

SEATTLE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

March 24, 2024

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Sonata for Violin and Piano in G Minor

Allegro vivo

Intermède: Fantasque et léger

Finale: Très animé

Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp

Pastorale

Interlude: Tempo de menuetto

Finale

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Minor

Prologue: Lent

Sérénade: Modérément animé

Finale: Animé

INTERMISSION

Syrinx

String Quartet in G Minor

Animé et très décidé

Scherzo: Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino doucement expressif

Très modéré; Très mouvementé; Très animé

AN ALL-DEBUSSY PROGRAM

This all-Debussy program celebrates the creation of the Dr. Oliver E. Cobb Endowment Fund of the Seattle Chamber Music Society. Dr. Cobb was for many years a member of the Board of Directors of the Society, and the endowment in his name will be used to underwrite the Executive Director's position. It is appropriate that we honor Dr. Cobb with a program of music by Claude Debussy. Dr. Cobb's mother, Margaret Gallatin Cobb, was a distinguished Debussy scholar who specialized in the literary influences on that composer; she became head of the Centre de Documentation Claude Debussy in St. Germain-en-Laye, the composer's birthplace, in 1972. For her work on Debussy, she was named an Officier de l'Order des Arts et des Lettres by the French government.

The works on this program come from very early in Debussy's career and from very late in his life. When Debussy composed his *String Quartet* in 1893, he was virtually unknown: not until the premiere of his *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune* the following year would he achieve fame—or, in some eyes, infamy. The remainder of the works on this program come from the Debussy's difficult final years. He had been diagnosed with cancer in 1909 and had undergone painful (and unsuccessful) treatment. Perhaps even worse, the eruption World War I threatened everything Debussy held dear. Now, as that war ground on, he wrote a series of works very different from his youthful *String Quartet*. This concert lets us hear music by the exuberant young Debussy and by the wholly original—and tormented—composer he had become thirty years later.

Sonata for Violin and Piano in G Minor

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Died March 25, 1918, Paris

Debussy's final years were wretched. At age 47 he developed colon cancer and underwent a painful operation, radiation therapy, and drug treatment. It was all to no avail, and the disease took its steady course. The onslaught of World War I in 1914 further depressed him, but it also sparked a wave of nationalistic fervor, and he set about writing a set of six sonatas for different

combinations of instruments. It may seem strange that the iconoclastic Debussy would return in his final years to so structured a form as the sonata, but he specified that his model was the French sonata of the eighteenth century and not the classical German sonata. To make his point—and his nationalistic sympathies—even more clear, Debussy signed the scores of these works “Claude Debussy, musicien français.”

Debussy lived to complete only three of the projected six sonatas: the *Cello Sonata*; the *Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp*; and the *Violin Sonata*, completed in April 1917. Projected—but never written—were sonatas for oboe, horn, and harpsichord; for trumpet, clarinet, bassoon, and piano; and a final sonata that would have included all the instruments from the five earlier sonatas.

The *Violin Sonata* would be Debussy’s final work, and it gave him a great deal of difficulty. From the depths of his gloom, he wrote to a friend: “This sonata will be interesting from a documentary viewpoint and as an example of what may be produced by a sick man in time of war.” Debussy played the piano at the premiere on May 5, 1917, and performed it again in September at what proved to be his final public appearance. His deteriorating health confined him to his room thereafter, and he died the following March.

For all Debussy’s dark comments, the *Violin Sonata* is a brilliant work, alternating fantastic and exotic outbursts with more somber and reflective moments. In three concise movements, the sonata lasts only about thirteen minutes. Debussy deliberately obscures both meter and key over the first few measures of the *Allegro vivo*, and only gradually does the music settle into G minor. The haunting beginning of the movement feels subdued, almost ascetic, but the dancing middle section in E major is more animated. Debussy brings back the opening material and rounds off the movement with a *con fuoco* coda.

The second movement brings a sharp change of mood after the brutal close of the first. Debussy marks it *fantasque et léger* (“Fantastic [or fanciful] and light”), and the violin opens with a series of leaps, swirls, and trills before settling into the near-hypnotic main idea. The second subject, marked “sweet and expressive,” slides languorously on glissandos and arpeggios, and the movement comes to a quiet close. Over rippling chords, the finale offers a quick reminiscence of the very opening of the sonata, and then this theme disappears for good and the finale’s real theme leaps to life. It is a shower of triplet sixteenths that rockets upward and comes

swirling back down: the composer described it as “a theme turning back on itself like a serpent biting its own tail.” There are some sultry interludes along the way, full of glissandos, broken chords, rubato, and trills, but finally the swirling energy of the main theme drives the music to its animated close.

