

Reno Chamber Orchestra
Twenty-Somethings
November 9 & 10, 2024

Program Notes
by Chris Morrison

Claude Debussy

Born: August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France
Died: March 25, 1918, Paris, France

Claude Debussy was one of the most important and influential composers of his time. After more than a decade of studies at the Paris Conservatoire, his receipt of the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1884 allowed him two years of work in Rome. Visits to Bayreuth in 1888-89 brought him under the spell of Wagner's music, which he later rejected, and the 1889 Paris World Exhibition exposed him to the music of Asian cultures. His famous, revolutionary *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, as well as the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* and the orchestral work *La mer*, secured his reputation as one of France's great composers. While his music – often described as Impressionism, although he didn't like the term – is appreciated for its sensuous beauty, it is also noteworthy for its fluid sense of tonality and the use of unusual scales like the pentatonic and whole-tone. These innovations were influential to many major musicians, from Igor Stravinsky and Olivier Messiaen to Pierre Boulez and Bill Evans.

Suite bergamasque (orch. Mouton)

Composed: 1890/1905

Duration: 18 minutes

Instrumentation: flute, oboe, 2 clarinets, bassoon, 2 horns, strings, piano or harp

Debussy wrote much of the music for the *Suite bergamasque* in 1890, when he was a twenty-eight year old student. For many years, he withheld the *Suite* from publication, thinking it not representative of his mature composing style. But the fame he had won over that time led to a publishing deal in 1905, for which Debussy revised the four pieces. The title comes from Paul Verlaine's 1869 poem "Clair de lune," which was additionally set to music twice by Debussy as a song. Its first verse reads:

Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.

Your soul is a chosen landscape
Where charming masquerades and dancers are promenading,
Playing the lute and dancing, and almost
Sad beneath their fantastic disguises.

The "bergamasque" that Verlaine makes reference to is the *Bergamasca*, a rough peasant dance of the people of Bergamo in northern Italy. Over the years, the *Suite bergamasque* has been orchestrated by many, including André Caplet, Leopold Stokowski, and Lucien Cailliet. This concert features the arrangement by Hubert (Henri François Hubert) Mouton (1872-1954), a Belgian

composer, conductor, and arranger who specialized in making orchestral arrangements of pieces by his contemporaries like Debussy and Maurice Ravel.

The opening *Prélude* is calm and flowing, in a moderate tempo but with free legato phrasing. The playful *Menuet* that follows bears some resemblance to the minuets of earlier days, but Debussy updates the dance by changing the rhythmic emphasis, employing more modern harmonies, and adding “fluttering” embellishments to the melodic line.

Clair de lune, the third and most famous of the four pieces, was originally titled *Promenade sentimentale*. Quiet, elegant, and lovely, in 9/8 meter, and with a slightly more active central section, *Clair de lune* has become one of Debussy's most popular compositions. He once wrote that he thought of this music as an evocation of summer moonlight as filtered through the leaves of a tree. Originally titled *Pavane*, the concluding *Passepied*, like the *Menuet*, is based on an older dance form, in this case a courtly dance that originated in Brittany. Light but intricate in texture, this movement combines rhythms of three and four beats, with a regular staccato accompaniment.

Franz Schubert

Born: January 31, 1797, Vienna, Austria

Died: November 19, 1828, Vienna, Austria

Franz Schubert is one of the best-loved and most important composers of the nineteenth century, his music consistently marked by a remarkable melodic gift, rich harmonies, and an expansive treatment of traditional forms. During his short but extremely prolific career, he composed nine symphonies, dozens of chamber and solo piano works, and a host of operas and liturgical works. His songs, numbering over 600, virtually created the genre of the art song. He started composing in his teens, and some early works came to the notice of Antonio Salieri, who worked with the young composer on composition and music theory. After a couple of unhappy years spent as a schoolteacher by day and composer by night, Schubert decided to pursue a career as a full-time composer, leading a somewhat bohemian life while creating a vast number of compositions that, at the time, attracted little attention. Only gradually did his music win acclaim, inspiring a remarkable burst of creativity in the mid 1820s. By that time, however, he was suffering badly from the syphilis and (possibly) typhoid fever that would take his life at age 31.

Arpeggione Sonata in A minor, D. 821 (arr. Tabakova)

Composed: 1824 (arr. 2004)

Duration: 25 minutes

Instrumentation: solo cello, strings

The arpeggione, a six-stringed instrument that is bowed like a cello, but fretted and tuned like a guitar, was invented around 1823 by Vienna-based luthiers Johann Georg Stauffer and Peter Teufelsdorfer. While the instrument – which is also known as a bowed guitar, cello guitar, or *guitarre d'amore* – never really caught on, it did enjoy a few years of popularity in the years after its invention. One of the early virtuosos of the instrument, Vincenz Schuster, was a friend of Schubert's, and it was likely he that commissioned Schubert to compose the Sonata in A minor, produced in November of 1824 and the only substantial composition for the instrument until its slight revival in the last couple of decades. By the time Schubert's sonata was published in 1871, the instrument was more or less obsolete. Hence, the work has been performed in more recent times featuring the cello or viola as the lead instrument.

The Sonata has attracted a number of arrangers – there is a version of the work for cello and orchestra by Gaspar Cassadó, one featuring solo flute by James Galway, and even versions for clarinet quintet and for alto saxophone and piano. The arrangement heard in this concert was made by Dobrinka Tabakova. Tabakova, born in Bulgaria in 1980, studied in London and earned her Ph.D. from King's College, Cambridge. Her compositions have been performed all over the world, including commissions from such renowned performers as Gidon Kremer and Janine Jansen. She is known for her works for solo strings, including her arrangement of the Schubert, which was originally for viola and string orchestra but is heard in this concert with solo cello replacing the viola.

Schubert's Sonata has been described by violist Antoine Tamestit as “hopeful, sad, nostalgic, and sweet.” The first movement, marked *Allegro moderato*, features two main themes, the first lovely and lyrical, the second lighter in tone. This contrast between somber and passionate, between spare textures and virtuoso display, is maintained throughout the movement. But the balance leans toward the dark, including the wrenching climax of the development of the main themes, described by one writer as “schizophrenic.”

The central theme of the second movement *Adagio* is something of a love song, with a long shapely line but also with some darker undercurrents amidst the beauty. As with the first movement, the close of the movement is quiet and spare, as well as rather bleak.

Sunshine emerges again, though, with the main theme of the third movement, which is in rondo form (here, ABACBA) and remains largely, like the second movement, in a major key. Some sections of the music evoke folk music, in the manner of Hungarian or Viennese dances. A rising *arpeggio*, a gesture heard throughout the work (and one that the arpeggione was notably suited for) closes the composition with a sort of “happily ever after” flavor.

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia

There are many who call Dmitri Shostakovich the greatest composer of the twentieth century, his music serving as a moving personal testament as well as a portrait of some of the seminal events of the century. His early works, such as one of the most accomplished First Symphonies ever (written at age 19 for his graduation from the Leningrad Conservatory), betray the influence of his fellow Russian composers Prokofiev and Stravinsky, as well as a brash and often sardonic sense of humor. That brashness could get Shostakovich in trouble, as with the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, which outraged Stalin and led to serious criticism in the Russian press. Works like the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, the latter inspired by the 1941 German invasion and known as the “Leningrad,” brought him worldwide renown. He continued to suffer from artistic repression in his homeland, however, including the famous 1948 government denunciation of Shostakovich and other prominent Russian composers. Some of his subsequent music sought to curry favor with the Soviet government, although he continued to write more serious works “for the desk drawer.” His last decade was marked by ill health, and an increased level of melancholy pervades the music of those years.

Hamlet, Suite from the Incidental Music, Op. 32a

Composed: 1932

Duration: 23 minutes

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, clarinet, bassoon, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings

In the 1920s and early 1930s, before Stalin and his regime imposed itself aggressively on the arts, the Russian avant-garde had a brief opportunity to thrive. In that atmosphere, in 1932 director and designer Nikolai Akimov decided to create a decidedly strange version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In his farcical rendering, most of the major characters spend much of the play drunk, Polonius is the central character, Hamlet himself is grossly overweight and despised, and the court is in the process of decay. Akimov's production, one of the last gasps of that Russian avant-garde, was a scandal, and was soon closed and banned by the government.

For this absurdist production, which Shostakovich himself described in the still-controversial book *Testimony* as "the most scandalous, they say, in the history of Shakespeare," he wrote equally strange, yet also sometimes powerful and moving, incidental music. The entirety of the score is roughly forty-five minutes in length, and includes parts for singers. Better known, though, is the orchestral suite, Op. 32a, heard in this performance.

As he was working on this score, Shostakovich was also writing his scandalous opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, and used *Hamlet* as an opportunity to try out some of the stylistic devices that also turn up in the opera. This music for the stage, by the way, is completely separate from another *Hamlet* score that Shostakovich produced some thirty years later, for director Grigori Kozintsev's 1964 film version of the play. Written for a much larger orchestra, it is one of some forty film scores that Shostakovich composed, and one of his best, well worth seeking out in its own right.

As to the Op. 32a Suite, the opening "Introduction and Night Watch" and the closing "March of Fortinbras" are rather pompous in tone. Some of the music, like "Feast," employs parodies of popular music of the time. The "Funeral March" seems a bit over-the-top in its grandiosity, and "Ophelia's Song" sounds like a lighthearted number from the music hall. There are other numbers, though, that seem more genuine in their emotion: the "Cradle Song" or "Lullaby" is truly tender and heartfelt, and the "Requiem," which quotes the familiar *Dies irae*, "Day of Wrath," melody from the medieval Mass for the Dead, is grand and has a authentic quality of tragedy.