



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2023-2024 chamber music season chamber series 1: La Belle Époque

Saturday, October 14, 2023, 8 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, October 15, 2023, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Lili Boulanger, Nocturne et cortège for violin & piano

Eric Moe, *Frozen Hours Melt Melodiously into the Past* for flute, clarinet, string trio & piano

Zoltán Kodály, Duo for violin & cello, Op. 7

Claude Debussy, *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* for soprano & piano

Ernest Chausson, Piano Quartet in A Major, Op. 30

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

The era from roughly 1871 until 1914 has been remembered by history as *La Belle Époque*, a time of great optimism throughout Europe, and particularly in France. The 1889 World's Fair prompted the construction of the Eiffel Tower, and together with the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* served to transform Paris into the grand yet walkable and inviting city we know today. Sandwiched between the Napoleonic wars and the First World War, *La Belle Époque* was a time of peace, prosperity, and the flourishing of all the arts. Artists and intellectuals regularly gathered to share new works and refine their ideas through conversation, and the fertile ground of such gatherings worked to the mutual benefit of all. With this program we celebrate an era of heady creation and innovation through the incorporation of many traditions and influences.

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) was an intensely talented child prodigy, the daughter of Ernest Boulanger (1815-1900), a singing teacher at the Paris Conservatory and a composer who had won the *Prix de Rome* in 1835, and Raïssa Mischetzky, a Russian princess who had been his student at the Conservatory. By the age of five, Lili was accompanying her older sister Nadia – now more well-known to us as the most influential teacher of composition in history – to her classes at the Conservatory, and she soon came to the attention of the faculty there. Their father died when Lili was just six years old, and it is often suggested that profound grief at his passing infuses her music.

Lili suffered with chronic illness for most of her brief lifetime. Her immune system was severely

weakened by bronchial pneumonia as an infant, leaving her vulnerable to near-constant infections and ultimately Crohn's disease, then known as intestinal tuberculosis. Consequently, she was never able to attend the Conservatory as a full-time student, but she did study privately with Paul Vidal, George Caussade, and Gabriel Fauré.

In 1913 Lili achieved the distinction of being the first woman to win the *Prix de Rome* with her cantata *Faust et Hélène*. International recognition of the event led to a guaranteed income from the publishing house Ricordi, as well as the standard period of study in Rome. Her first trip there was cut short by World War I, and then again by the deterioration of her own health when she returned in 1916. Nadia cared for Lili in her last two years and then dedicated much of her own time and energy to promoting her younger sister's music and legacy.

Although the *Nocturne et cortège* for violin (or flute) and piano are often published and performed together, they were written three years apart and not conceived as a pair at the time. The *Nocturne* was composed over two days in September of 1911, while Boulanger was also engaged in the larger scale project of her submission for the *Prix de Rome*. *Cortège* came just as quickly in July of 1914, following her return from Rome. Taken together, they form a perfectly contrasting pair of miniatures, displaying her Impressionist influences for sure – you can even hear a few notes of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* in the *Nocturne* – but fresh, evocative, and thoroughly delightful.

Eric Moe (born 1954), composer of what *The New York Times* as called “music of winning exuberance,” has received numerous grants and awards for his work, including the Lakond Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Guggenheim Fellowship; commissions from the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the Fromm Foundation, the Koussevitzky Foundation, the Barlow Endowment, Meet-the-Composer USA, and New Music USA; fellowships from the Wellesley Composer's Conference and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts; and residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Bellagio, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the UCross Foundation, the Camargo Foundation, the Aaron Copland House, the Millay Colony, the Ragdale Foundation, the Montana Artists Refuge, the Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians, the Hambidge Center, and the American Dance Festival, among others.

Tri-Stan, his sit-trag (situation tragedy)/one-woman opera on a text by David Foster Wallace, premiered by Sequitur in 2005, was hailed by *The New York Times* as “a blockbuster” and “a tour de force,” a work of “inspired weight” that “subversively inscribe[s] classical music into pop culture.” In its review of the piece, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* concluded, “it is one of those rare works that transcends the cultural divide while still being rooted in both sides.” The work is available on a Koch International Classics compact disc. *Strange Exclaiming Music*, a CD featuring Moe's chamber music, was released by Naxos in July 2009 as part of their American Classics series; *Fanfare* magazine described it as “wonderfully inventive, often joyful, occasionally melancholy, highly rhythmic, frequently irreverent, absolutely eclectic, and always high-octane music.” *Kick & Ride*, on the BMOP/Sound label, was picked by WQXR for album of the week: “...it's completely easy to succumb to the beats and rhythms that come out of Moe's fantastical imaginarium, a headspace that ties together the free-flowing atonality of Alban Berg

with the guttural rumblings of Samuel Barber's *Medea*, adding in a healthy dose of superhuman strength." Other all-Moe CDs are available on New World Records (*Meanwhile Back At The Ranch*), Albany Records (*Kicking and Screaming, Up & At 'Em, Siren Songs*), and Centaur (*On the Tip of My Tongue*). *The Sieneese Shredder*, a fine arts journal, includes an all-Moe CD as part of its third issue.

As a pianist and keyboardist, Moe has premiered and performed works by a wide variety of composers. His playing can be heard on the Koch, CRI, Mode, Albany, New World Records and Innova labels in the music of John Cage, Roger Zahab, Marc-Antonio Consoli, Mathew Rosenblum, Jay Reise, Ezra Sims, David Keberle, Felix Draeseke, and many others in addition to his own. His solo recording *The Waltz Project Revisited – New Waltzes for Piano*, a CD of waltzes for piano by two generations of American composers, was released in 2004 on Albany. *Gramophone* magazine said of the CD, "Moe's command of the varied styles is nothing short of remarkable." A founding member of the San Francisco-based EARPLAY ensemble, he currently co-directs the Music on the Edge new music concert series in Pittsburgh.

Moe studied composition at Princeton University (A.B.) and at the University of California at Berkeley (M.A., Ph.D.). He is currently the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Composition and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh and has held visiting professorships at Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania.

Frozen Hours Melt Melodiously Into The Past was composed in 2009 on a grant from the Jebediah Foundation New Music Commissions for the Firebird Ensemble. It is, in fact, the first part of a two-part tone-poem *The Deeds and Sufferings of Light*, which takes its title from Goethe's *Theory of Colors*: "Colors are the deeds and sufferings of light." Moe writes that the pair of pieces "consciously evokes Romantic notions of the sublime, placing heroic struggle and pathos in a contemporary context and seeing how they fare." He also writes: "*Frozen Hours Melt Melodiously Into The Past* is an intensely lyrical piece. Not a coincidence; I used vocal music, some songs of mine on texts of Richard Wilbur, as the point of departure. The cello, with its uncanny ability to evoke the human voice, plays a starring role. A guiding ambition in its composition was for surprising departures to lead inexorably to surprising returns."

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 strófaszervezete* ("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 composed the Duo for violin and cello in 1914 as the First World War was looming. This combination has a very small concert repertoire, but Kodály obviously felt no constraint in his conception of the potential for enormous expressive power. The tensions of the times are apparent in the sometimes contentious musical dialogue, and the elements of folk music – five-note and modal scales, rhapsodic passages and extravagant ornamentation, and abrupt changes of mood – conjure the image of local musicians showing off in the village square. These local musicians are clearly virtuosos with much to show off, as Kodály demands the extreme registers of both instruments, many double-stops, and polyrhythms and other compositional devices to make it sound like a much larger ensemble.

Referring to his music and that of Bartók, Kodály wrote in 1925, "Certain modern Hungarian works apparently have created the impression abroad of a musical revolution. They are more accurately to be described as conservative. Our intention has not been to break with the past, but to renew and strengthen the links by recreating the atmosphere of the ancient, forgotten melodies, by erecting new structures from their scattered stones. These old songs are our heirlooms; their creators, long since silent, are our true ancestors."

