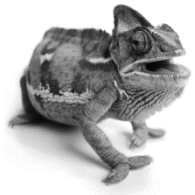

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2021-2022 chamber music season
Up Close 1: Robyn Bollinger, violin; Sarah Rommel, cello & Elizabeth Schumann, piano

Sunday, March 13, 2022, 4 PM at Old South Church

Program:
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Piano Trio No. 5 in C Major, K. 548
Philippe Hersant, Variations sur *la Sonnerie de Sainte-Geneviève-du-Mont de Marin Marais*
Frank Bridge, Miniatures, Set I for piano trio, H. 87 (1909)
Maurice Ravel, Piano Trio in a minor

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur Rice

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) is a more familiar figure to the general public than most composers, if nothing else from the play and movie *Amadeus* – exaggerated though they may be. Born in Salzburg, Austria to Leopold Mozart, a well-respected musician himself, he was the most prodigious of child prodigies, coming to the attention of Europe's musical elite both as a performer and a composer well before his tenth birthday. He of course had to struggle to earn a decent living, serving as concertmaster in the orchestra and then organist for the Archbishop of Salzburg before moving to Vienna, where he eventually attained the position of composer of the Imperial and Royal Chamber. Somehow, even with a busy performing schedule, he managed to write an absolutely staggering amount of music in his short life; his catalog includes 21 stage and opera works, 15 Masses, over 50 symphonies, 25 piano concerti, 12 violin concertos, 27 concert arias, 17 piano sonatas, 26 string quartets, and many other pieces. Mozart died of rheumatic fever just short of his 36th birthday.

The Piano Trio in C Major, K. 548, was composed in the summer of 1788, an extraordinarily productive time for Mozart despite very difficult circumstances. Austria's war with the Ottoman Empire had an enormous impact on aristocratic support for artists, and he had to move his family to less expensive lodgings. To make matters worse, his fourth child died at just six months old and Costanze was ill, requiring expensive treatment. Somehow he still composed several major works, including this and another piano trio (E Major, K. 542), the Piano Sonata, K. 545, and symphonies 39-41. The jubilant mood of the Trio is remarkable, as is Mozart's completion of the transformation of the genre from its earlier form of piano with obbligato doublings of the melody and bass line. Throughout this and his other mature trios, we find a conversation of three equals,

in much the same manner that Mozart would treat three characters onstage in an opera – commenting, arguing, even interrupting each other in order to further the drama.

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 program note:

> *La Sonnerie de Saint-Geneviève-du-Mont*, written for violin, viola de gamba, and harpsichord was published in 1723 in a collection entitled *La gamme and other symphonic pieces*. Marin Marais succeeded in writing a highly developed piece based on a very short (it has only three notes) and simple carillon theme (that of the Saint Geneviève church). With this base obstinately repeated in an immutable tempo, Marais invented numerous countermelodies (destined primarily for the violin) and allowed himself only two modulations.
>
> I was quite struck by this charming work when I discovered it about twenty years ago. Using an arrangement similar to that of Marin Marais, but with modern instruments (violin, cello, piano) my *Trio* appears as a continuation, an amplifying variation on the baroque composer's piece. The theme of the three notes is nearly omnipresent in my piece, but it jumps from one instrument to another in different tonalities and registers and it is subjected to several variations in tempi and dynamics. Occasionally references, more or less hidden, to other famous carillon (Moussorgsky's *The Great Gate of Kiev* or Bizet's *The Carillon of the Woman from Arles*) are mixed into my piece.
>
> The *Trio* was commissioned by Radio-France and is dedicated to the musicians of the Ader Ensemble, who premiered it in 1998: Alice Ader, Christophe Poiget and Isabelle

Veyrier.

Frank Bridge (1879-1941) was one of the leading English musicians of his time, well-known as a conductor, violist, and composer. He came from a working class family in Brighton and won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music, where he studied violin and composition. His primary teacher, Charles Villiers Stanford, was a notorious tyrant who dashed the compositional aspirations of many of his students, but those who survived, such as Vaughan Williams, Holst and Bridge, came away with impeccable technique and unquestionable skill in the Brahmsian ideals of motivic development.

Bridge soon switched his primary instrument to viola, substituting for the ill Emmanuel Wirth in the Joachim String Quartet in 1906 and then joining the English String Quartet, which he was a member of until 1915. At the same time, he built a reputation as a fine and flexible conductor, directing operas at the Savoy Theater and Covent Garden and appearing with orchestras such as the London Symphony. He became known for his ability to take on even very difficult programs on very short notice.

