



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2024-2025 chamber music season chamber series 2: Origin Stories

Saturday, November 23, 2024, 7:30 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, November 24, 2024, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Ludwig van Beethoven, Piano Quartet No. 3 in C Major, WoO 36

Leonard Bernstein, Sonata for clarinet & piano

Chinary Ung, *Child Song* for flute, violin, cello & piano

George Enescu, Octet in C Major, Op. 7 (1900)

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) became more famous to the general public than any classical musician can reasonably expect. His rich legacy to the music world was of a scope and variety that could only have been accomplished by an American, due in no small part to the seemingly effortless way he embraced both the most highbrow music of the concert hall and popular music. Bernstein was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts to Russian Jewish immigrants. He came from a line of rabbis, and his father continued to study the Talmud even while operating a successful business. While attending Harvard he met Aaron Copland for the first time, beginning a long and fruitful friendship. He then went to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he studied piano, conducting and orchestration.

Bernstein made a dramatic public entrance to the music world in November of 1943 when, as a young assistant conductor at the New York Philharmonic, he replaced Bruno Walter at the last minute for a nationally broadcast concert. In the following year he had three outstanding successes that cemented his reputation as a world-class musician: his Symphony No. 1 “Jeremiah” won the New York Music Critics’ Circle award as the best American work of the year; *Fancy Free*, a ballet choreographed by Jerome Robbins, debuted at the Metropolitan Opera House; and *On the Town* opened on Broadway. The long career that followed included successes on every front. He composed many concert pieces, theater works (including of course *West Side Story*), and the score to the movie *On the Waterfront*. As music director of the New York Philharmonic from 1958 to 1969, he programmed the famous Young People’s Concerts for television, brought the works of Mahler to a regular place in the American concert hall, and introduced enlightening thematic programming, bringing the Philharmonic into the heart of

contemporary New York culture. Bernstein taught generations of young conductors at Tanglewood and was instrumental in the formation of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Institute, the Pacific Music Festival in Japan, and the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival in Germany. He won nearly every award possible for an American musician and remained active as a conductor and educator to the very end of his life.

The Sonata for Clarinet and Piano was composed in 1941-1942, immediately following a summer of conducting study with Koussevitsky at Tanglewood. It was the 23-year-old composer's first published piece, and was written not for any particular commission or request, but simply out of a fascination for the clarinet. Later, he would befriend Woody Herman and write the more well-known *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* for clarinet and jazz band. Bernstein always expressed a particular affection for the Clarinet Sonata, despite what he calls "a certain student element in the music." He was probably referring to the Hindemith-like neo-classicism of the first movement, which would not prove to be part of his mature style. The piece does, however, contain some boogie-woogie piano, syncopated rhythms and a section of Latin feel, all foreshadowing the wonderful music he would write for the musical theater.

As the world grows smaller, it is less and less uncommon to find composers from non-Western cultures making their mark in Western music; skillfully blending the musical ideas of their heritage into the forms of Western music. **Chinary Ung** (born 1942) is a perfect representative of this trend.

In the composer's own words: *"I believe that imagination, expressivity, and emotion evoke a sense of Eastern romanticism in my music that parallels some of the music-making in numerous lands of Asia. Above all, in metaphor, if the Asian aesthetic is represented by the color yellow and the Western aesthetic is represented by the color blue, then my music is a mixture – or the color green...Composing for me is truly a spiritual path."*

Ung was born in Cambodia, and his earliest musical experiences were in its musical tradition. He later studied at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, where the only instrument available to him was the E-flat clarinet (an odd instrument to study by any standard). In 1964 he came to the United States and continued his clarinet studies at the Manhattan School of Music. He soon discovered an interest and talent in composition and continued at Columbia, where he received his PhD in 1974. His teachers have included Chou Wen-Chung and George Crumb. His career has followed the normal track of university teaching: the University of Pennsylvania, Arizona State University, and finally the University of California at San Diego, where he is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Music.

Ung's activities as a cultural leader demonstrate a profound sense of responsibility to a broader cultural and societal context. He has worked with numerous institutions and individuals who share his dedication toward preserving Cambodian culture and forging cultural exchanges between Asia and the West, such as The Asian Cultural Council. He was President of the Khmer Studies Institute in the U.S.A. between 1980-1985, and was an advisor for the Killing Fields Memorial and Cambodian Heritage Museum of Chicago and a member of the Cambodian-Thai cultural committee.

Ung's music is a remarkable blend of two cultures. He uses Western instruments, but his melodic materials are often based on Asian pentatonic scales, and he often calls for pitch bending and microtones that further resemble the music of the East. In works such as his *Spirals*, the heterophonic textures also are reminiscent of the music of Southeast Asia. His synthesis is, in part, a result of a personal and cultural crisis. As a reaction to the horror of the Khmer Rouge genocide, in which much of his family perished, he devoted the period of 1975 to 1985 to the study and performance of Cambodian music and aesthetics.

During this time Ung stopped composing entirely (except for one piece: *Khse Buon* for solo cello or viola, written in 1980 for cellist Mark Johnson of the Vermeer Quartet). He was by no means in hibernation, however, undertaking an in-depth study of the music of his homeland and other parts of Asia, preserving, cataloging, and commercially releasing recordings, and learning to play the *roneat-ek*, a xylophone-like instrument featured in the traditional Cambodian *pinpeat* ensemble. Along with other refugees in the United States, he formed and toured with a *pinpeat* group, even performing in the Reagan White House as part of a program of political advocacy for the plight of the Cambodian people. Of even more personal significance were his activities, along with his mother, to find out what had happened to his family in Cambodia and get as many of them out as possible. To that end, he even went so far as to hire mercenaries to extricate over 30 of his relatives and transport them to the U.S. and Australia.

Child Song was composed in 1985, the first piece after his self-imposed hiatus. It represents a remarkable return, an ambitious and deeply personal synthesis of the techniques and aesthetics of contemporary Western music he had learned in New York with the music he had first heard and loved as a child, and then spent the previous decade studying deeply with the sophistication of a highly educated composer. It was premiered – in its first version for alto flute, viola, cello, and harp – by members of the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia, including his wife Susan on viola, who happened to be pregnant with their first child at the time, another point of remarkable personal resonance. We will hear the second version for flute, viola, cello, and piano, which was commissioned by the Chicago Ensemble.

The music itself is just as remarkable as the story of its creation. Ung draws from not just the music of Cambodia but also other Asian countries, and his collage effects and flexible sense of time perfectly evoke the layered, fractured nature of childhood memories coming in and out of focus, as well as his own personal sadness of what has been lost in his homeland, never to be recovered. The one recognizable Cambodian tune is a popular children's clapping song, analogous to "pat-a-cake":

Pour the coconut juice
the rooster's tail
wears the crocodile coat
the crocodile rides the horse
and, I ride the elephant
- translation by Chinary and Susan Ung

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was the son and grandson of professional musicians, both employed in Bonn, Germany at the court of the Electorate of Cologne. Surprisingly few details of his early years are known, but he displayed enough talent performing on both the violin and piano that he was compared to the young Mozart by a visiting teacher. He visited Vienna in 1786 and probably met and had one or more lessons with Mozart, but only stayed for two weeks due to the fatal illness of his mother. In 1789 Beethoven effectively took over the care of his family, petitioning the court for half of his alcoholic father's salary. In 1790 he met Haydn, and with the help of the Electorate of Cologne moved to Vienna to study with him beginning in November 1792. The relationship, though cordial, was not entirely happy, and – likely to Beethoven's relief – Haydn left in early 1794 to London for one of his extended stays. Beethoven now sought instruction from Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, a master of contrapuntal techniques, and also studied for a time with Antonio Salieri, particularly regarding setting Italian texts to music. By 1796, he had established a renowned career as Vienna's leading virtuoso pianist and was beginning to travel on concert tours, playing his own music and that of others, and often improvising to great acclaim.

But all would not continue happily; as early as 1801 he began to share the information of his increasing deafness, and he suffered to the point of despair with the condition for the rest of his life. Beethoven's individualistic, headstrong, often rebellious nature was only heightened by the social isolation of deafness, and his personal relationships were never smooth. Family troubles continued as well, and in 1813 he became guardian of his nephew Karl despite protracted legal battles with the boy's mother. The relationship with Karl was perpetually marked by drama, taking enormous amounts of time and energy. In 1814, at the height of his fame, Beethoven gave his last public performance as a pianist; he could no longer function as a performer, and his loneliness and isolation only increased. As his personal struggles intensified, however, his music only reached deeper and deeper into his own soul and plumbed further the extreme, sometimes violent, sometimes almost divine emotions of the individual human life. His great achievement as a composer can be summed up as the appropriation of the classical forms of Haydn and Mozart's generation for the new age of Romanticism, showing the world how the expression of the intensely personal can become the expression of the universal.

Beethoven composed just three piano quartets, all in 1785 in his fifteenth year and all published posthumously. It is often assumed that the teenaged Beethoven modeled these earliest works on the piano quartets of Mozart, but the facts do not support that assumption, and in fact the opposite could easily be the case. Let's look at the context: the piano quartet was not yet an established chamber ensemble at this time, and he likely chose it to avoid the inevitable scrutiny of string quartets or piano trios, ensembles that had been pioneered by Haydn and expanded on by Mozart. If in fact he met Mozart during his 1786 Vienna visit, and if he showed him any compositions, they would certainly have included the set of three piano quartets. Mozart's own piano quartets were composed later that year. So there you have it...Beethoven inspired Mozart in the new piano quartet genre, not the other way around!

Maybe.

In any event, these piano quartets – and the C Major quartet we will hear today was conceived by him as the first of the set but called the third in the posthumous publication – represent an

auspicious beginning for the composer who would later define Romanticism in music. They certainly show the influence of Mozart, particularly his violin sonatas published in 1781, and they are clearly the work of a young composer. But they just as clearly show his melodic gift, and though he did not publish them, instead choosing a set of piano trios as his Opus 1, he also did not discard them. Themes and other ideas show up in his Opus 2 Piano Sonatas, for example. This optimistic, even breezy piece of chamber music is the first indication we have of the giant Beethoven was to become.

Georges Enescu (1881-1955) was the most prominent Romanian musician of the early 20th century and one of the most famous violinists of his generation. As a prodigiously talented boy he was sent to Vienna to study violin, piano and composition at the *Konservatorium der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*. He continued his studies at the Paris Conservatory, where his classmates included Ravel and Koechlin. Upon graduating in 1899 he began his professional career, establishing a pattern of splitting time between home bases in Paris and Romania. Enescu was one of the most highly regarded violinists and pianists among the musical elite who made their homes in Paris, appearing throughout Europe as a soloist and playing chamber music with Cortot, Thibaud, Casals, Fournier, and Casella. He spent summers composing in Romania, but also took a leadership role in his home country's musical culture, founding a prize for Romanian composers in 1912, a symphony orchestra in 1917, and an opera company in 1921.

As a violinist, Enescu was famous for a warm, singing tone, and in all performing capacities he eschewed any kind of showmanship in order to communicate a special kind of reverence for the music. At times he reluctantly took on students, including the young Yehudi Menuhin, but always tried to make composition a high priority. In part due to ever-increasing requests to perform and conduct in both Europe and the United States and in part because he was a perfectionist, Enescu's compositional output was rather small – only 33 opus numbers – but tremendously varied in both instrumentation and compositional style. Ill and living in exile after the Communist takeover of Romania following World War II, Enescu suffered a severe stroke in 1954, completing a final work, his Chamber Symphony, before passing away in 1955.

Enescu's Octet for strings was completed in 1900 after a year and a half of intense labor by the just nineteen-year-old composer to create a ground-breaking, thoroughly original, large-scale work, requiring immense virtuosity from every player. Recounting just how difficult it was to achieve the hugely ambitious task he had undertaken, he said, "No engineer putting his first suspension bridge across a river can have agonized more than I did as I gradually filled my manuscript paper with notes." The first scheduled performance was cancelled after five rehearsals because the conductor felt it was too risky. One of Enescu's mentors, André Gedalge, assisted in getting it published in 1905, earning the dedication, and it was not actually performed until 1909 in Paris.

Enescu describes it in his preface as follows:

This Octet, cyclic in form, presents the following characteristics: it is divided into four distinct movements in the classic manner, each movement linked to the other to form a single symphonic movement, where the periods, on an enlarged scale, follow one another

according to the rules of construction for the first movement of a symphony. Regarding its performance, it is to be noted that too much emphasis should not be given to certain contrapuntal artifices in order to permit the presentation of essential thematic and melodic elemental values.

Of course it is impossible not to compare it to Mendelssohn's Octet, composed 75 years prior also by a teenage wunderkind, but it also bears comparison to Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* for string sextet, composed just a year earlier. In actuality, the spirit of Enescu's Octet lies somewhere in between; while the richly Romantic harmonic language sounds more like early Schoenberg than the traditionalist Mendelssohn, the organizing principles are more Classical than Schoenberg's narrative-based construction. The result is extraordinary, a piece not often performed in large part because of its enormous difficulty, but worth every bit of that effort.

- Gabriel Rice

Ung biography provided by the composer and Adam Greene, edited by Gabriel Rice

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