



2012 SUMMER SOLSTICE FESTIVAL

L'ESPRIT FRANÇAIS

FRIDAY, JUNE 22, 2012

8 PM

CONVOCAATION HALL, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

PROGRAM NOTES

BY DAVID BERG

A pre-concert talk by Sandra Joy Friesen begins at 7:15 PM

French composer Claude Debussy wrote: "music must humbly look to give pleasure; extreme complication is contrary to art." Sensuality, tenderness and an aversion to "extreme complication" describe the aesthetic embodied in all the works on tonight's program. From the *melodies* of Fauré through Debussy and Messiaen, these composers produced expressive music of exquisite lucidity and sophistication, unencumbered by the complexities and dense textures exhibited in the music of Brahms, Wagner and other Germanic composers. French composers in the 19th and 20th centuries reacted against the overwhelming influence of German music, establishing institutions to promote and cultivate the music of French composers. We shall also see how some of this reaction has its roots in response to German military aggression.

The songs of **Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924) provide a link between German romanticism and the music of Ravel and Debussy. This student of Saint-Saëns and teacher of Ravel is celebrated as the master of the French art song, composing over 100 between 1861 and 1921. Ravel remarked that Fauré rescued French music from the overwhelming dominance of the German Lied. Sometime in the 1870s, Fauré composed *Après un rêve*. The text describes the yearning of a lover for the return of an ecstatic dream of his/her beloved. This evening, we hear a transcription of the song by the cellist, Pablo Casals. Fauré's subtle and supple melody conveys serenity one moment and anguish the next, all with a reserved lyricism. Originally planned for a cello sonata that never materialized, Fauré's **Élégie pour violoncelle et piano** (1880) is a short work of romantic intensity conveyed by a transparent, almost limpid, musical material. The opening lament in the cello is a glorious example of Fauré's melodic style – at once highly expressive, yet "appearing" quite simple. The piano steps forward in the middle section with an optimistic theme, eventually taken up by the cello. The work culminates in an outburst of the grief-stricken theme, followed by an erratic cadenza, returning to the opening theme with a brief reminiscence of the middle theme.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) is the best-known French classical composer. His work has universal appeal. His style (especially his harmonic style) left an indelible impression on such composers as Stravinsky, Bartok, Messiaen, and others including the 20th century's jazz giants, such as Duke Ellington, George Gershwin, Thelonius Monk and Bill Evans.

Debussy commenced formal composition studies in 1880, winning the prestigious Prix de Rome four years later. These early years were enriched by an attraction to and eventually rejection of the music of Wagner. Debussy also benefited from exposure to the multicultural Paris Exhibitions and long-lasting friendships with some of the greatest musical and literary artists of the time.

Debussy came to loathe classical development. His independent genius was acknowledged by Virgil Thompson when he wrote, "Claude Debussy was the least weighed upon by the dead hand of formula."

Debussy's two books of *Préludes* were composed between late 1909 and 1913. Book II was composed between late 1912 and April of 1913. The "names" of the preludes are inscribed at the end of each. This gesture indicates that the piano composition is of the utmost importance, not some object it is describing. Debussy detested the phrase "impressionism," although by adding these post-prelude quotations, he seems to be reaching for some affinity between music and the descriptions. There is also a sense that he is preventing the application of phony titles to his preludes, as people did to Chopin's preludes (e.g., "Rain Drop" and "Winter Wind").

We first hear **Prélude V. (. . . *Bruyères*)**, an affable pastorale reminiscent of a British or Breton folk melody. The title means "heather" or "the heath," evoking a pleasant country landscape. The pentatonic opening melody and the plagal cadences soften this work's edges into a warm and gentle walking tune. **Prélude VI (. . . "*Général Lavine*" – *excentric*)** is a charming nod to the performances of music hall artist "General" Ed La Vine, an American clown and acrobat who appeared at the Folies-Mariguy in 1910 and 1912. The music wonderfully evokes the trumpet call and fanfares of this comically militaristic clown and juggler. Apart from strident "military" fanfares (one of which recalls "Camptown Races"), the work includes various music hall clichés, especially the cakewalk. Debussy, of course, was quite familiar with the cakewalk style imported from the US and UK (e.g., *Minstrels*, *Golliwog's Cakewalk*).

Concluding the second book, **Prélude XII (. . . *Feux d'artifice*)**, is a virtuoso tour-de-force calling upon Lisztian piano technique. "Fireworks" is an essay in contrast, pitting gentle murmurs and delicate staccato sparks against wild glissandi and thunderous explosions. At the conclusion of the work, a distant strain of the French national anthem, "La Marseillaise" emerges, as if heard in the distance during a Bastille Day celebration. Perhaps with La Marseillaise, Debussy is signing the work (as he would during the years of World War I), "*Claude Debussy, musicien français.*"

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was born during the flourishing of the Romantic Movement and died well after the modern movement was underway. Known best today for *Danse macabre* and the *Carnival of the Animals* (a work he wrote for friends and suppressed so as not to damage his reputation as a serious musician), Saint-Saëns was an extremely precocious talent and a brilliant mind with interests ranging from astronomy to geology and language. It is said that he memorized all of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas before he was in his teens. At the age of ten, he gave a concert including Beethoven's 3rd Piano Concerto, Mozart's B flat concerto and other major works. After completing his studies, he had won the admiration of such composers as Liszt, Rossini, and Berlioz. Although he championed the revolutionary music of Schumann and Wagner, he was a conservative composer. His music is idiomatic and technically brilliant. His contemporary, the Nobel prize-winning author Romain Rolland, wrote: "He brings into the midst of our modern restlessness something of the sweetness and clarity of past periods, something that seems like fragments of a vanished world."