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was from a family of Burgundian peasants settled near Paris around 1800. Childhood piano lessons led to admission in the Paris Conservatory in 1872. His record there was not particularly distinguished, earning him a *premier prix* only in accompaniment, but his talents for composition became much more apparent outside the academic halls. He was hired in the summer of 1880 by Tchaikovsky's patron, Nadezhda von Meck, to teach her children and play duets. She took him to Florence and Arachon, and then the following two summers to Russia and Vienna. In 1884 he won the *Prix de Rome* and spent the next two years there at the Villa Medici. Debussy continued his cosmopolitan cultural education over the next several years, cultivating friendships with poets – particularly the Symbolists – and painters in the Paris cafés, searching out non-Western musical traditions such as the Javanese Gamelan, and visiting Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889. The Wagnerian influence remained strong for the rest of his life, even if it was often manifested in opposition. He never lost admiration for *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde*, and Wagner's general conception of music-drama was central to Debussy's overall aesthetic. The influence of poetry and visual arts may have been even greater than that of Wagner or any other musician, however. Although Debussy has often been given the label Impressionist, his aesthetic is much better described in relationship to Symbolism, the short-lived French literary movement characterized by rejection of realism, naturalism and clear-cut forms, and a taste for the esoteric and mysterious.

The guiding light of the Symbolists was the poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), 20 years Debussy's senior. The young Debussy first set Mallarmé's verse to music three years before they met, and he soon joined the older man's Tuesday evening meeting of like-minded artists. When the complete poetry of Mallarmé was collected and published for the first time in 1913, Debussy jumped at the chance to make a cycle of art songs – but alas Ravel jumped first, obtaining the rights to set them to music (and even choosing two of the same songs!). Debussy was furious, and somehow even more furious when Ravel took steps to make sure Debussy's request would also be granted.

A vital aspect of Mallarmé's huge influence on French poetry was his delight in the sounds of the words, and the multiple meanings that would arise from the homophones he played with so freely. Of course, this very same characteristic made his poetry so very attractive to composers...and also so very difficult to translate into any other language. Each of the three poems Debussy chose is a meditation on the movement and intangibility of thin air: *Soupir* ("sigh") is a single sentence rising and falling with the inhalation and exhalation of a breath; *Placet futile* is the words of a lover who knows full well that his pleas will be unheeded; and *Éventail* is a stream of thoughts and associations set in motion by the waving of a fan.

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899) was born to a well-off professional family in Paris. Highly protective after the premature deaths of two older siblings, his parents entrusted his education to a private tutor, who encouraged his considerable talents and parallel interests in literature, music, and drawing. When it came time to choose a career, Chausson followed the urgings of his family, received a law degree, and was sworn in as a barrister in 1877. He never practiced law, however, and by 1879 was enrolled at the Paris Conservatory as a student of Jules Massenet. He also

attended Franck's classes and traveled to Germany several times to hear Wagner's operas. Chausson even took his honeymoon in Bayreuth, where he and his bride took in *Parsifal*.

Chausson's comfortable financial circumstance allowed him the freedom to apply himself tirelessly to composing, host salons, and discreetly help colleagues such as Debussy and Albéniz through some difficult times. He died at only 44 years old in a bicycle accident, leaving behind a body of work of high quality in many genres.

Chausson's style traversed from the early influence of Massenet in which shapely melody and beautiful harmony took precedence over tension or emotional depth, through a middle period of highly dramatic music displaying the model of Franck with cyclical structures and large-scale forces, and then the seemingly universal fascination with the Symbolist poets as well as the Russian novelists. His best-known work, the *Poème* for violin and orchestra, came from this third period. By 1897, Chausson was feeling very confident in his technique and expressing the need to shed outside influences, and he turned back to chamber music to assert his mature, concise, clear style. The Piano Quartet in A Major was the first work of what must unfortunately be considered Chausson's all-too-brief final period. It is a confident work incorporating all that he had learned and transforming it into his own idiom, starting from an emotional landscape of optimism and continuing through heartfelt lyricism in the second movement and gentle dance figures in the third. The finale harkens back to his mentor César Franck by bringing back themes from the previous movements in a breathless burst of energy.

- Gabriel Rice

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Moe biography provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice