

JULY 26, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

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

Ravel wrote this set of eight little waltzes as an act of homage to Franz Schubert. Schubert wrote an enormous amount of dance music for piano—waltzes, laendler, minuets, German dances—and as a young man Ravel fell deeply in love with it. Among Schubert's dances for piano 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." These eight brief waltzes require little introduction. By turns languid, sparkling, lilting, and vivacious, they show a rhythmic sophistication and suppleness (as well as a harmonic language), far beyond Schubert, but they also capture much of the fun and spirit of Schubert's waltzes.

Le tombeau de Couperin, M.68

Composed: 1914-17

- I. Prélude. Vif
- II. Fugue. Allegro moderato
- III. Forlane. Allegretto
- IV. Rigaudon. Assez vif
- V. Menuet. Allegro moderato
- VI. Toccata. Vif

Early in the twentieth century Ravel embarked on a lengthy study of eighteenth-century French keyboard music, and he planned to write a collection of his own piano pieces in the manner of the eighteenth-century

French clavecinists. His working title for this piece was Suite française. But then World War I exploded across Europe, shaking Western Civilization to its core. Ravel enlisted in the French army and—at age 40—drove ambulances carrying wounded back from the front. For a nature as sensitive as Ravel's, the experience was devastating.

Under these conditions, what had begun as the Suite française evolved into something quite different. In 1914-17 Ravel composed a suite of six movements for piano and dedicated each movement to a different friend who had been killed in the war. He gave the piece a title that reflects both its homage to French music of the past and the dark moment of its creation: Le tombeau de Couperin, or "The Tomb of Couperin." Ravel creates a consciously antiquarian sound in this music: each of the six movements is in a baroque form, and Ravel sets out to make the modern piano mimic the jangling, plangent sound of the harpsichord.

CONCERT

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major

MAURICE RAVEL

Born: 1875

Died: 1937

Composed: 1923

- I. Allegretto
- II. Blues. Moderato
- III. Perpetuum mobile

Ravel began making sketches for his Violin Sonata in 1923, the year after he completed his orchestration of Musorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. He was composing a number of works for violin during these years, including Tzigane, but the Violin Sonata proved extremely difficult for him, and he did not complete it until 1927. The first performance, by violinist Georges Enescu and the composer, took place on May 30, 1927, in Paris while that city was still in a dither over the landing of Charles Lindbergh the week before.

In the Violin Sonata, Ravel wrestled with a problem that has plagued all who compose violin sonatas—the clash between the resonant, sustained sound of the violin and the percussive sound of the piano—and he chose to accentuate these differences: "It was this independence I was aiming at when I wrote a Sonata for violin and piano, two incompatible instruments whose incompatibility is emphasized here, without any attempt being made to reconcile

their contrasted characters.” The most distinctive feature of the sonata, however, is Ravel’s use of jazz elements in the slow movement.

The opening Allegretto is marked by emotional restraint. The piano alone announces the cool first theme, which is quickly picked up by the violin. A sharply rhythmic figure, much like a drum tattoo, contrasts with the rocking, flowing character of the rest of this movement, which closes on a quietly soaring restatement of the main theme.

Ravel called the second movement Blues, but he insisted that this is jazz as seen by a Frenchman. In a lecture during his American tour of 1928, he said of this movement: “while I adopted this popular form of your music, I venture to say that nevertheless it is French music, Ravel’s music, that I have written.” He sets out to make violin and piano sound like a saxophone and guitar, specifying that the steady accompanying chords must be played strictly in time so that the melodic line can sound “bluesy” in contrast. The “twang” of this movement is accentuated by Ravel’s setting the violin in G Major and the piano in A-flat Major at the opening.

Thematic fragments at the very beginning of the finale slowly accelerate to become a virtuoso perpetual motion. Ravel brings back themes from the first two movements before the brilliant close, which features complex string-crossings for the violinist.

Piano Quartet in A minor, Op. 67

JOAQUÍN TURINA

Born: 1882

Died: 1949

Composed: 1931

I. Lento — Andante mosso

II. Vivo

III. Andante — Allegretto

Like his compatriots Granados, Albeniz, and Falla, Joaquín Turina was strongly committed to his Spanish heritage, and the names of some of his greatest works make that clear: *La oración del torero*, *Sanlúcar de Barrameda*, *Sinfonía sevillana*. Yet of all twentieth-century Spanish composers, Turina was the one most consistently attracted to classical forms: among his works are a piano quintet, quartets, sonatas, trios, and preludes, and he was the only one of those four to write a symphony. Turina composed his Piano Quartet in A minor in 1931, and he dedicated it to one of his friends, the Spanish composer and pianist José María Cuervós.

If Turina was attracted to the classical forms, he felt free to adapt them for his own uses. The first movement of his Piano Quartet is not in traditional sonata form, but is instead a free-form movement that alternates several different themes at different tempos. And unlike the many composers who try to assimilate the quite different sonorities of the resonant strings and the percussive piano, Turina consciously exploits those differences—he often has the three stringed instruments playing exactly the same music, either in unison or in octaves, and he will set this against solo passages for the piano. That makes for a very distinctive sonority, and we feel that from the first instant of this music.

The Piano Quartet in A minor bursts to life in a great, sweeping outburst for the strings in octaves, and only when this has been stated does the piano enter. This opening section is marked *Lento*, and in its course the violin offers a theme-shape that will run throughout all three movements. That theme-shape becomes the basis for the *Andante mosso*, as the movement moves ahead, and Turina will alternate these two tempos throughout the movement. In addition to the traditional Italian performance markings, he also feels free to add instructions in Spanish: *muy expresivo, vibrante, suave y expresivo*.

The central movement in three-movement classical form was usually a slow movement, but Turina makes his middle movement the fast one. Marked *Vivo* and set in 3/8, it begins with explosions of *pizzicato* that are inevitably compared to the sound of the guitar; the brief middle section of this movement recalls the fundamental theme-shape from the opening movement.

The finale opens with something else unusual in classical chamber music, a soaring cadenza for the violin. The other instruments join it, and the music takes wing at the *Allegro molto*. Once again, there are many tempo changes, and the basic theme-shape reappears here, played both slowly and very fast. Rather than rushing ahead at the end, Turina slows the tempo and builds the music up to a grand climax that concludes on a triple forte chord from all four instruments.

Divertimento in E-flat Major, K. 563

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: 1756

Died: 1791

Composed: 1788

I. Allegro

II. Adagio

III. Menuetto. Allegretto — Trio

IV. Andante

V. Menuetto. Allegretto — Trio — Trio II

VI. Allegro

This extraordinary music comes from one of the most difficult periods of Mozart's life, the summer of 1788. That June, beset by financial troubles, the Mozart family moved to less expensive lodgings in the suburbs of Vienna, only to suffer real calamity, the death of their infant daughter Theresia. Mozart's pathetic letters begging for money from his friend and fellow mason Michael Puchberg suggest the extremity of his state. But external troubles did not mean creative drought: working at white heat through the summer months, Mozart wrote the great final trilogy of symphonies and then completed the Divertimento in E-flat Major in September. He dedicated this last work to Puchberg, who had helped the composer with loans.

The title "divertimento" is misleading. The title page actually reads String Trio in E-flat Major, with Mozart's further description Divertimento in Six Pieces. The music is in standard sonata-allegro form with two additional movements: a set of variations and an extra minuet. As its title suggests, a divertimento was conceived as diversion music, light in character and perhaps intended for outdoor performance. In that sense, this music is hardly a divertimento. Instead, it is true chamber music—intimate, expressive, and dependent on the full interplay of voices central to chamber music.

Some of this music's nobility comes from its generous proportions: when all repeats are taken, the first two movements can stretch out to nearly a quarter-hour each. Beyond this, the mood is at times quite serious. It is dangerous to look for autobiographical significance in music, particularly from so difficult a time in a composer's life, but many have noted the serious and somber character of this work and an almost bittersweet quality that colors its most expressive moments. The Allegro

opens gravely and quietly (Mozart marks its beginning *sotto voce*), and this long movement unfolds gracefully. The Adagio partakes of the same mood, though a florid violin part soaring above the other two voices brings some relief.

By contrast, the first minuet is vigorous and extroverted, and Mozart follows this with the first "extra" movement, a set of variations. Critics invariably call the theme here "folklike," and its slightly-square four-bar phrases do seem to suggest a popular origin. But Mozart's treatment of this simple tune is very sophisticated, and the next-to-last variation—in the unusual key of B-flat minor—is stunning. The energetic second minuet features two trio sections, both of them jaunty; an equally jaunty coda rounds off the movement. Mozart brings the divertimento to a close with a rondo based on a rocking main theme in 6/8 meter. There are vigorous episodes along the way, but the lyric mood of the main theme dominates this movement.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger