



## SUMMER FESTIVAL IN SEATTLE

**FRIDAY, JULY 9**

**Francis Poulenc**

Trio for Oboe, Bassoon and Piano

*Presto: Lent—Presto—Le double plus lent—Presto*

*Andante: Andante con moto*

*Rondo: Très vif*

Ben Hausmann, oboe   Paul Rafanelli, bassoon   Andrew Armstrong, piano

**Edvard Grieg**

Sonata for Cello and Piano in A minor, Op. 36

*Allegro agitato*

*Andante molto tranquillo*

*Allegro—Allegro molto e marcato*

Bion Tsang, cello   Adam Neiman, piano

**Felix Mendelssohn**

Octet for Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 20

*Allegro moderato con fuoco*

*Andante*

*Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo*

*Finale: Presto*

James Ehnes, violin   Erin Keefe, violin   Andrew Wan, violin  
Augustin Hadelich, violin   Cynthia Phelps, viola   Richard O'Neill, viola  
Robert deMaine, cello   Edward Arron, cello

**Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)**

Trio for Oboe, Bassoon and Piano (1926)

One of his many friends described Francis Poulenc as “half monk, half guttersnipe,” which conveys the dual nature of the man and his music. These seemingly incompatible traits were absorbed from his father and mother, respectively. Poulenc *père* was a partner in a chemical manufacturing firm and a devout Catholic with a strong rural background. The composer’s mother was heir to a long line of sophisticated Parisians in the cabinet-making field and was more or less indifferent to the pull of religion. Poulenc left the fold with the death of his father in 1917, returning to the Church in 1936 when a visit to the shrine of Notre Dame de Rocmadour happened to coincide with the unexpected death of his friend Octave Ferround. Many of his subsequent works tapped deeply into his

religious passion, though he remained true to his dapper, fun-loving side as well. Among his best-known works, his Gloria of 1959 celebrates both the sacred and profane aspects of his dual personality, though other works could also be cited.

During his adolescence, Poulenc studied piano with Ramon Viñes, Debussy's chosen interpreter of that composer's keyboard works. In composition, however, Poulenc was essentially self-taught, though he used Charles Koechlin as a mentor in the early 1920s. If Schubert was the virtual originator and arguably finest proponent of the German *Lied*, Poulenc could claim pride of place in the realm of French *mélodie*, of which he wrote some 140. This witty, utterly urbane Parisian counted among his close friends and colleagues the elite poets, artists and composers who lived in the French capital during the first several decades of the 20th century.

Among early influences on Poulenc was the Stravinsky of the neo-Classical bent and specifically the older composer's ballet, *Pulcinella*, derived from early 18th-century music once ascribed to Giovanni Pergolesi. The lean and economical writing Poulenc found in *Pulcinella* resonated to a classically oriented aspect of his musical thinking. In the Trio for Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano, he leavened Stravinsky's acerbic wit with a *souçon* of tenderness.

The opening movement starts with a mildly dissonant and sober chordal intro by the piano until the bassoon, and then oboe, enters with a lighter ascending theme. Here the movement's *Presto* marking reflects that distinctly hedonistic, fun-loving side to Poulenc. The winds trade light-hearted jabs with the dominating piano; a brief central episode finds the composer in a more contemplative mood highlighted by a lyrical tune seconded by the bassoon over spare piano chords. A return to *Presto* frivolity brings the movement to a snappy close.

A graceful piano passage launches the *Andante*, the instrument's Alberti-bass accompaniment suggesting both *Rococo* and Classical usage—as well as sounding as if it were the model for the Mozart/Saint-Saëns-inspired slow movement of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G (completed five years after the Poulenc Trio). A brief shift to the minor sets up the bassoon's flowing and lyrical theme, soon taken up by the higher-pitched oboe. The two winds engage in friendly dialogue supported by the unobtrusive piano part.

In good 18th-century fashion Poulenc ends the Trio with a vibrant *Rondo*, again initiated by the piano—here in a particularly upbeat mood. This is the Poulenc of light-hearted Parisian café music, deft, clever and irrepressibly buoyant. A passing reference to the first movement's opening theme lends structural unity, and like the *Presto*, this scintillating *Rondo* ends with a terse and emphatic thwack.

## Edvard Grieg (1843–1907)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in A minor, Op. 36 (1883)

Dismissed by Debussy as “chocolate-covered snow,” Grieg’s music continues to hold sway in the public’s heart, primarily because of his Piano Concerto in A minor and the incidental music to Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. Grieg was probably most comfortable as a miniaturist. He had a fine melodic sense and a conservative but appealing harmonic style. Scandinavian artists in general are often characterized in terms of a melancholy and moodiness attributable to the northern clime (Ibsen in drama, Ingmar Bergman in film, Sibelius and Nielsen in symphonic music), but Grieg’s music unselfconsciously embraces audience-friendly lyricism. No wonder his music was so well adapted to the operetta *The Song of Norway*.

Grieg composed the Sonata for Cello and Piano in the autumn of 1883, dedicating it to his brother John, an amateur cellist. Apparently the task proved emotionally daunting. The composer had noted a year earlier, “To all appearances I am living a more peaceful life than ever before, but in reality it is a life full of inward struggle. I am both spiritually and bodily unwell and decide every other day not to compose another note, because I satisfy myself less and less.” Whatever demons he had to contend with in its composition, the Sonata shows his fluency in taking advantage of the cello’s range of arresting timbres, including its remarkable similarity to the baritone voice.

A tremolo-like figure on the piano opens the first movement, marked *Allegro agitato*, before entrusting the cello with a sweet and lyrical main theme. Beyond the rich and sonorous cello part, the movement is laid out along strict sonata principles—he had, after all, received thorough if conservative training in Leipzig. The piano assumes a tempestuous pose in pressing the music onward, though it enjoys a moment of serenity before allowing the cello to present the above-mentioned lyric theme that is *so* much a Grieg signature. The movement includes a brief but strenuous cadenza for the cello; one wonders if this gesture was a gift of brotherly love.

The middle movement, *Andante molto tranquillo*, begins softly on the piano with a theme remarkably similar to the Triumphal March from his incidental music to *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, written 11 years earlier (and later revised). After this fairly lengthy introduction the cello takes up the same theme, mirroring the piano part’s inward musing. Supportive piano chords provide the armature on which the cantabile cello part unfolds in lyric splendor. The “*Sigurd Jorsalfar*” theme recurs periodically, lending unforced nobility to the music.

A brief and mysterious introduction by the unaccompanied cello opens the concluding *Allegro—Allegro molto e marcato*. As he did most effectively in the finale of his A-minor Piano Concerto, Grieg follows this passage with a rousing *Halling*, a wild and intensely physical Norwegian dance. In this, the Sonata’s longest movement, the range of expression varies throughout. Moments of galvanic energy alternate and are thereby highlighted by moments of tenderness and reserve. At times the music erupts with startling outbursts of tempestuous energy.

## **Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)**

Octet for Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 20 (1825)

During Mendelssohn's much-celebrated adolescent prodigy years a number of unequivocal masterpieces, e.g., the Octet for Strings, Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hebrides* Overture, greeted the light of day with freshness, atmosphere and stunning completeness. Each of these works testifies to his early maturation and astounding gift for both form and musical characterization. He also penned a baker's-dozen string symphonies during these "formative" years, giving him ample scope to develop his great skill in writing for strings.

Mendelssohn dedicated the much-loved Octet—actually a "double quartet"—to his friend and violin teacher Eduard Rietz, who had propitiously bestowed on the composer a copy of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, the very work Mendelssohn re-introduced to the world in 1829 and which began the Bach renaissance that happily continues unabated to this day.

That a 16-year-old could produce so fine a chamber work as the Octet was astonishing. Max Bruch simply called it a "miracle." Mendelssohn noted in the manuscript that "this octet must be played by all the instruments in symphonic orchestra style." Toward the end of his brief life Mendelssohn reflected that the Octet was "my favorite of all my compositions," adding "I had a most wonderful time in the writing of it."

Mendelssohn cast the Octet in four movements. The *Allegro moderato con fuoco* opens with a rich and distinctly orchestral texture above which soars the first violin's regal yet energetic theme. Mirroring the composer's above-noted "suggestion," the prevailing sonority remains orchestral in both color and variation of density. Counter themes balance the principal theme, especially a legato tune played initially by the first viola. During the development, Mendelssohn raises the emotional temperature through increasing syncopation and heightened dynamics before an unexpectedly quiet introduction to the recapitulation. He ends the movement with a fiery coda.

A beguilingly lovely *Andante* acts as a serene respite before an incomparably airy and buoyant *Scherzo*—one of his "signature" forms. His extravagantly gifted and astute sister Fanny wrote of it: "All is new, strange, and yet so familiar and pleasing—one feels close to the world of spirits, lightly carried up into the air. Indeed one might take a broomstick so as to follow the airy procession."

Like the *Scherzo*, the *Finale: Presto* bristles with unstoppable humor beginning with the opening tune in the second cello. Here Mendelssohn casts a theme in the lowest register of the cello, one designed to be virtually impossible to perform with poise or grace. The tune dominates throughout, offset by brief episodes in which the entire ensemble pounds out a quasi-rustic motif of emphatically repeated unison notes.

**Program Notes by  
Steven Lowe**