Like many other British composers around the turn of the twentieth century, Bridge's early style was influenced by the French; his has been described as "loosely derived from Delius, Debussy and Ravel." His best-known orchestral work, a suite titled *The Sea* written in 1912, can't escape comparison to Debussy's *La Mer* from 1904, but it is well worth hearing in its own right. As he got older, and following the tragedies and barbarities of World War I which cemented his pacifist beliefs, his music became increasingly abstract, much less conservative in its harmonic and rhythmic language. He expressed frustration that his earlier music remained better known and more often performed.

Bridge is perhaps best known as the teacher of Benjamin Britten, who credited him with insistence "on the absolutely clear relationship of what was in my mind to what was on the paper." Despite such a spectacular success, Britten was the only composition student he ever had.

Bridge composed three sets of miniatures for piano trio in 1909 for his violin student, Betty Hanbury, and her cellist sister Rachael. As it happens, they had a third sister named Patricia who later would join them at the piano. These are certainly early works in Bridge's output, displaying charm, skill, and beauty if little of the innovation that would come later. While it would be easy to dismiss them as student works, as the scholar Renz Opolis writes:

> There is a difference between works written for students and student works and it can be said with certainty that the Miniatures are not the latter, and they ought not to be dismissed as inconsequential student works suitable for neither amateur nor professional. To the contrary, any one of these tonally diverse and brilliantly written cameos would serve as a superb encore for a professional piano trio while amateurs will spend many a happy hour with these delightful works.

Set I of the Miniatures consists of two interpretations of Baroque dances – a Minuet and a Gavotte – followed by a sparkling Allegretto.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) came of age in a life of Parisian culture and privilege, though his father was Swiss and his mother Basque. His musical interest was supported from the very beginning, and he entered the Paris Conservatory's preparatory piano department at age 14, winning prizes and admission to the full Conservatory two years later. His career there was difficult, however, and he left without prizes. He returned in 1897 to study composition, finding a sympathetic teacher in Fauré, but was again denied the prizes that would lead to a diploma because of his inability (or unwillingness) to demonstrate mastery of traditional counterpoint.

Like many innovative French composers before him (notably Berlioz), Ravel essentially ignored the criticisms of the reactionary Parisian musical establishment and continued on his path, eventually gaining renown on the merits of his work. When it became clear to the musical public that he should be awarded the *Prix de Rome*, the highest state prize for a French composer, he was denied five years in a row. It soon emerged that all of the finalists were students of Lenepveu, a member of the jury. The ensuing scandal led to the resignation of the director of the Paris Conservatory and the installation of Fauré, but by then Ravel was officially too old for the award.

Ravel was proudly French, volunteering for service in World War I (his health was not good enough to be a pilot as he hoped, but he was eventually able to serve as a driver), but he never subscribed to blind nationalism and even refused the *Légion d'Honneur* when it was offered. He also declined membership in an association of French musicians because he could not agree with their aims of elevating French music above all others and boycotting recently composed music from Germany. He believed that musical inspiration should come from all sources: Spanish music is evident in much of his output; he was for a time a close friend of Stravinsky and loved Russian music; he had a thorough knowledge of the Germanic and Austrian traditions; and he shared Debussy's fascination with the Javanese Gamelan and other Eastern music. In 1909 he took a leading role in the formation of the *Société Musicale Indépendente*, dedicated to performing music of interest regardless of nationality, genre, or style.

Ravel's war service was cut short by dysentery in 1916, and his mother – the closest emotional attachment of his life – died suddenly in 1917. He moved away from Paris, to "Le belvedere" in Montfort-l'Amaury, where he would remain for the last two decades of his life. Even though his own creative work slowed during this time, Debussy's passing in 1918 elevated Ravel in the eyes of many to the standing of France's leading musician.

The Piano Trio was composed during the summer of 1914 just as France was entering the war, and he worked diligently, even feverishly, through writer's block in order to finish it before volunteering to serve. He wrote to a friend:

> I am working—yes, working with the sureness and lucidity of a madman. At the same time I get terrible fits of depression and suddenly find myself sobbing over the sharps and flats!

The struggles proved immensely fruitful. Asymmetrical rhythmic motives derived from Basque

music permeate the first and fourth movements. The second movement, *Pantoum*, is based on a Malay poetic form that was fashionable in France at the time; four-line stanzas are constructed so that the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third line of the next. Always the craftsman, Ravel used the poetic inspiration to manipulate two musical ideas to wonderful effect. The third movement is based on the traditional Passacaglia form, but the ground bass becomes ever more harmonically and rhythmically varied throughout the movement. The finale, in a free Rondo form, utilizes virtuoso techniques from the strings to create the impression of a much larger ensemble, a brilliant ending for one of the great and unique masterpieces of the chamber music repertoire.

- Gabriel Langfur Rice