Debussy may have been unhappy about this music while working on it, but once done he felt more comfortable with it, writing to a friend: “In keeping with the contradictory spirit of human nature, it is full of joyous tumult . . . Beware in the future of works which appear to inhabit the skies; often they are the product of a dark, morose mind.”

Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp

Debussy wrote the *Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp* in 1915 in a small cottage in Pourville, looking out over the English Channel. He had originally intended to use oboe instead of viola, and the revision is fortunate, for the completed sonata contrasts three different sonorities: plucked strings, bowed strings, and a wind instrument. Of the three sonatas, this is the least severe. Listening to this ethereal music, one would not guess that the most cataclysmic war history had ever seen was raging across trenches 100 miles east of where it was written.

The sonata’s structure is as unusual as Debussy’s choice of instruments. The opening movement, *Pastorale*, offers six different melodic ideas, but these often feel more like fragments than fully-stated themes. The movement is not in traditional sonata form; the melodic ideas recur in an unusual sequence, and the tempo changes so often that the movement seems to break down into short episodes.

The same design shapes the final two movements. The *Interlude* is marked *Tempo de menuetto*, but that is only a general indication of speed, for there is nothing minuet-like about this movement, which brings back themes from the first movement. The *Finale* too is freely-structured. Whirring harp figures launch this movement on its way, and the other voices quickly join it. But even in this rapid finale the mood remains subdued, the music fragmentary.

Something of Debussy’s own mood at the time he wrote the *Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp* may be seen in letters to his friend Robert Godet. At just the moment he was finishing the sonata, Debussy wrote: “I am writing down all the music that passes through my head, like a madman, and rather sadly.” And after hearing the sonata performed for the first time the

following year, Debussy wrote: “The sound of it is not bad, though it is not for me to speak to you of the music. I could do so, however, without embarrassment for it is the music of a Debussy I no longer know. It is frightfully mournful and I don’t know whether one should laugh or cry—perhaps both?”

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Minor

One of the most impressive things about Debussy’s *Cello Sonata* is its concentration: it lasts less than twelve minutes. Further intensifying this music’s severity is Debussy’s refusal to develop—or even to use—themes in a traditional sense: this is music not of fully-developed themes but of thematic fragments appearing in various forms and shapes. The opening movement, *Prologue–Lent*, is only 51 measures long, but Debussy alters the tempo every few measures: the score is saturated with tempo changes and performance instructions. The piano’s opening three-measure phrase recurs throughout, contrasting with the cello’s *agitato* passages in the center section. At the end, the cello winds gradually into its highest register and concludes hauntingly on the interval of a perfect fifth, played in harmonics.

The second and third movements are performed without pause. The second is marked *Sérénade*, but this is unlike any serenade one has heard before: there is nothing lyric about this song. The cello snaps out grumbling pizzicatos (Debussy considered calling this movement *Pierrot Angry at the Moon*), and when the cello is finally given a bowed passage, it is marked *ironique*. The finale—*Animé*—opens with three quick pizzicatos and then races ahead. As in the first movement, there are frequent changes of tempo, a continuing refusal to announce or develop themes in traditional senses, and sudden changes of mood: at one point the performer is instructed to play a brief lyric passage *con morbidezza*, which means “gently,” yet another passage is marked *arraché*, or “ripped out.” The sonata concludes on an abrupt pizzicato.

Such a description makes the sonata sound fierce, abstract, even mocking. But beneath the surface austerity of this sonata lies music of haunting emotional power.

Syrinx

Debussy’s reputation was established by an early work that prominently displayed the flute, but the popularity of *Prelude à l’après midi d’un faune* has overshadowed the fact that one

of his last—and most individual—works also features the flute. In 1913, poet and playwright Gabriel Mourey approached Debussy about composing music for Mourey’s three-act dramatic poem *Psyché*, which was to be presented in a private home that fall; the poem would include an account of the death of Pan, god of forest, fields, and herds. In mythology, Pan had once pursued a nymph named Syrinx, who fled his advances; when capture was imminent, she prayed to be turned into a reed, and from this reed Pan cut the pipes on which he played. Debussy was wary of the project and resisted at first, finally agreeing to furnish only an offstage flute solo that would depict the last melody Pan played before his death.

