reminiscent of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920's (Prokofiev, Shostakovich).

III. *Religious* makes use of one of the compositional techniques of the German Baroque (Bach, Handel, Telemann), in which a very old choral melody (*Jesu Leiden, Pein und Tod*) sounds in the lowest instrument, the cello. In the higher voices, the other instruments move very freely, taking into account the strict harmonic laws of that time.

IV. *Luminous* is the fastest and the longest of the Four Preludes. It refers stylistically to the music from the French Impressionism (Debussy, Ravel, Dukas).

All references to historical styles are just meant to give the listener an idea in advance of what he or she will be hearing. Of course the composer is lord and master over his own material, and the *Four Preludes to Infinity* remains a very personal work.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was perhaps the quintessential Romantic composer. The son of an author, translator (his father's small fortune was made translating Byron into German) and book dealer, Robert's first interest was literature, and literary or other extra-musical inspiration, as well as a tendency to extreme self-expression, characterized his works throughout his life. Often his pieces had personal associations – memories, feelings, specific events – of which biographers get only glimpses from the notes in his manuscripts. It appears that mental illness ran in Schumann's family; his father died as a relatively young man of a nervous disorder, and his older sister Emilie most likely committed suicide at age 19. In his own short and often tumultuous life Schumann produced an incredibly diverse body of work – symphonies, songs, chamber music, piano music, choral music – usually working extremely fast during periods of inspiration.

As a young man, Schumann acquiesced to his parents' wishes and attended the University of Leipzig to study law. Before long, however, he was studying piano with Friedrich Wieck and meeting Leipzig's musical leaders. After a period of travel and self-reflection, he returned to Leipzig to devote himself completely to music, with more intense study under Wieck's guidance. An injury to the middle finger of his right hand cut his performing career short, however, and his path as a composer and critic was determined. He fell in love with Wieck's young daughter Clara, who was being groomed for a career as a concert artist, and despite Wieck's vociferous

objections and legal battles, eventually married her. Even as she gave birth to eight children and raised seven, Clara became one of the most famous piano virtuosi of the century, and the couple were good friends with Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, Brahms, Liszt, Berlioz, and many other prominent musicians.

During most of his career, Schumann was better known as a music critic than as a composer. He wrote prolifically throughout his life: articles, journals, diaries (including a joint “marriage diary” with Clara), letters, etc. He founded the journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and was its owner and editor from 1835 to 1844. In a sincere effort to represent a dialectic way of thinking, he created characters from whose points of view he would write, both in criticism and private correspondence. Florestan, Eusebius, and Meister Raro represented for him the ability to hold and embrace simultaneously conflicting viewpoints, respecting the value of instinctive emotion as well as calculated thought, and always listening to the voice of moderation to balance the two.

In 1850 Schumann finally achieved a post acknowledging his formidable and diverse abilities as a musician. He was appointed Municipal Music Director in the capital of the Rhine Province, Düsseldorf. Success would be short-lived, however. The next three years would be his last as a productive composer before succumbing to mental illness aggravated by syphilis. The disease would confine him to an asylum beginning in February 1854. Clara was not allowed to see him during this time, finally able to visit only two days before his death in July of 1856.

As a young man, Schumann became particularly infatuated with the music of Schubert, which he found satisfying in much the same ways as his favorite literature. In a letter to Friedrich Wieck he wrote: “Apart from Schubert’s music, none exists that is so psychologically unusual in the course and connection of its ideas... While others used a diary to set down their momentary feelings, Schubert used a piece of manuscript paper.” It’s difficult to imagine Schumann expressing a more concise objective for his own work, and even though the two men never met, they remain linked in musical history due to much more than simply the beginning consonants of their names.

A particular favorite piece was Schubert’s E-flat Major Piano Trio, and it is no accident that among Schumann’s first attempts at chamber music was a Piano Quartet in the related key of C minor, closely modeled on the Schubert trio, begun in 1828 but never completed for publication. It is also clearly no accident that the apex of Schumann’s “chamber music year” of 1842 was the nearly simultaneous composition of two works for piano and strings: the Piano Quintet, Op. 44, and Piano Quartet, Op. 47, both in the same key of E-flat Major! Schumann’s techniques had matured by this time to the point that he was no longer working so closely from other composers’ models, but Schubert’s influence is still clear and strong in more than just the choice of key. The Op. 44 Quintet often overshadows its smaller brother because of its bold opening and more outgoing character, but the Op. 47 Quartet is no less a masterpiece of its genre, with a unique scherzo (often considered a nod to his friend Mendelssohn) and an andante cantabile that contains one of the most beautiful melodies ever written by anybody, Schumann equaling – and even possibly surpassing – his hero in the distillation of Romantic self-expression into a single melodic line and its musical setting and development.

- Gabriel Langfur

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