

# Program Notes

## PRE-CONCERT

### Valses nobles et sentimentales, M. 61

#### MAURICE RAVEL

Born: 1875

Died: 1937

Composed: 1911

- I. Modéré, très franc
- II. Assez lent, avec une expression intense
- III. Modéré
- IV. Assez animé
- V. Presque lent, dans un sentiment intime
- VI. Vif
- VII. Moins vif
- VIII. Épilogue. Lent

In 1911 Ravel took time off from his work on the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* to compose a very different sort of music, a set of eight waltzes for piano that he called *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. Ravel wrote these waltzes as an act of homage to Franz Schubert. Schubert wrote an enormous amount of dance music for piano: waltzes, ländler, minuets, and German dances, and as a young man Ravel fell deeply in love with it. Among Schubert's dances are a set of *Valses sentimentales* composed in 1823 and a set of *Valses nobles* from three years later, and these were the inspiration for Ravel's own set of waltzes for piano. His title, he said, "sufficiently indicates my intention of writing a cycle of waltzes after the example of Schubert," and here he sets out to evoke the gracious world of Vienna a century earlier.

These eight brief waltzes show a rhythmic sophistication, a suppleness, and a harmonic language far beyond Schubert, but they also capture much of the fun and spirit of Schubert's waltzes. Ravel himself may best get at the flavor of this music in a light-hearted quotation from the novelist Henri de Régnier that he set at the top of the published score: "The delightful and always novel pleasure of a useless occupation."

### The Firebird

#### IGOR STRAVINSKY

#### (ARR. GUIDO AGOSTI)

Born: 1882

Died: 1971

Composed: 1928 (Original ballet 1910)

- I. Danse infernale
- II. Berceuse
- III. Finale

Igor Stravinsky burst to international fame—and changed the course of music—with his three great "Russian" ballets: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913). These are spectacular compositions for orchestra, remarkable for their sheet sonic impact, range of instrumental color, and Stravinsky's incredible rhythmic imagination. Not surprisingly, they have become three of the most popular orchestral works ever written.

Pianists have, of course, been attracted to these scores, and there are some notable arrangements of these ballets for keyboard. Stravinsky himself contributed several of them, but he did not make a keyboard arrangement of *The Firebird*, and the most famous keyboard version of music from that ballet was made in 1934 by the Italian pianist and pedagogue Guido Agosti (1901–1989).

*The Firebird* tells of a young prince, Ivan Tsarevich, who pursues the magic Firebird—part woman, part bird—into the garden of the green-taloned *Kastchei*, most horrible of all ogres, and of Ivan's rescue of the princesses that *Kastchei* has imprisoned. Agosti chose to arrange the final three movements of the orchestral suite Stravinsky drew from the ballet in 1919: the famous *Infernal Dance*, with its barbaric snorts and growls as *Kastchei*'s fiends attempt to resist the Firebird's spell; the *Berceuse*, which is the music the Firebird uses to lull *Kastchei* and his followers to sleep; and the *Finale*, based on the old Russian folk song "By the Gate," which drives the ballet to a magnificent conclusion on music of general rejoicing.

# CONCERT

## Piano Trio No. 1 in C minor, Op. 8

### DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born: 1906  
Died: 1975  
Composed: 1923

For years, audiences knew of only one Shostakovich piano trio, the Trio in E minor of 1944. But Shostakovich had written a Piano Trio in C minor in 1923, when he was a 17-year-old student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Though he did not have it published, he did perform the music in public and listed it as his Opus 8. In the sequence of Shostakovich's work, this trio comes just before the First Symphony of 1925, which catapulted the composer to worldwide fame. Like several others of Shostakovich's early works, it dropped out of sight and remained unknown, in this case for sixty years.

In 1981, six years after Shostakovich's death, his pupil Boris Tishchenko prepared a performing edition of the trio. This was necessary because some small sections of the manuscript had disappeared. Tishchenko had to compose a 22-measure passage for the piano to make up for this, and he edited the work for performance. Soon performed in the West as well as in Russia, the trio was recognized as fully characteristic of Shostakovich's early style. It has been recorded and represents a valuable addition to the catalog of the composer's chamber works.

Only about fourteen minutes long, the Trio in C minor is in one continuous movement that falls into four subsections. Even these, however, are characterized by so many sudden and mercurial shifts of key, tempo, and mood that the trio has been compared to a rhapsody. But Shostakovich unifies this music around the cello's three-note figure heard at the very beginning; this will recur in many guises throughout. It is altogether characteristic of Shostakovich—even at age 17—that he has left the home key of C minor behind before he has fully presented the opening statement. A lyric second idea is also announced by the cello, and the structure of this trio is very loosely based on sonata form as the music moves through a series of sharply-contrasted sections (one of them titled *Prestissimo fantastico*) to the energetic close.

## String Quartet No. 1, Lyric

### GEORGE WALKER

Born: 1922  
Died: 2018  
Composed: 1946

- I. Allegro
- II. Molto adagio
- III. Allegro con fuoco

George Walker learned to play the piano as a boy and quickly developed into a virtuoso. At age 14 he entered the Oberlin Conservatory, and while there he served as the organist of the School of Theology. Walker continued his studies at the Curtis Institute, where he was a piano student of Rudolf Serkin, and in 1945 he performed Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, becoming the first African-American to appear as soloist with that orchestra. Walker taught at a number of American universities, including Rutgers, where he was on the faculty from 1969 until 1992. A composition student of Rosario Scalero and Nadia Boulanger, he composed orchestral, chamber, keyboard, and vocal music, and much of this has been recorded. In 1996 Walker became the first African-American composer to win a Pulitzer Prize for music when he received that award for his *Lilacs for Voice and Orchestra*, premiered by Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Walker composed his String Quartet No. 1 in 1946, shortly after the 24-year-old composer graduated from Curtis. The quartet is in three movements in a fast-slow-fast sequence. The opening Allegro bursts to life with a fierce gesture that sets the dramatic mood of the movement, though more relaxed secondary material arrives quickly, and this sonata-form movement develops both these ideas. Walker's harmonic language is fundamentally tonal, but it can turn acerbic at moments, then relax just as quickly into consonant resolutions. The active development rises to a full-throated climax, then breaks off suddenly for the movement's unexpectedly quiet conclusion.

As the young composer began the second movement of this quartet, he learned that his grandmother had died, and this *Molto adagio* was written in her memory. The movement may be thought of as a lament, but this is a loving rather than a grieving lament, and it is exceptionally beautiful music. After the quartet was complete, Walker arranged this movement for string orchestra,

adding a part for double basses, and under the title *Lyric for Strings*, it has become his most frequently performed works (it is, in fact, one of the most frequently performed works by any American composer). The quartet concludes with a high-energy *Allegro con fuoco*. This rondo-like structure alternates lyric episodes with more strident material, and near the end Walker brings back its principal theme at a much slower tempo—this becomes a moment of calm reflection before the sudden rush to the firm concluding chords.

## Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25

### JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1856–1861

- I. *Allegro*
- II. *Intermezzo. Allegro ma non troppo* — Trio
- III. *Andante con moto*
- IV. *Rondo alla zingarese. Presto*

Like Mozart and Beethoven before him, Brahms did not make the move to Vienna all at once. From his native Hamburg, he paid a number of visits before moving to that fabled city in the early 1860s, when he was in his late twenties. The Piano Quartet in G minor was among the pieces Brahms used to introduce himself to Vienna. Composed between 1857 and 1861, it had already been performed in Hamburg, with Clara Schumann at the piano. Reaction in Vienna was mixed; some critics were enthusiastic, but one called the quartet “an offense against the laws of style.” Exactly what he meant by that is unclear, for already evident in this music is the wonderful Brahmsian nobility, particularly in the sober, serious first movement. The Quartet in G minor is also big music—not just in its length, but in its air of gravity. And the wonderful finale is fired by Brahms’ lifelong passion for Hungarian music.

The massive opening *Allegro* is built on three separate theme-groups, all developed in some detail. The solemn pulse of quarter-notes at the very beginning recurs in a number of guises throughout the movement, which alternates the home key of G minor with lengthy passages in D Major. For all its breadth and nobility, this movement often seems turbulent and troubled, and after a lengthy recapitulation it draws to a quiet close that resolves none of its tensions.

Brahms had originally called the second movement a *Scherzo*, but he changed that name to *Intermezzo*, reflecting its gentler, less extroverted nature. This movement brings a sharp change of sound—the strings are muted, and their silvery color and swung rhythms give this movement a mysterious, dark texture, in pleasing contrast to the powerful first movement. The trio section, marked *Animato*, seems to surge with new energy, though Brahms here retains the rocking 9/8 meter of the outer sections. The *Andante con moto* returns to the mood of the opening movement, but the center section brings a surprise: Brahms moves into shining C Major, and the music marches smartly in the piano as strings provide stinging accents. The sense of a sturdy march is preserved here despite the music’s 3/4 meter rather than the duple meter one expects in a march.

The concluding *Rondo alla Zingarese* (*Rondo in the style of gypsies*) is the most striking of the movements. Brahms had first come into contact with Hungarian music at the age of 15, when Hungarian refugees fleeing Russian rule had crossed Germany on their way to America. It was a case of love at first hearing, and this fiery finale, with its quick episodes and sudden tempo shifts, is saturated with gypsy music—it should properly be played by performers with flashing earrings and flowing kerchiefs. The basic rondo theme is built on a series of three-bar phrases, and along the way the episodes are by turn sultry, playful, swaying, fiery, languorous. Brahms rips the music to its close with a sizzling coda marked *Molto presto*.

Many have felt that the drama and broad scope of the Quartet in G minor are more appropriate to the resources of an orchestra than a piano quartet, and in 1937 Arnold Schoenberg—an admirer of Brahms—orchestrated this music. Schoenberg joked that he had created “Brahms’ fifth symphony,” but there is a measure of truth in that remark. For those interested in hearing this music in its orchestral form, it has been frequently recorded and is readily available.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.