

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2017-2018 Mellon Grand Classics Season

January 12 and 14, 2018

JUANJO MENA, CONDUCTOR
LORNA MCGHEE, FLUTE

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Printemps

- I. Très modéré
- II. Modéré

JACQUES IBERT

Concerto for Flute and Orchestra

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante
- III. Allegro scherzando

Ms. McGhee

Intermission

MAURICE RAVEL

Valses nobles et sentimentales

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Suite from *The Firebird* (1919 Version)

- I. Introduction — The Dance of the Firebird
- II. Dance of the Princesses
- III. Infernal Dance of the King Kastchei
- IV. Berceuse —
- V. Finale

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Printemps ("Spring"), Suite Symphonique (1887)
Orchestrated (1913) by Henri-Paul Büsser

Claude Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, on August 2, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918. He composed *Printemps* as a condition for winning the *Prix de Rome* in 1887, originally for female chorus and orchestra and later for mixed chorus and piano four-hands. The version performed this weekend was re-orchestrated by Henri-Paul Büsser in 1913, and was premiered in Paris at the Société National de Musique with conductor Rhené-Baton on April 14, 1913. These performances mark the PSO premiere of the work. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion, harp, piano four hands and strings.

Performance time: approximately 15 minutes

In 1884, Debussy was in love. Nothing wholesome and proper for such a Bohemian as young Claude-Achille, however, but rather a passionate affair with one Mme. Vasnier, an older married woman and a singer whom Debussy had accompanied at the piano. Both she and her husband were his closest friends at the time (shades of the Wesendonck–Wagner triangle), and he haunted their home for five years. He flattered Mme. Vasnier by dedicating to her some of his most beautiful early songs and much of his attention.

Cosseted in such loving company, it is understandable that Debussy accepted the *Prix de Rome* in June 1884 with some trepidation. The venerable *Prix*, sponsored by the French Académie, was the most distinguished annual honor given to young French artists, and Debussy had twice unsuccessfully tried to win it. For his third attempt, he submitted the cantata *L'Enfant prodigue*, and was awarded first prize. Beside recognition, however, the *Prix* carried with it the requirement of a three-year residency at the Villa Medici in the Eternal City. This obligation he looked at askance since it meant leaving the Vasniers and the vibrant artistic climate of Paris. Refusal was unthinkable, however, so off he went to Rome. He hated it. He was "crushed and annihilated" by the city; called the Villa Medici "a prison" and its director, the painter Ernest Hébert, "a jailer."

Debussy worked as best he could to fulfill the requirement of submitting a composition each year to the French Académie. The second of these, *Printemps* of 1887, was inspired by Botticelli's luminous painting. Of this music Debussy wrote, "The idea I had was to compose a work of a particular color that would cover a wide range of feeling. It will be called *Printemps*, not a descriptive Spring but in human terms. I should like to convey the slow and miserable birth of beings and things in nature, their gradual blossoming out, and finally the joy of being born anew. All this is to be done without a 'program,' because I detest all music which follows some literary text one happens to have got hold of." The original orchestral score (which included wordless parts for chorus) was lost in a fire at the bookbinder's shop where it had been sent, so the work was submitted to the members of the Académie in a piano duet score. They judged it "confused," "bizarre" and "incoherent," and refused to allow its performance under their auspices. Debussy put the score in his trunk. In 1913 the conductor and composer Henri-Paul Büsser (who died in 1973 at the age of 101) orchestrated *Printemps*, following the composer's indications. It was first heard on April 14, 1913 in Paris, a quarter-century after it was written.

Except for some juvenilia, *Printemps* is Debussy's earliest orchestral composition. Though he was heavily under the sway of Wagner at the time it was written (he spent weeks studying *Tristan* to relieve the oppression of living in Rome), the music is as indebted to Chabrier, Delibes and d'Indy as to the German master. But it also shows much individuality — Debussy's characteristic style was formed, if not polished, in his first works. Despite a certain rambling prolixity, *Printemps* shows his characteristic thematic integration (the opening solo flute theme returns throughout both sections of the work), pliant melodic construction and luscious harmonic palette. Neither of the sections follows a traditional formal model. ("Music, by its very nature," he wrote to Jacques Durand in 1907, "is something that cannot be poured into a tight and traditional form. It is made up of colors and rhythms.") *Printemps* is best heard as an evocation of moods; as "impressions of the winds, the sky, the sea!" as Debussy once said of his

music in general. Though lacking the subtlety and wondrous craftsmanship of his later orchestral compositions, it is still a piece well worth hearing. The magic air of genius inherent in *Printemps* escaped the tradition-laden judges of the French Académie in 1887, but it is joyously clear today.