The dominance of German romanticism led Saint-Saëns and a colleague to establish the Société Nationale de Musique in 1871. The Société was established during the Franco-Prussian War, just a few days before the Prussian army marched down the Champs-Élysées. It was through the Société that he supported the cause of the music of French composers of his time, as well as earlier. The Société motto: *ars gallica!*

Composed in 1872, **Saint-Saëns' Sonata in C minor for cello and piano** is among his finest works. Overcast by the composer's grief over the death of a relative who cared for him in his infancy, the cello sonata retains the influences of German romanticism. The Allegro's passionate main theme and subsequent material is presented in straightforward classical form. The flowing middle movement is a paragon of Apollonian elegance and restraint. The technical brilliance of the tempestuous finale reminds us of Saint-Saëns' dictum, that "virtuosity gives a composer wings with which to soar above the commonplace and the platitudinous."

It was early 1917-- the Great War was raging. Dogged by financial problems as well as the cancer that was to take his life, **Claude Debussy** was putting the finishing touches to his **Sonata for Violin and Piano**, the third of his projected *Six sonates pour instruments divers, par Claude Debussy, musicien français*. Debussy did not live to complete the remaining three works. The Sonata for Violin is a deeply touching work, blending tenderness and melancholia, playful moments, exuberance and joy. Ideas are presented and developed according to Debussy's singular style. Throughout the sonata, there is a resistance to closure, with fleeting phrases suddenly shifting in

mood, from rage, to nostalgia, to sweetness. The interplay of the instruments is also unique, as the piano is much more a partner than accompanist.

The first movement, ***Allegro vivo***, begins with poignant chords in the piano, while the violin intones an ambiguous plaintive melody, *dolce espressivo*. The mood is fleeting, as the music swiftly transitions into a grand but brief climax. A hesitant muted section (*sur la touché*) takes us inward. Following a passage of arpeggios beneath the gleam of violin harmonic, the main theme returns in the piano. After further reconsideration of the opening theme, a coda erupts, recasting a formerly subdued but insistent motive into a grand arabesque gesture, whereupon the composer brings the work to a flamboyant but sudden close.

The ***Intermède***, marked “*Fantasque et léger*,” is an uplifting and spirited interaction between the soloists. This movement is often compared with a similar movement in the Cello Sonata, which originally referred to Pierrot, the sad, love-drunk clown. The form of this movement is somewhat like a modified rondo, with the material moving from playful and mischievous to tender little ariosos. A distant and tremulous piano, acting as a bridge from the *Intermède*, opens the ***Très animé Finale***. Although it has shades of a rounded form, Debussy characterized the *Finale* as a work that “goes through the most curious deformations ending up with the simple game of an idea which turns on itself like a snake swallowing its tail.” After a restatement of the work’s opening theme, we are led to a joyful violin theme in G major. The music turns toward a slow, profound passage. Reawakening, we return to the joyful theme, which morphs into staccato violin over a simple motive in the piano. Debussy refines this idea, which gradually propels the sonata to its conclusion.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was inspired by the example of Debussy. He entered the Paris Conservatoire at age 11, publishing his first compositions while still a student. Messiaen became famous for his sophisticated use of rhythmic and tonal modes, as well as his use of bird song and his mystical brand of Catholicism. The ***Thème et variations*** (1932) for violin and piano, is an early work composed as a wedding gift to his violinist wife. While it does not bear any of the exotic rhythms or birdcalls found in his later work, the harmonic texture is luminous. The tender twenty-eight bar theme (solely the provenance of the violin) is followed by a similarly direct variation, *Modéré*, though the theme is launched in the piano, with a dialogue emerging. *Un peu moins modéré* introduces a contrapuntal play based on the theme. In the *Modéré, avec éclat*, Messiaen creates a shimmering yet off-balance variation. The fourth, *Vif et passioné*, is a light and swift variation, gathering in rhythmic moment until arriving at the grand finale, *Très lent*, a majestic revelation, which gradually subsides into quiet solemnity.

The music of **Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937) is known throughout the world. He is most admired for his transcendent mastery of orchestration. Ravel was inspired by and had great admiration for his senior, Debussy, as well. Both adored the music of the Russian masters and were exasperated with some German composers. The feelings of admiration were mutual until the media gradually drove a wedge between the two composers. The two differed philosophically as well, with Ravel less inclined toward the symbolism favored by Debussy.

Ravel’s skill as an orchestrator is evident in his chamber works, such as the ***Introduction et allegro*** (1905). The inception of the piece owes itself to a commission from Maison Érard, the renowned maker of pianos and harps. The company was scheduled to release its newest pedal harp and commissioned Ravel to compose a work for the launch. *Introduction et allegro* was written in the space of a week “of frantic work and 3 sleepless nights.” This brief chamber work fully exploits the qualities of the instrument groups (winds, strings, harp). The brief *Introduction* begins with a cryptic incantation by the woodwinds, answered by the strings and augmented by the harp. The *Allegro* is guided by sonata form, with the harp initiating the theme. The sunny allegro continues until the winds introduce a new theme. The strings recount the introduction theme, juxtaposed with the allegro theme in the harp. This gradually builds to a broad climax, interrupted by an extensive harp cadenza, recounting the main theme. The rest of the ensemble joins in for a rapturous conclusion.