



**SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE**

**WEDNESDAY, JULY 6, 2011**

**Anton Arensky**

Quartet for Violin, Viola and Two Cellos in A minor, Op. 35

*Moderato*

*Variations on a theme of Tchaikovsky*

*Finale: Andante sostenuto—Allegro moderato*

Augustin Hadelich, violin Cynthia Phelps, viola  
Godfried Hoogeveen, cello Andrés Diaz, cello

**César Franck**

Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor

*Molto moderato quasi lento—Allegro*

*Lento, con molto sentimento*

*Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*

Andrew Wan, violin James Ehnes, violin Richard O'Neill, viola  
Bion Tsang, cello Inon Barnatan, piano

**Antonín Dvořák**

Slavonic Dances for Piano, Four Hands, Op. 46

Anna Polonsky, piano Orion Weiss, piano

**Maurice Ravel**

*La Valse*, Poème Chorégraphique, for Two Pianos

Anna Polonsky, piano Orion Weiss, piano

**Anton Arensky (1861-1906)**

Quartet for Violin, Viola and Two Cellos in A minor, Op. 35 (1895)

Blessed with musical talent that manifested early—by age nine he had already composed a number of songs and piano pieces—Anton Arensky's precocity did not bloom into abundant maturity as a composer. His main teacher, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, assessed him with this dismissive verbal shrug, "He will quickly be forgotten." Truth be known, his posthumous reputation rests on essentially two works, the D-minor Piano Trio and the orchestral Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky. On the other hand, how many *other* composers have had an imposing natural landmark named after him? Fate may have been unkind to his posthumous musical status, but perhaps his spirit may linger (or shiver) in the Antarctic Arensky Glacier, named after the multi-talented Russian musician. In life he

wore the hats of composer, pianist, conductor and teacher (whose students included Scriabin and Rachmaninoff among others). Sadly he died of tuberculosis, exacerbated by alleged alcoholism and compulsive gambling.

The opening *Moderato* of Arensky's unusually scored Quartet for Violin, Viola and Two Cellos draws its theme from an old Russian psalm, setting an appropriately mournful mood. The somber motive lies low in the strings and is initially presented in muted chordal harmony. Soon, however, the individual instruments take the lead in music that varies considerably in mood, texture and tempo. After the opening homophony, the musical strands separate into virtually independent lines. Quicker tempos alternate with slower sections, almost in the manner of a rondo. A lovely lyrical passage in the major lightens things, though the mood is still reflective rather than festive. An energetic scherzo-like section about a third way into the movement gives way to a quiet, if restless paragraph. After several more varied episodes, the movement ends with a recollection of the somber opening mood and material.

The *Variations on a theme of Tchaikovsky* movement is based on a song by that composer, "When Jesus Christ was still a child." As in the first movement, variety is enhanced—as one would expect in this form—by imaginative changes in texture, e.g., *pizzicatos* as well as contrasting instrumental solos. Shifts in mood and tempo add further to the sense of kaleidoscopic unfolding.

Relatively brief, the Finale opens with an introductory *Andante sostenuto* that eventually undergoes fugal treatment of the patriotic Russian hymn, "Slava Bogu no neve Slave," appropriated eight decades earlier by Beethoven in his second "Rasumovsky" Quartet (Op. 59, No. 2). The melancholy and funereal atmosphere of the opening movement returns before Arensky shifts gears, ending the work on a note of energetic triumph. Perhaps he felt it was better to celebrate Tchaikovsky's music than to simply grieve his passing.

### **César Franck (1822-1890)**

Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor (1879)

Unlike the preternaturally gifted Felix Mendelssohn, who composed memorable works while in his teens, Franck's finest works emerged only in the last two decades of his life. Yet his musical gifts were apparent to his parents at an early age. His father plainly saw that César and his brother Joseph abounded in talent, and moved the family to Paris in order to obtain superior training for his sons—with an eye on future lucrative concert-giving, need one add.

How often have we heard this story: the old man's domineering attitude ultimately drove César into the arms of a young woman disapproved by the son's parents. After the couple married in 1848, Franck turned from public concertizing to teaching, further rebelling against his father. He continued to play, but on the organ rather than the infinitely more popular piano. Franck was, in essence, a very private and self-effacing person, preferring the quiet world of teaching, organ playing and composition. Among his peers he was

considered one of the greatest organists of his day, and was highly respected as a composer and teacher.

Although he had little love for Wagner and Liszt's "music of future," Franck adopted the concept of "cyclical" composition—essentially using identical or related thematic material throughout a piece of music—favored by the abovementioned composers. Although some commentators associate Franck's use of chromatic harmony with Wagner, others note Bach as the source, a not unreasonable assumption given Franck's practical and intimate knowledge of Bach's organ works.

Cyclical composition can easily be traced to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but it really gained tremendous currency through the works of Saint-Saëns. By the time Franck composed his Piano Quintet in 1879, Saint-Saëns was already moving from youthful radicalism into an increasingly nasty form of musical reaction. At the first performance of Franck's Quintet, the composer was pleased by Saint-Saëns' handling of the piano part, and expressed his appreciation afterwards by offering his older colleague the manuscript. To his astonishment and hurt feelings, Saint-Saëns made a sour face and walked away ungraciously.