JACQUES IBERT

Concerto for Flute and Orchestra (1933)

Jacques Ibert was born in Paris on August 15, 1890, and died there on February 5, 1962. He composed his Concerto for Flute and Orchestra in 1933, and was premiered by the Orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire with conductor Philippe Gaubert and soloist Marcel Moyse on April 14, 1913. The Pittsburgh Symphony premiered the work at Syria Mosque with conductor William Steinberg and soloist Bernard Goldberg on March 21, 1958. This work, like so many other concerted pieces by French composers of the 20th century, was intended for the competitions for solo instruments held each year at the Conservatoire, and is, indeed, a challenging test of technique and musicianship for the performer. The score calls for woodwinds and horns in pairs, trumpet, timpani and strings.

Performance time: approximately 19 minutes

Jacques Ibert was the son of a Parisian businessman and it was his father's intention that the boy follow in the paternal footsteps when it came time to choose a career. Jacques had other ideas, however, and he studied music in secret so as not to incur Papa's displeasure. Curiously, Ibert chose to be admitted to the Paris Conservatoire not as a musician but as an actor, another of his ambitions since childhood, though he studied music along with histrionics. His musical instincts soon won out, however, and he decided that composition offered the more fruitful future course. He studied with Fauré and became friends with his classmates Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud. Ibert interrupted his studies during the First World War to serve with the French Navy, eventually becoming an officer in the Naval Reserve. He continued his education after the war at the Paris Conservatoire with Paul Vidal, and in 1919 won the *Prix de Rome*. It was during his residency in Rome that he produced the work which brought him his first recognition, the *Ballade of Reading Gaol*, based on the poem by Oscar Wilde. From 1937 to 1955, Ibert served as director of the Academy of Rome, then left Italy to become head of the united management of the Paris Opéra and Opéra Comique, a post he held for two years. His only visit to the United States was during the summer of 1950 to conduct master classes at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood.

Ibert wrote his Flute Concerto in 1934 for the distinguished French virtuoso Marcel Moyse (1889-1984), professor at the Paris Conservatoire and principal flute of the Opéra Comique. This work, like so many other concerted pieces by French composers of the 20th century, was intended for the competitions for solo instruments held each year at the Conservatoire, and is, indeed, a challenging test of technique and musicianship for the performer. The first movement is a dazzling showpiece, employing a dancing main theme filled with leaps and scales and a contrasting, legato subsidiary melody. The tender *Andante* is a subdued, wistful, long-limbed song. The finale returns the virtuosity of the opening movement, and even surpasses it in its demands on the soloist.

MAURICE RAVEL

Valses nobles et sentimentales (composed for piano in 1911, orchestrated in 1912)

Maurice Ravel was born in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France on March 7, 1875, and died in Paris on December 28, 1937. He composed *Valses nobles et sentimentales* for piano in 1911, and orchestrated it in 1912. The orchestration performed today was premiered at the Châtelet Theater conducted by Maurice Ravel on April 22, 1912, and was premiered by the Pittsburgh Symphony and William Steinberg at Syria Mosque on April 28, 1967. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes,

clarinets and bassoons, English horn, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta and strings.

Performance time: approximately 18 minutes

Labels make life easier. There is a certain comfort in walking up to a painting on a museum wall and finding an unambiguous attribution to “Rembrandt” or “Picasso” or whomever. The label is easily evaluated without having to worry much about the actual work, thereby saving a great amount of intellectual effort. So it is with a book — or a piece of music. There was a concert given in Paris in 1911, however, that did not offer its audience the luxury of labels. It was sponsored by the *Société Musicale Indépendante*, an organization similar to others that sprang up in the world’s important music centers during the first decades of the 20th century to promote the works of the more adventurous composers. This particular concert was the Society’s way of encouraging the listeners (especially the critics) to evaluate what they actually heard rather than simply judging the “label,” i.e., the name of the composer. All of the music performed, never before heard, was given anonymously and the listeners were asked to guess the creators. The *Valses nobles et sentimentales* was included on the concert.

Though Ravel had achieved an estimable reputation by 1911 and had many friends in the audience, these factors did not prevent his anonymous work from creating a stir and even summoning forth a disturbing chorus of boos and catcalls. Many were unnerved by the acerbic harmonic palette he employed. Some even thought the piece was a joke. When the votes were tallied, the nominated composers included Satie, Koechlin, d’Indy and even Kodály, but “a minute majority,” Ravel recalled, “ascribed the paternity of the *Valses* to me.” Incidentally, the critics in attendance at whom this entire escapade was aimed, declined, in a burst of face-saving common sense, to vote.

There would be little difficulty today in crediting the provenance of the *Valses* to Ravel, especially in its diaphanous orchestral garb. However, the first-night audience heard the work in its original version for solo piano, whose sonority more clearly delineates the acidic tang of the chord structures. The spacing and coloring of Ravel’s masterful transcription tend to soften the language of “steely counterpoint and chords of flint,” to use the phrase of the composer’s friend and biographer, Roland-Manuel. The orchestral transcription was created in 1912, the year of *Daphnis et Chloé*, as music for the ballet *Adélaïde, or The Language of the Flowers*, for which Ravel also provided a scenario based on a woman’s expression of her moods through the medium of flowers.

Of the background of the work, Ravel wrote, “The title, *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, shows clearly enough my intention to compose a chain of waltzes in the style of Schubert. In place of the virtuosity which characterized *Gaspard de la Nuit*, there was a style cleaner, clearer, which emphasized the harmonies and brought them to life.” The works for piano by Schubert that influenced Ravel were the *Valses nobles*, Op. 77 and the *Valses sentimentales*, Op. 50. The musical style, however, is French rather than Viennese, with the spirit of Satie hovering above much of Ravel’s music. The title page even bears a cryptic, Satie-esque inscription that Ravel drew from the writings of Henri de Régnier: “The delicious pleasure, always new, of a useless occupation.”

This work of highly refined sensibility and sophistication comprises seven continuous miniature waltzes followed by an epilogue which provide a variety of contrasting moods, keys and tempos encompassing more emotional states than the title indicates. The hushed epilogue recalls disembodied wisps from most of the preceding waltzes.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Suite from *The Firebird* (composed in 1909-1910, suite arranged in 1919)

Igor Stravinsky was born in Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg on June 17, 1882, and died in New York City on April 6, 1971. He composed his ballet *The Firebird* in 1909-1910, and arranged the suite heard today in 1919. The ballet was premiered at the Paris Opéra under Gabriel Pierné on June 25, 1910, and was premiered by the Pittsburgh Symphony at Syria Mosque under Antonio Modarelli on March 29, 1935. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celesta and strings. Performance time: approximately 19 minutes

Fireworks. There could not have been a more appropriate title for the work that launched the meteoric career of Igor Stravinsky. He wrote that glittering orchestral miniature in 1908, while still under

the tutelage of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and it shows all the dazzling instrumental technique that the student had acquired from his teacher. Though the reception of *Fireworks* was cool when it was first performed at the Siloti Concerts in St. Petersburg on February 6, 1909, there was one member of the audience who listened with heightened interest. Serge Diaghilev was forming his Ballet Russe company at just that time, and he recognized in Stravinsky a talent to be watched. He approached the 27-year-old composer and requested orchestral transcriptions of short pieces by Chopin and Grieg that would be used in the first Parisian season of the Ballet Russe. Stravinsky did his work well and on time.

During that same winter, plans were beginning to stir in the creative wing of the Ballet Russe for a Russian folk ballet — something filled with legend and magic and fantasy. The composer Nikolai Tcherepnin was associated with the Ballet Russe at that time, and it was assumed that he would compose the music for a plot derived from several traditional Russian sources. However, Tcherepnin was given to inexplicable changes of mood and he was losing interest in ballet at the time, so he withdrew from the project. Diaghilev inquired whether Stravinsky had any interest in taking it over, and he agreed. The triumphant premiere of *The Firebird in Paris* on June 25, 1910, rocketed Stravinsky to international fame.

The story deals with the glittering Firebird and the evil ogre Kastchei, who captures maidens and turns men to stone if they enter his domain. Kastchei is immortal as long as his soul, which is preserved in the form of an egg in a casket, remains intact. The plot shows how Prince Ivan wanders into Kastchei's garden in pursuit of the Firebird; he captures it and exacts a feather before letting it go. Ivan meets a group of Kastchei's captive maidens and falls in love with one of them. The princesses return to Kastchei's palace. Ivan breaks open the gates to follow them, but he is captured by the ogre's guardian monsters. He waves the magic feather and the Firebird reappears to smash Kastchei's vital egg; the ogre expires. All the captives are freed and Ivan and his Tsarevna are wed.

Stravinsky drew three concert suites from *The Firebird*. The 1919 suite includes six scenes from the complete score. The first two, *Introduction* and *The Dance of the Firebird*, accompany the appearance of the magical creature. The *Round Dance of the Princesses* uses the rhythm and style of an ancient Russian dance called the *Khorovod*. The *Infernal Dance of King Kastchei*, the most modern portion of the score, depicts the madness engendered by the appearance of the Firebird at Kastchei's court after the revelation to Ivan of the evil ogre's vulnerability. The haunting *Berceuse* is heard when the thirteenth princess, the one of whom Ivan is enamored, succumbs to a sleep-charm that saves her from the terrible King while Ivan destroys Kastchei's malevolent power. The *Finale*, initiated by the solo horn, confirms the life-force that had been threatened by Kastchei.