



**Chameleon**  
Arts Ensemble  
*of Boston*

## PROGRAM NOTES

### **Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston**

*Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director*

### **2023-2024 chamber music season chamber series 2: As near as memory –**

Saturday, November 18, 2023, 8 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, November 19, 2023, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

#### **Program:**

Giacomo Puccini, *Crisantemi* for string quartet

Charlotte Bray, *Fire Burning in Snow* for soprano, oboe, clarinet, violin & cello

Gordon Jacob, Sextet in B-flat Major for piano & winds, Op. 6

Sergei Rachmaninoff, Trio élégiaque No. 2 in d minor, Op. 9

#### **Program notes by Gabriel Rice**

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**Giacomo Puccini** (1858-1924), the last champion of Italian Opera Verismo, came from a family that had provided the music at the Cathedral of San Martino in Lucca, Italy for two centuries. His father died when he was just five years old, but the position of organist and music director at the Cathedral was reserved for him once he came of age, and the city supported his family with a pension. He dutifully studied the organ with two of his father's former pupils, but attendance at a performance of Verdi's *Aida* in Pisa in 1876 inspired him to a different path. He enrolled at the Milan Conservatory in 1880 to study composition, with the intention of carrying on the Italian operatic tradition.

Puccini's first one-act opera, *Le villi*, was produced to great success in Milan in 1884, and most importantly it caught the attention of the music publisher Giulio Ricordi, who acquired the copyright, put the composer on a stipend, and became a trusted friend, adviser, and his greatest promoter and advocate. Ricordi encouraged him to travel to Bayreuth to take in the innovations of Wagner, and curiosity about the music of Debussy, Stravinsky, and even Schoenberg led Puccini to bring the Italian opera tradition into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all the while maintaining its lush and overtly expressive, lyrical character.

Puccini's personal life can only be described as, well, operatic. In the late 1880s he fell in love with a married woman named Elvira Gemignani. They lived together for years before her husband died and they were able to marry in 1904, but Elvira was a difficult companion. In 1908 she instigated a notorious scandal by becoming inexplicably jealous of a young servant in their

home named Doria Manfredi, threatening to kill her. Doria poisoned herself, and at her parents' insistence was examined by a doctor who confirmed that she was in fact a virgin. Elvira was found guilty of charges brought against her by the Manfredis, but with the help of a sympathetic judge and a payment of damages to the family by Puccini, was never punished.

*Crisantemi* for string quartet was composed in 1890 in memory of Puccini's friend Amadeo di Savoia, the second son of Italy's King Vittorio Emanuele II, who had been named King of Spain following the Glorious Revolution of 1868. King Amadeo I attempted to rule as a constitutional monarch but abdicated in 1873 due to opposition from all sides, returning to a peaceful life in Turin. He died at only 44 years old, and Puccini was inspired to write his memorial in just one night. The title refers to the Italian tradition associating chrysanthemums with funerals, and Puccini used its soaring theme in Act IV of *Manon Lescaut* (1893) to underscore the ill-fated lovers wandering to their deaths.

**Charlotte Bray** (b. 1982) is one of the most esteemed and in-demand British composers of her generation. Born out of an intense desire to communicate, her music is exhilarating, inherently vivid, and richly expressive with lyrical intensity. Recent premieres include *Ungrievable Lives* (2021/22), performed by the Castalian String Quartet at the Elbphilharmonie, Wigmore Hall, Konzerthaus Wien, Kuhmo Chamber Music Festival, and Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. Orchestral highlights include *Forsaken* (2022), premiered by Philharmonisches Orchester Hagen (Joseph Trafton); *Landmark* (2022), for orchestral winds, percussion and basses, premiered by Dresdner Sinfoniker (Jonathan Stockhammer); *The Flight of Bitter Water* (2022), conducted by Marin Alsop and performed by Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien; and *Where Icebergs Dance Away* (2021), commissioned by WDR Sinfonieorchester (Cristian Măcelaru), receiving its UK premiere at the BBC Proms under Sakari Oramo.

Originally from High Wycombe, Bray graduated from Birmingham Conservatoire with First Class Honors, having studied composition with Joe Cutler, and then completed a Masters in Composition with Distinction from the Royal College of Music in London studying with Mark-Anthony Turnage. She went on to participate in the Britten-Pears Contemporary Composition Course with Oliver Knussen, Colin Matthews, and Magnus Lindberg and studied at Tanglewood Music Centre with John Harbison, Michael Gandolfi, Shulamit Ran, and Augusta Read-Thomas. Her music is published by Birdsong. She lives in Berlin.

Composer's Program Note:

A BCMG Sound Investment commission supported by individual donors in memory of Jack Phipps and dedicated to the poet Nicki Jackowska and the memory of Jonathan Harvey, *Fire Burning in Snow* sets three poems by Jackowska; *Moonshot*, *Loose Ends*, and *Occupations*, a collection portraying lost love and a search for a way forward from this "place."

Frozen, immersed in his absence, the first movement, *Moonshot*, craves for closeness, reaching out for the lost love. Peeling away the layers of personality that gave her form, defined her, she dances alone in a light that she hopes will summon him, singing for

comfort. In her solitude, in the quiet of this haunting lament – the darkest part of the collection – a deep emptiness is felt. Disturbed, raw emotions that are never fully comprehended, mysteries that persist, provide openings for other journeys.

Delivered from a male perspective, *Loose Ends* is grounded and present. Emerging from an emotional landscape shaped by painful loss, newly found freedom, promise (a dream) of future happiness, the character feels indestructible until he loses control, falls back to the dense earth with a thud and realization that his attempts to bury the memories of his lost love are superficial and futile.

A rich presence is felt throughout *Occupations*. A love dovetailed into hers – internal, whilst still being free; constantly thrown back to recall what has been lost, until eventually, it escapes, (once accepted, perhaps). Ultimately, some form of resolution is found.

A rich palette and threaded sensory references allow one to see, hear, smell, and feel the poems – they are virtually tangible, leaping off the page with a clear and colorful voice.

**Gordon Jacob** (1895-1984), over the course of his long life and career, was one of the undisputed leaders of British musical culture. The youngest son of a family of ten, he attended Dulwich College before serving in World War I, where he was captured prisoner and was one of only 60 survivors from a battalion of 800. After the war he studied at the Royal College of Music with Vaughan Williams, Stanford, Parry, and Boult, and from 1924 until his retirement in 1966 served on the faculty. His students at RCM included Malcolm Arnold, Imogen Holst, and Joseph Horowitz, among others. Jacob was the author of several books, edited the Penguin scores for a time, and composed over 700 pieces of music. Dedicated to a conservative musical language – he famously wrote: “the day that melody is discarded altogether, you may as well pack up music...” – he was the perfect choice to provide music for large public events such as the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953.

The Sextet for Wind and Piano was composed in 1956 for the great horn player Dennis Brain and his wind quintet, in memory of Dennis’ father Aubrey, also a famous horn player, who had passed away the previous year. Four of the five movements are based on the notes ABEBA, for Aubrey Brain. Shortly after the first performance, Dennis himself died tragically in a car crash, and Jacob rededicated the work to both father and son.

**Sergei Rachmaninoff** (1873-1943) was born at his family’s estate in the Novgorod region of Russia. They had been wealthy, but the fortune was squandered by his father; when he was nine years old they moved to St. Petersburg where he enrolled at the Conservatory on a scholarship. His sister’s death and parents’ separation led him to fail all of his subjects in 1885, and he was sent to Moscow to study with Nikolay Zverev, a disciplinarian who channeled Rachmaninoff’s physical gifts into a spectacular piano technique. He completed his education at the Moscow Conservatory, graduating a year early with a gold medal for his one-act opera *Aleko*, and soon afterward composed the Prelude in c# minor, which launched his fame as a composer but would

become a thorn in his side, requested at nearly every performance he gave for the rest of his life.

Following the critical failure of his First Symphony in 1897 – which may very well have been mostly due to the terrible conducting of Glazunov, who was likely drunk at the premiere – Rachmaninoff went into a deep depression aggravated by an unhappy love affair. Finding himself unable to muster the creative confidence to compose, he sought out the help of a psychiatrist named Nikolai Dahl, a cultured man whose conversations about art and music may have been just as helpful as the hypnosis techniques he used in therapy. In any case, Dahl was the dedicatee of the second piano concerto, which was an international success and cemented Rachmaninoff's enduring fame.

In the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century, Rachmaninoff was pursuing three careers simultaneously. Not only was he gaining fame as a composer exemplifying Russian Romanticism and a piano virtuoso with equal parts stunning technique and emotional depth, he was also an orchestral and opera conductor of remarkable insight and clarity, working regularly at the Bolshoi Theater. His international engagements included nearly as much conducting of his own orchestral works as performing at the piano, and he even declined an offer to become music director of the Boston Symphony.

The Revolution in 1917 prompted him to take his family with him on a concert engagement to Stockholm and never return. Once again faced with the loss of all his property in Russia, Rachmaninoff made the calculated decision to prioritize piano performance, which was a much more reliable generator of income than composing or conducting. He lived in New York until the early 1930s when he built an estate in Switzerland. By 1939 the threat of war was once again too much, and he brought his family back to the United States, living in Beverly Hills until his death in 1943.

The second *Trio élégiaque* was composed as a tribute to Tchaikovsky when Rachmaninoff was just twenty years old, on the heels of his earliest successes. An important mentor who had expressed interest in conducting his orchestral tone Poem *The Rock*, Tchaikovsky had died suddenly just days after the premiere of his Sixth Symphony – which Rachmaninoff had had to miss because he was conducting *Aleko*. Shocked and filled with grief, Rachmaninoff modeled the work on Tchaikovsky's own piano trio, which was itself written in tribute to Nikolai Rubinstein. The three-movement structure follows the same pattern, with material from the first movement returning in the finale and a set of variations on a theme from *The Rock* forming the middle movement.

- Gabriel Rice

Bray biography provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice  
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