



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2021-2022 chamber music season chamber series 4: between here and there

Saturday, April 2, 2022, 8 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, April 3, 2022, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Zoltán Kodály, Sonatina for cello & piano

Jeremy Gill, *Winternacht*, for flute, viola & harp – world premiere

Philippe Hersant, *Im fremden Land* for clarinet, string quartet & piano

Heitor Villa-Lobos, Quintette en forme de chôros, W231

Felix Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 87

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur Rice

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) grew up in the Hungarian countryside, where his father was an employee of the Hungarian state railway system assigned as station master to posts in Szob, Galánta, and Nagyszombat. Both of his parents were amateur musicians – his father played the violin and his mother sang and played the piano – so as a child he heard both classical music and original Hungarian folk music as sung by his schoolmates. With very little instruction, he learned to play the violin, viola, cello, and piano well enough to read chamber music and play in the school orchestra.

While attending Budapest University to study Hungarian and German, Kodály also began attending the Academy of Music, earning diplomas in composition and teaching, and received a PhD in 1906 for his thesis titled *A Magyar népdal strófászerkezete* (“The Stanzaic Structure of Hungarian Folksong”), which was particularly perceptive in analyzing the relationships of music and speech patterns. There was already some material on this subject to read, but much of his work was based on his own field research, often with Béla Bartók at his side. The two men became close friends and collaborators, determined not only to document and expand on Hungarian music, but also to lift up the people of Hungary with a music education system rooted firmly in their own traditions.

Also in 1906, Kodály received a scholarship for six months of study in Paris, where his most memorable experience was hearing the music of Debussy. Upon his return, Kodály was

appointed to the faculty of the Academy of Music. The First World War and the subsequent bourgeois revolution interrupted Kodály's academic career, his field research with Bartók, and his growing international reputation as a composer, but publication of his scores by Universal Edition beginning in 1921 and the resounding successes of *Psalmus Hungaricus* and the singspiel *Háry János* put his career firmly back on track.

Even as Kodály's international reputation grew he remained mostly in Hungary, carrying out his mission for the good of the Hungarian people. During the Second World War he focused mostly on patriotic music, sometimes even as he and his wife were taking refuge for safety. Following the war he again began traveling internationally, recognized as a leader in the study of folk music and receiving honorary doctorates from the universities of Budapest (1957), Oxford (1960), East Berlin (1964) and Toronto (1966), and honorary membership of the Belgian Academy of Sciences (1957), the Moscow Conservatory (1963) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1963). He was named president of the International Folk Music Council in 1961 and honorary president of the International Society of Music Education in 1964. In 1965 he was awarded the Herder Prize for his work in furthering East–West cultural relations.

Bartók wrote of his friend: “If I were to name the composer whose works are the most perfect embodiment of the Hungarian spirit, I would answer, Kodály. His work proves his faith in the Hungarian spirit. The obvious explanation is that all Kodály's composing activity is rooted only in Hungarian soil, but the deep inner reason is his unshakable faith and trust in the constructive power and future of his people.”

Kodály focused on chamber music and small forces early in his career, including the Duo for violin and cello in 1914 and the Sonata for solo cello in 1915. He also composed a three-movement Sonata for cello and piano in 1909-1910, but was never happy with the first movement and only allowed it to be performed as a diptych. When the opportunity arose to publish the work in 1922, Kodály attempted to replace the first movement entirely but found that his language had changed such that the new material was incompatible with the old, and the Sonata Op. 4 was published with just two movements. The new piece took on a life of its own as the Sonatina on today's program.

Clearly Hungarian in character, as is all of his music, the Sonatina is just as clearly inspired by the music of Debussy that Kodály studied and loved so much during his time in Paris. The piano introduction in particular is reminiscent of Impressionism, and the quasi-sonata form sounds free enough to be illuminating an unspoken poetic narrative. The Sonatina is an altogether charming and unique contribution to the repertoire for cello and piano.

Recent collaborators of American composer, conductor, and pianist **Jeremy Gill** (b. 1975) include conductors JoAnn Falletta, Stuart Malina, Steven Osgood, Gil Rose, and Jaap van Zweden; pianists Ching-Yun Hu, Orion Weiss, and Shai Wosner; the vocal sextet Variant 6, and the Grammy-winning Parker Quartet. Jeremy has written major works for flutist Mimi Stillman, oboist Erin Hannigan, clarinetist Chris Grymes, and pianist Peter Orth, and the Buffalo Philharmonic, Chautauqua Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Harrisburg Symphony, and New York Classical Players have each commissioned his music since 2016. Other commissions have come

from the American Opera Project, Chamber Music America, Concert Artists Guild, the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, and the American Composers Forum. Mr. Gill has received major awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, ASCAP, BMI, and the League of American Orchestras.

Major premieres during the 2021–22 season include *Corvus Mythicus*, commissioned by the Dallas Symphony to celebrate the installation of Dutch artist Arie Van Selm’s Crow sculpture at the Meyerson Symphony Center; *Motherwhere: Bagatelles for Strings, after Bán*, a New York Classical Players-commissioned concerto for string quartet and string orchestra premiered by the Parker Quartet and NYCP in New York City; and *Winternacht*, a trio for flute, viola, and harp based on a poem by Georg Trakl, featuring the Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston. His oboe concerto *Serenada Concertante* will receive a featured performance this summer by Dallas Symphony principal oboist Erin Hannigan at the annual International Double Reed Society conference in Boulder, Colorado.

Composer’s program note:

In the midst of the 2019–20 winter season, I was a guest lecturer for the Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston’s “Up Close” concert featuring works by Debussy and Gubaidulina for flute, viola, and harp, and works by Foote and Ravel (the Salzedo arrangement of his Sonatine) for flute, cello, and harp (presented, as they often are, with viola instead of cello). I had been wanting to write a flute, viola, and harp trio for Deb Boldin and her Chameleon Arts Ensemble for some time, and the opportunity to immerse myself in these major works for the ensemble while turning my own hand to it was irresistible. I decided that I would begin and complete a new trio entirely during the winter season, that it would truly be a “winter work.”

I sought an inspirational frame for my piece in the poetry of Georg Trakl, whose work I have set, and whose dreamy, symbolist aesthetic felt appropriate to what I had in mind. I found what I was looking for in “Winternacht,” a poem that roughly describes the nocturnal adventures of “you”—“you leave the dark abode of humans...you stamp along the rail embankment...your legs ring out like blue ice...your brow grows pale from the rapture of the frost”—until toward the end of the poem when this “you” is abstracted to “the body”: “Silent and lost to oblivion the chill body melts in the silver snow.”

This “story”—of an individual traipsing through the snow (for reasons and with a destination unknown), who ultimately succumbs to the cold, lying down for one last “sleep”—matches what I imagine informs Debussy’s “Des pas sur la neige” from his first book of Preludes for Piano. Indeed, Debussy’s prelude is like a ghost that haunts my work, and though I never quote the famous walking figure with which Debussy’s piece begins, I do reference the end of his prelude—a plagal cascade through G/D fifths falling to a final, unexpectedly widely-spaced D minor chord—twice in my work, as the premonition and then representation of our hero’s final sleep.

The Trakl poem, however, does not end with this sleep: “On awakening, the village bells tolled. Through the eastern gate the roseate day appeared all in silver.” So my work

comes in two large parts, the first “setting” the journey of our hero, and the second featuring an extended “chaconne découvrir,” in which the underlying chaconne-esque chord progression is only gradually revealed through nineteen seven-bar cycles of a diminishingly incomplete progression (the complete progression is finally heard in the seventeenth cycle) that parallels the sensory clarity that obtains with the encroaching light of day.

This apparently happy ending is decidedly un-Trakl, and, indeed, it is not clear that the hero has awakened at all—it could rather be the village (or the day) rousing itself—and the “roseate day” that dawns reminds one of the famous mariner’s rhyme that concludes “red sky at morning, shepherds take warning.” I sought a music that had something dichotomous about it, something triumphantly inevitable, but tinged with cognitive as well as chordal dissonance.

I finished *Winternacht* on March 18, the day before the spring equinox, during the first full week that many in the United States were being urged to socially distance ourselves from one another to stem the tide of a rapidly spreading, new coronavirus.

The French composer **Philippe Hersant** was born in Rome in 1948. He completed an undergraduate degree in literature in 1968, the same year he entered André Jolivet's composition class at the Paris Conservatory. From 1970 to 1972, he was a resident scholar at Casa Velázquez in Madrid and from 1978-1980 at Villa Médicis. Since 1973 he has been a producer at the radio station *France Musiques*. With a varied catalogue of around ninety pieces (not counting his scores for the cinema and the theatre), Philippe Hersant has achieved broad recognition on the contemporary music scene. He has received commissions from, among others, the French Ministry of Culture, Radio France, Paris Opera, Leipzig Opera, and the Orchestre National de Lyon. In addition, the musical world has awarded him many distinctions: Grand Prix Musical de la Ville de Paris (1990), Composers' Prize from the SACEM (1991), Grand Prix SACEM for symphonic music (1998), Grand Prix of the Del Duca Foundation (2001), and two Music Awards (Victoires de la Musique) in 2005 & 2010.

As an avid reader and a lover of the cinema, Philippe Hersant has drawn on varied literary sources including James Joyce, the German Romantics and many poets from the Far East, as well as cinematographic sources. He declares a particular predilection for the film director Fellini and how he portrays the significance of memory. Hersant defines himself as a tonal composer willing to turn music's entire heritage – from Monteverdi to Janacek to Stockhausen – to his advantage. As a composer, he lives by a few precepts: to be personal rather than to seek innovation at all costs, to avoid greyness, and to surprise.

Composer's comments about *Im fremden Land*, transcribed from a 2012 interview:

The piece is not cheerful at all, *Im fremden Land*. It was a tragic piece, I think. The first idea I had of this music was when I learned of the death of a good friend of mine called Olivier Greif who was a great composer, but who died at the age of fifty. We had the same piano teacher when we were kids. I didn't see him for forty years and then I met

him again two years before his death. We had a lot of things in common. His music is much more violent than mine, but we loved the same kinds of music: old music, ancient music, music from the Middle Ages, and so on. And when I heard about his death – which I did not expect at all – I had some kind of a flash in my head. I heard music, very short but very impressive. It was a mix of bells – funeral bells – and some birds shrieking, something like crows, and this chorale that I use in the piece, which is an old song from Germany, 15th century, called “Innsbruck, I Have To Leave You.” The song was so famous that it became a sacred song, a chorale that Bach uses very often, and it’s not “Innsbruck, I Must Leave,” but “Oh World, I Have to Leave You”: *O Welt, ich muss dich lassen*. When I heard about Olivier’s death I had this song in my mind, because the last time I saw this friend we talked about this song. He told me how much he loved it, and he wanted to quote it in one of his works.

So, I had this very short...flash, let’s say, in my head, and I wrote a piece, which is about five minutes, with this image I had in my mind. You could recognize the bells, and the clarinet playing the shrieking, and the string quartet playing the old song. And for two years I left this piece alone and it wasn’t performed, and then I wrote the first four movements because I had a commission for this sextet form. I tried in every movement to have a quotation of one phrase of this song, so the thing could be logical. It’s a funny way to write a piece, you know: the finale first and then the four other movements. All these movements have something Mahlerian in them. The titles are in German because the song is in German, and my friend loved Mahler’s music.

In a way it’s some kind of tribute to this composer. When I saw him again after forty years, I thought in a way he was my brother in music. We really had a lot of things in common, so that’s why his death really struck me.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) was by far the most creative and internationally recognized Brazilian composer of concert music in the 20th century. Born to a middle class family in Rio de Janeiro, his strict father made sure he had a thorough musical education, learning to play the clarinet and cello and attending many concerts and operas. He also rebelled somewhat by learning to play the guitar on his own, and, following his father’s early death in 1899, immersed himself in Rio’s popular music. The fusion of European styles with Brazilian popular music would characterize Villa-Lobos’ most ambitious and creative music throughout his career.

Villa-Lobos initially followed his mother’s wishes by enrolling in a preparatory course for medical school, but his passion for music was irresistible and he was soon living with an aunt and earning a living by playing cello in theaters, movie houses, and hotels. Over the next several years he traveled extensively throughout Brazil, seeking new experiences and indigenous music. By 1915 he had built up enough of a composition portfolio to have a concert dedicated to his works, and the vehement negative reaction of conservative critics had the effect of establishing his reputation as an innovator. Darius Milhaud, who lived in Rio in 1917-18, and Artur Schnabel, who visited in 1918, became friends and supporters. Schnabel in particular introduced Villa-Lobos’ music throughout the world.

In the early 1920s, Modernism was becoming highly fashionable in Brazil, and Villa-Lobos was the musical representative to the “Week of Modern Art” organized by intellectuals and artists from various disciplines in Sao Paulo, February 11-18, 1922. In 1923 he left for Europe, with the support of several friends and patrons. He traveled to several cities and decided to live in Paris until 1930, making several visits back to South America to conduct concerts. His international reputation was solidified, and Villa-Lobos became a model for innovation based on the artful joining of European and native music. He returned to Brazil to be a leader and advocate for music education, which only served to bolster his reputation as a composer and cultural icon. In the last two decades of his life he made many international tours, conducting and presenting concerts of his music even as his health began to fail. His passing was a national loss, and his funeral was attended by the president of Brazil.

While in Paris in the 1920s, Villa-Lobos wrote several pieces titled “Chôros” for various instrumental combinations, all inspired by the spirited dance music played by pick-up bands on the streets of Rio de Janeiro called *chorões*. In his words, “The Chôros represents a new form of musical composition in which are synthesized the different modalities of Brazilian, Indian and popular music, having for principal elements Rhythm, and any typical Melody of popular character.” The *Quintette en forme de Chôros* dates from 1928, and in its original version has an English horn in place of the more standard French horn of the woodwind quintet. Most ensembles prefer the more outgoing character of the French horn, as it heightens the improvisatory “street band” nature of the music, which also evokes pounding Indian drums and the shrieks of jungle birds.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was born in Hamburg, Germany to an exceptionally cultured and affluent family. His grandfather Moses Mendelssohn was a prominent Enlightenment philosopher, and his intellectual influence was strong in the household. Of Jewish descent, the family converted to Christianity while Felix was a child – not so much to avoid prejudice as to better match their religious beliefs with their philosophical leanings. Felix received an outstanding general education in addition to musical tutelage, and his broad and cultured background was surely an impetus for his many varied contributions to musical culture. He essentially defined the role of the modern conductor while raising the standards of orchestral performance throughout Europe, and was single-handedly responsible for the reintroduction of the music of J.S. Bach in the 19th century. In 1843 he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, forming the model for the modern conservatory as well. He organized the faculty into specialized departments and sought out the most outstanding scholars and performing artists to teach their instruments and other subjects, including Robert and Clara Schumann for composition, score-reading and piano. All the while, Mendelssohn composed steadily, in his personal style, particularly disciplined on Classical models of form, harmony and counterpoint. He maintained a Classical elegance at a time of extreme Romantic excess (he had a particular distaste for the music of Berlioz), but his music has never sounded archaic or unoriginal. He died of a brain hemorrhage just three months before his 39th birthday, in a state of acute mourning for the tragic death of his beloved sister Fanny.

Composed in 1845, just two years before Mendelssohn’s death, the second String Quintet in B-

Flat Major has to be considered a “mature” work, though he was only thirty-six years old at the time! In any event it clearly heralds an evolution of his style which we did not get the opportunity to hear more of; there is much less reliance on counterpoint skills derived from Baroque music and embellishment from Classical models and much more declamatory expression. Mendelssohn himself was not quite comfortable with this line of thinking, choosing not to publish the work and commenting: “Though not an art work in the highest sense, it is still an exercise in forms and the representation of ideas. Here you have the reason why I have written so many compositions which have not and never should be printed.”

Alas, sometimes artists are not the best judges of their own work...the B-Flat Major quintet is a much-loved and valued piece in the repertoire for viola quintet, and it contains some of Mendelssohn’s most dramatic music. The Adagio movement in particular has a weighty, tragic character unique in his output, and the finale makes full use of the sonorous possibilities of the ensemble, offering a thickness of texture similar to his string symphonies.

- *Gabriel Langfur Rice*

Hersant and Gill biographies and notes provided by the composers, edited by Gabriel Langfur Rice
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