Franck laid out the Quintet in three movements. The first movement, *Molto moderato quasi lento—Allegro*, begins with a slow and restive introduction that foretells the drama and passion of the lengthy *Allegro*. The second subject of this movement, a tender "motto" theme suggestive of Romantic longing, recurs throughout the entire work in keeping with the composer's cyclic style.

The *Lento* middle movement, in "song" form (A–B–A), employs a pensive theme that provides needed contrast with the storminess of what has preceded it.

The finale, *Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*, marks a return to heightened passion, beginning with strong tremolo-laden strings to set a feverish mood. The primary tune, a bold and rhythmically exciting variant of the recurring "motto" theme, impels the music onward.

One of Franck's biographers, Léon Vallas, suggested that the sweeping passion of the Piano Quintet reflected the composer's feelings for Augusta Holmes, one of his pupils. There's nothing like love—unrequited or fulfilled—that inspires artists to intense expression. Giving ironic weight to Valla's interpretation of the music in question was Mme. Franck's reaction to the Quintet: she absolutely hated it! Not that she was objective, of course...

### **Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)**

Slavonic Dances for Piano, Four Hands, Op. 46 (1878)

For all the guff about Johannes Brahms' brusque and even rude behavior in social settings, he was in truth a generous soul both with money and moral support. He provided financial relief to musicians in need, always insisting on anonymity, and he supported

aspiring composers whose music impressed him. Such is the case with Antonín Dvořák. In 1875, Brahms persuaded his own publisher Simrock to publish Dvořák's *Moravian Duets*. Their success motivated Simrock to ask the young composer for more Bohemian-inspired pieces, resulting in the composition and publication of the first set of *Slavonic Dances*, composed in two formats—one for piano duet and the other in an orchestral arrangement. The music proved irresistible to musicians and music-lovers everywhere, lifting Dvořák out of his precarious financial situation and ultimately assuring him a steady income throughout his life.

Two years later, with recommendations from Brahms and the fearfully powerful Viennese music critic Edouard Hanslick, the Viennese minister of culture awarded Dvořák a stipend 600 gulden. One might add that the two composers remained steadfast friends. (To this day, however, Hanslick remains an example of reactionary music criticism.)

Dvořák reveled in his country's folk heritage; the *Slavonic Dances* convey the many moods and rhythms of Bohemian life. Unlike Wagner, Dvořák's love of his country never descended into disdain for other peoples. Proud of his Czech heritage he even argued with Simrock over the spelling of the composer's first name. Simrock wanted to continue using the German version, i.e., Anton; Dvořák insisted on the Czech Antonín. This squabble led to a temporary parting of the ways. When the dust settled in 1882, Simrock agreed on the change; to sweeten Dvořák's victory, the freshly published second set of *Slavonic Dances*, Op. 72, brought him ten times more money than had the Op. 46 group.

The Op. 46 set of dances mark the first brilliant outpouring of Czech nationalism in Dvořák's canon. Drawing upon a rich folk-based dance tradition, Dvořák did not appropriate existing melodies for the *Slavonic Dances*, relying on his own lyric sense and ingrained knowledge of the genre to write original yet wholly idiomatic tunes. Bohemia—indeed all of Central Europe—made use of the dance forms Dvořák employed in the *Slavonic Dances*. These include the *Furiant*, a rapid and fiery Bohemian dance in 3/4 time with frequently shifting accents; the Russian *Dumka*, of a folk or narrative character with sudden changes from melancholy to exuberance; the *Polka*, a Bohemian dance in quick duple meter and characteristic rhythms, originating ca. 1830; *Sousedská*, a slow country waltz; and *Skocná*, a hopping step, and various Serbian dances that had been absorbed into the living tradition of folk-dance.

### **Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)**

*La Valse* (1919–20)

Despite short stature and a poor constitution, Maurice Ravel managed to enter the armed forces in World War I, only to be discharged for medical reasons. He had seen the horrors of that execrable slaughter first-hand, and was left shaken by the deaths of six comrades memorialized in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Following the war, the composer gave delayed utterance to an idea he had held in check for several years: a musical homage to Johann Strauss. Originally intending to call it *Wien* (“Vienna”), the bad taste left by the

war led him to change the title to *La Valse*. In any case, the immediate motivation to write the work came from a commission from the renowned impresario Serge Diaghilev, for whom Ravel had composed *Daphnis et Chloé* in 1912. When completed, Diaghilev declared the new work “a masterpiece, but not a ballet.” (It had to wait until 1929 for staging and performance by Ida Rubinstein.) Ravel’s mastery of the piano is evidenced in his arrangement of the vibrant orchestral version into the idiomatic two-piano version in 1921.

Though filled with loving reminiscences and gestures of appreciation to the “waltz king,” *La Valse* is anything but a breezy romp in 3/4 time. Powerful undercurrents of darkness permeate this brilliant score, bearing witness to the haunting memories of the dreadful war years. The lilt of the waltz metamorphoses into a threatening and assaultive sequence of dissonant chords and rhythmic dislocations, bringing the work to a disquieting close.

**Program Notes by Steven Lowe**