As he so often did, Debussy put off composition until the last minute and then had to scramble to get the music done; late in November 1913 he wrote to Mourey to complain that this piece “in truth . . . is a devil!” Debussy *did* get it done in time for the first performance of the poem, but the music itself was not published until 1927, long after his death. Debussy had called the work *La flûte de Pan*, but the publisher gave it the name *Syrinx*.

Certain critics have taken pains to try to show that this very brief piece (only 35 measures) bears some relationship to sonata form. A far better approach is simply to listen to *Syrinx* as the sad and evocative song of the god Pan as he plays one final time on his pipes. The music is metrically quite free: Debussy originally wrote it without bar lines, leaving it to the individual artist to supply the phrasing and rubato that help bring the music to expressive life (bar lines were added when the music was published, however). Debussy keeps much of *Syrinx* in the flute’s languorous lower register—rather than sounding silvery or brilliant, the music glows softly and sadly.

String Quartet in G Minor

Early in 1893 Debussy met the famed Belgian violinist Eugene Ysaÿe. Debussy was at this time almost unknown, but he and Ysaÿe instantly became friends—though Ysaÿe was only four years older than Debussy, he treated the diminutive Frenchman like “his little brother.” That summer, Debussy composed a string quartet for Ysaÿe’s quartet, which gave the first performance in Paris on December 29, 1893. Debussy was already notorious with his teachers for his refusal to follow musical custom, and so it comes as a surprise to find him choosing to write in this most demanding of classical forms. Early audiences were baffled. Reviewers used words

like “fantastic” and “oriental,” and Debussy’s friend Ernest Chausson confessed mystification. Debussy must have felt the sting of these reactions, for he promised Chausson: “Well, I’ll write another for you . . . and I’ll try to bring more dignity to the form.”

But Debussy did not write another string quartet, and his *Quartet in G Minor* has become one of the cornerstones of the quartet literature. The entire quartet grows directly out of its first theme, presented at the very opening, and this sharply rhythmic figure reappears in various shapes in three of the four movements, taking on a different character, a different color, and a different harmony on each reappearance. What struck early audiences as “fantastic” now seems an utterly original conception of what a string quartet might be. Here is a combination of energy, drama, thematic imagination, and attention to color never heard before in a string quartet. Debussy may have felt pushed to apologize for a lack of “dignity” in this music, but we value it today just for that failure.

Those who think of Debussy as the composer of misty impressionism are in for a shock with his quartet, for it has the most slashing, powerful opening Debussy ever wrote: his marking for the beginning is “Animated and very resolute.” This first theme, with its characteristic triplet spring, is the backbone of the entire quartet: the singing second theme grows directly out of this opening (though the third introduces new material). The development is marked by powerful accents, long crescendos, and shimmering colors as this movement drives to an unrelenting close in G minor.

The *Scherzo* may well be the quartet’s most impressive movement. Against powerful pizzicato chords, Debussy sets the viola’s bowed theme, a transformation of the quartet’s opening figure; soon this is leaping between all four voices. The recapitulation of this movement, in 15/8 and played entirely pizzicato, bristles with rhythmic energy, and the music then fades away to a beautifully understated close. Debussy marks the third movement “Gently expressive,” and this quiet music is so effective that it is sometimes used as an encore piece. It is in ABA form: the opening section is muted, while the more animated middle is played without mutes—the quartet’s opening theme reappears subtly in this middle section. Debussy marks the ending, again played with mutes, “As quiet as possible.”

The finale begins slowly but gradually accelerates to the main tempo, “Very lively and with passion.” As this music proceeds, the quartet’s opening theme begins to appear in a variety

of forms: first in a misty, distant statement marked “soft and expressive,” then gradually louder and louder until it returns in all its fiery energy, stamped out in double-stops by the entire quartet. A propulsive coda drives to the close, where the first violin flashes upward across three octaves to strike the powerful G major chord that concludes this most undignified—and most wonderful—piece of music.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger