

Program Notes

CONCERT

Echoes, Time, Horizon (SCMS Commission)

JUHI BANSAL

Born: 1984

Composed: 2026

The piece I had completed just prior to beginning this one found shape and form through the overlap of stages of fire and stages of grief. In writing that piece, I remember noticing that how far ahead one can imagine—an hour, a day, a week, a month—changes depending on where you are in the process of moving through something difficult. It was an idea that sat in my sketchbook, unexplored in that earlier work.

Echoes, Time, Horizon takes that idea as inspiration—this image of horizons opening little by little by little, broadening from a point barely ahead of you to something further ahead. As an art form that also lives in time—we can't hear the previous moment of sound once it's gone, we haven't yet heard the next moment that's coming—I was intrigued by the possibilities of exploring sound in this way—not just a progression or sequence or theme to move through, but something to open, shrink, expand, circle, rotate, and open again.

Program note by Juhi Bansal.

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Major, Op. 13

GABRIEL FAURÉ

Born: 1845

Died: 1924

Composed: 1875–1876

- I. Allegro molto
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo. Allegro vivo
- IV. Finale. Allegro quasi presto

One of Fauré's students, the composer Florent Schmitt, described his teacher as an "unintentional, unwitting revolutionary." The term "revolutionary" hardly seems to apply to a composer best-known for his gentle Requiem, songs, and chamber works. But while Fauré was no heaven-storming radical

bent on undoing the past, his seemingly-quiet music reveals enough rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic surprises to justify Schmitt's claim. The Violin Sonata in A Major, written in the summer of 1876 while Fauré was vacationing in Normandy, is dedicated to his friend, the violinist Paul Viardot. Following its first performance, the sonata was praised by Fauré's teacher Saint-Saëns for its "formal novelty, quest, refinement of modulation, curious sonorities, use of the most unexpected rhythms. . . charm [and]. . . the most unexpected touches of boldness." This is strong praise, but close examination of the sonata shows that Saint-Saëns was right.

One of the most interesting features of the opening Allegro molto occurs in the accompaniment, which is awash in a constant flow of eighth-notes. The piano immediately hints at the first theme, and that instrument is busily weaving a filigree of accompanying eighth-notes that will shimmer throughout this movement when the violin enters to sing that theme fully. The movement is in the expected sonata form, and the violin's falling second subject is accompanied by murmuring triplets from the piano. There is an elegance and grace about this movement that is easy to sense but difficult to describe. It can also be passionate music, and the movement concludes on a fiery restatement of its opening theme.

Distinguishing the Andante is its rhythmic pulse: a 9/8 meter throbs throughout the movement, though Fauré varies its effect by syncopating the accents within the measure. The third movement, a scherzo marked Allegro vivo, goes like a rocket. Fauré chooses not the expected triple meter of the traditional scherzo but a time signature of 2/8, an extremely short rhythmic unit, particularly when his metronome marking asks for 152 quarter-notes per minute. He further complicates the rhythm by writing in quite short phrases, so that the effect is of short phrases rapidly spit out, then syncopated by sharp off-beats. A lovely, graceful trio gives way to the opening material, and the movement suddenly vanishes in a shower of pizzicato notes.

The tempo marking for the finale—Allegro quasi presto—seems to suggest a movement similar to the third, but despite its rapid tempo the last movement flows easily and expressively. Or at least it seems to, for here Fauré complicates matters harmonically. The piano opens in the home key—A Major—but the violin seems always to prefer F-sharp minor,

and the resulting harmonic uncertainty continues throughout the movement until the sonata ends in unequivocal A Major.

To emphasize this sonata's originality may have the unhappy effect of making the music sound cerebral, interesting only for its technical novelty. That is hardly the case. Fauré's Sonata in A Major is one of the loveliest violin sonatas of the late nineteenth century, full of melodic, graceful, and haunting music.

Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 87 **ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK**

Born: 1841

Died: 1904

Composed: 1889

- I. Allegro con fuoco
- II. Lento
- III. Allegro moderato, grazioso
- IV. Finale. Allegro ma non troppo

Dvořák was compulsive about dating his compositions. As he began work, he would note the date at the top of the blank page, and as he finished he wrote the date at the end of the manuscript. And so we know that he began the Piano Quartet in E-flat Major on July 10, 1889, and completed it six weeks later on August 19. This was a very rich time in Dvořák's life. Surrounded by a large and happy family, he was composing steadily, conducting, and being honored throughout Europe. Earlier in 1889 he had seen his opera *The Jacobin* premiered in Prague, and a week after completing the Piano Quartet he would begin composing one of his finest works, the Eighth Symphony. The composition of the Piano Quartet went well, and on August 10 Dvořák wrote enthusiastically to his publisher: "I've now already finished three movements of a new piano quartet and the Finale will be ready in a few days. As I expected it came easily and the melodies just surged upon me. Thank God!"

The Quartet in E-flat Major is the second of Dvořák's two piano quartets, and it has been much admired for its variety of moods, the deft fusion of piano and string instruments, and Dvořák's easy modulation between surprising keys. Some critics have been less generous, criticizing the piece for its quasi-orchestral writing and huge effects—one of them even went so far as to call this quartet "disagreeably melodramatic." But one person's disagreeable

melodrama is another's beauty, and for every critic who has had reservations about this music's grand sweep, countless audiences have loved the quartet just for that excitement.

The opening *Allegro con fuoco* is aptly named, for there is plenty of fire here: at the very beginning the strings make a fierce declaration, only to be answered by the piano's almost whimsical reply. Both these ideas will figure importantly in the development, and the yoking together of such dissimilar ideas is typical of the quartet. The viola, Dvořák's own instrument, has the haunting second theme, and the movement fluctuates between the quietly lyrical and the dramatic.

In a similar way, the *Lento* is mercurial in its mood shifts. Sectional in structure and unusually long, it is based on five different themes: the cello's wistful opening—marked *molto espressivo*—quickly gives way to a heated episode introduced by the piano, which in turn is followed by sequences of varied tonality and mood. The third movement is in ABA form, but this is no minuet. The outer sections are based on a waltz rhythm, and some have heard Eastern influences here: the piano's waltz tune sings languorously, and Dvořák soon has it tinkling in high registers in imitation of the Hungarian cimbalom. The trio dashes along agreeably on its omnipresent dotted rhythm.

The *Finale* is the movement most often criticized for sounding orchestral. A dramatic unison passage launches the movement on its vigorous way, and once again a lovely viola melody lessens tensions—in fact, some of the most attractive music in the quartet comes in this movement's quiet passages. The coda begins quietly but soon gathers force, and the quartet rushes to a knock-out conclusion.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.