Debussy & Mahler

Rihab Chaieb, mezzo-soprano
Paul Groves, tenor

ROCKPORT CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
Earl Lee, conductor
Ruggero Allifranchini, concertmaster/violin
Danny Koo, violin | Barry Shiffman, viola
Allison Eidridge, cello | Yoobin Son, flute
Todd Palmer, clarinet | Bee Ungar, bassoon
Jung-A Bang, piano | Matt Sharrock, percussion
Michael Bridge, accordion and céléste

SYRINX [1913]
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

PRÉLUDE À L’APRÈS-MIDI D’UN FAUNE [1891-4]
Claude Debussy (1862-1918), arr. Benno Sachs

PREMIÈRE RAPSODIE, L. 116A [1909-10]
Claude Debussy (1862-1918), arr. Todd Palmer

:: INTERMISSION ::

DAS LIED VON DER ERDE [THE SONG OF THE EARTH] [1908-9]
Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), arr. Arnold Schoenberg and Rainer Riehn
1. Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde [The Drinking Song of Earth’s Sorrow]
2. Der Einsame im Herbst [The Solitary One in Autumn]
3. Von der Jugend [Of Youth]
4. Von der Schönheit [Of Beauty]
5. Der Trunkene im Frühling [The Drunkard in Spring]
6. Der Abschied [The Farewell]
SYRINX
Composed 1913; 3 minutes

Debussy’s tautly written, 35-measure, three-minute Syrinx is a seminal work which led to more than a century of probing, exploratory works for solo flute. In a similar way, his Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune marked the turning point from a 19th century outlook on music to a 20th century aesthetic. Syrinx, originally titled La flûte de Pan, first served as incidental music, played off-stage, in Gabriel Mourey’s symbolist play, Psyché [1913]. The Act 3 stage directions for this melodrama within the play describe a moonlit, lakeside scene where nymphs, adorned in white, dance and lounge, admiring themselves, listening “to the syrinx (panpipe) of the invisible Pan, moved by the song that escapes from the hollow reeds.”

In the piece, downward cascading, curling melodic fragments that turn in on themselves, without any anchoring tonality, luxuriate in the warm lower register of the Boehm flute. The three sections of Syrinx are tonally ambiguous, often modal, elusive yet hauntingly familiar and seductive.

These are harmonies that are not in our books,” wrote Debussy to the music critic Iaka Monsieur Crochel, imagining notes played by an Egyptian shepherd on his flute. The seductive power of the syrinx recurs throughout Debussy’s music, above all in the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune.

PRÉLUDE À L’APRÈS-MIDI D’UN FAUNE
Composed 1891-4; arranged 1920; 10 minutes

Debussy described his Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, written in the early 1890s, as a ‘general impression’ of a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. Over a half century later, French composer Pierre Boulez nominated Debussy’s evocative tone poem as the awakening of modern music, in which the very idea of musical form itself is challenged and overthrown. Debussy’s score has as many measures as French Symbolist poet Mallarmé’s poem has lines. The score evolues out of the opening flute melody—a beautifully evocative phrase that allows for a kaleidoscopic of subtly different interpretations. The melody in turn grows out of Mallarmé’s line “A single line of sound, aloof, disinterested” and in it lies the heartbeat of the score. Each time the flute melody appears, we hear something new, a new shade of color in Debussy’s improvisatory-like score. Like Mallarmé, Debussy avoids direct statement. His ever-shifting music suggests and alludes, while its mood, sensuously erotic, floats dreamlike between states of wakefulness and reverie.

The arrangement on this performance is by Benno Sachs (1894–1920), an otherwise unknown name to the musical community, mainly because he trained as a Viennese physician for whom music was a hobby. His creative arrangement, however, was made for the fourth and final season of Arnold Schoenberg’s Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performances). In this 1921–2 season, as many as 16 chamber arrangements by Schoenberg’s pupils were scheduled for the monthly performances by an orchestra made up of a few wind instruments, a string quintet, piano and harmonium. Schoenberg’s aim with the reduced forces was to “allow for a clarity of presentation and a simplicity of formal enunciation often not possible in a rendition obscured by the richness of orchestration.” In other words, to again quote Schoenberg, “complicated works would be clearly presented, divorced from their coloristic properties.” The arrangement does, indeed, throw new light on Debussy’s evocative score, as Schoenberg intended, and further offers today’s audience an opportunity to listen from the ‘inside-out’, peeling back the layers to appreciate how a masterwork is constructed.

PREMIÈRE RAPSODIE, L. 116A
Composed 1909-10; arranged 2010; 8 minutes

Debussy wrote two rhapsodies for solo instrument and piano. The first was a commission for saxophone solo and orchestra from Elise Hall – “the saxophone lady,” as Debussy referred to this official with the Orchestral Club in Boston. He never really completed the commission, leaving the music unorchestrated, despite many pleas from Boston. The Clarinet Rhapsody, on the other hand, is true Debussy, full of romantic lyricism and virtuosity. In February 1909, Debussy had been appointed member of the Supreme Council of the Music Section of the Paris Conservatoire – an establishment job for a composer who was temperamentally at odds with an establishment of any kind. Still, it did bring him into direct contact with a new generation of music students. Their performances of the imposed pieces in the annual competition pleased him sufficiently to agree to write both the Rapsodie and a brief sight-reading test-piece (Petite pièce) for the clarinet students in the 1910 competition. He orchestrated both in the following year, for full orchestra. Debussy himself was on the jury. He said at the time that the Première rapsodie (he never completed a second) was “one of the most pleasing pieces I have ever written.”

Clarinetist Todd Palmer arranged the work for chamber orchestra one hundred years after it received its 11 ‘first performances’ at the Conservatoire. His aim, he says, “is to bring the radiant sounds and colors of Debussy’s orchestral palate to a broader, yet smaller, and more practical musical setting,” while “faithfully reproducing the composer’s original musical intentions.”

DAS LIEB VON DER ERDE [THE SONG OF THE EARTH]
Gustav Mahler (b. Kalischt, nr. Igau, Bohemia [now Košice, Slovakia, Czech Republic], July 7, 1860; d. Vienna, May 18, 1911), arr. Arnold Schoenberg and Rainer Riehn
Composed 1908-9; arranged 1921/1983; 40 minutes

Similar to how actors refuse to utter the word “Macbeth” inside a theater, Gustav Mahler felt queasy when it came time to write his Ninth Symphony. Even though he had completed the gigantic choral Eighth – the Symphony of a Thousand – the previous year, monstrous fear held him back from calling Das Lied von der Erde his Ninth. (Beethoven completed nine symphonies; Bruckner died before completing his Ninth). Instead, Mahler gave this emotionally conceived song-cycle a descriptive title, The Song of the Earth, but still referred to it as a symphony. It requires a substantial job for a composer who was temperamentally at odds with an establishment of any kind. Still, it did bring him into direct contact with a new generation of music students. Their performances of the imposed pieces in the annual competition pleased him sufficiently to agree to write both the Rapsodie and a brief sight-reading test-piece (Petite pièce) for the clarinet students in the 1910 competition. He orchestrated both in the following year, for full orchestra. Debussy himself was on the jury. He said at the time that the Première rapsodie (he never completed a second) was “one of the most pleasing pieces I have ever written.”

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Walther Mahler conducting, around 1916, caricature by Austrian silhouette artist Otto Böhler
for wind quintet (with doubling on piccolo, cor anglais, E-flat and bass clarinets), also string quartet, harmonicum, celesta, piano and a large percussion kit. At this time, however, Schoenberg’s brave attempt to make new music reach a new audience — often unseen or by bringing an “innocent ear” to their listening — failed. Hyper-inflation in Austria made such efforts unsustainable. The score was left unfinished until 1983, when German composer and conductor Rainer Riehn (1941-2015) completed the orchestration and prepared the arrangement for publication.

Back to Mahler now. In 1907, Mahler experienced major disruptions to his life as he had known for the past ten years. He resigned his administratively arduous post as director of the Vienna Court Opera, soon afterwards signing on with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. But, more significantly, in 1907, he had been diagnosed with a lesion of the heart, forcing major changes in a lifestyle. The summer months, when he found the time to compose, saw him climbing mountains and walking through forests — "wrestling my ideas from nature," he told conductor Bruno Walter. "I have never been able to compose only at my desk — I need outside exercise for my inner exercises," he added. A few months later, he was further devastated by the death of his daughter Maria from diptheria. She was four, he was 46 and, just four years later at the age of 50, he, too, would be dead.

Feelings of mortality are present from the outset of The Song of the Earth, which he wrote mainly in the summer of 1908, after his first season at the Met. Tenor and mezzo-soprano (or baritone) alternate through the six poems that he selected from a small collection of 80 poems titled Die chinesische Flöte (The Chinese Flute). These had been recently published, in 1907, by Hans Bethge (1876-1946) in German, which he had freely translated and adapted from two 19th century French translations of 8th century Chinese sources. For all this distancing, the poems that Mahler selected and then reshaped into a symphonic structure spoke deeply to him and resulted in one of his finest compositions. Four of the poems have been traced back to the most celebrated Chinese poet of the period, Li Bai. The second movement is based on a poem by Chang Tui, and poems by Mong Kao Jen and Wang Wei are combined in the finale, all in Bethge’s translations.

The tenor has the first song, The Drinking Song of Earth’s Sorrow, which opens with a horn call, closely followed by a motif which binds the symphony together and which has suggestions of the pentatonic scale — perhaps drawn from early Chinese cylinder recordings. Mahler is believed to have listened to before setting his Chinese poems. The unnatural, strained exuberance of the opening song’s hymn to wine cools three times to the words “Dark is life, dark is death!” Structurally, the song has elements of a sonata allegro, with contrasting themes and a repeated exposition. A sequence of slow movements and scherzos will then lead inexorably towards an extended finale, in which song cycle and symphony are interwoven in a farewell that is as long as the other movements combined.

In the second song, The Solitary One in Autumn, the mezzo seeks peace and rest among nature’s decay. The performing direction on the score, somewhat dragging and exhausted, appropriately encapsulates the singer-poet’s solitary experience. On the surface, Of Youths appears to transcend the surrounding melancholy, but the green and white porcelain pavilion described in the poem, like the chinoiserie in Mahler’s music, seems transitory and fragile. Of Beauty is an idyll, where the mezzo wistfully recalls unruly horsemen and the ache of romance, only to summon feelings of poignancy at the fleeting nature of it all. The fifth song brings a return of the drunkard (not a form of escapism that Mahler personally sought). It is a light-hearted song, perhaps with underlying bitterness and cynicism, that pauses only to acknowledge the beauty of springtime birdsong.

The final movement contains music of transcendent beauty and restraint. This is Mahler’s monumental summing-up of musical themes and motifs that make up this beautiful work. The two poems, including the additions made by Bethge and Mahler, bid farewell in the simplest of images: a setting sun, a closing flower, a weary homebound worker, a roosting bird, a poet longing for closure. Three main thematic sections appear twice with a deeply moving farewell march between. By the end, Mahler finds beauty in life with the Earth awakening again to Spring and his final ‘awg’ (forever), is nine times repeated. Mahler’s music “has the beauty of loneliness and pain,” composer Benjamin Britten eloquently states, “a serenity literally supernatural.”

— Program notes © 2022 Keith Horner. Comments welcomed: khnotes@sympatico.ca
MATT SHARROCK, percussion

Matt Sharrock is a versatile marimbist, percussionist and conductor who is a member (or founding member) of numerous ensembles, including the Transient Canvas duo, the mixed quartet Hinge and the Boston Percussion Group, as well as a resident percussionist with the Chameleon Arts Ensemble. They are currently on faculty at the Boston Conservatory at Berklee.

YOOBIN SON, flute

A member of the New York Philharmonic, flutist Yoobin Son has also served as principal flute of Lincoln Center’s Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra and the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. Additionally, Ms. Son is an active soloist and chamber musician, as well as an adjunct professor at New York University. She received her undergraduate degree from the Curtis Institute, her Master’s from Yale University and a professional studies certificate and artist diploma from the Manhattan School of Music.

BEE UNGAR, bassoon

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ABOUT THE ARTISTS

JUNG-A BANG, piano

Pianist Jung-A Bang has appeared in prestigious concert halls across the world as a soloist and collaborative artist. She has spent summers at the Perlman Music Program as their Young Artist Fellow, and at the Banff Chamber Music Residency Program with her duo, L’ètoile. In high demand as a collaborative pianist, the South Korean native has served on the staff of Banff International Music Program and Aspen Music Festival, as well as at major music schools, including The Juilliard School and New England Conservatory.

ALLISON ELDREDGE, cello

Currently serving on the faculty of Harvard University and the New England Conservatory Preparatory School, Allison Eldredge rose to the attention of classical music audiences when she was invited to perform the Elgar Cello Concerto with the Chicago Symphony by Music Director Daniel Barenboim. In 1989, she was awarded the coveted Avery Fisher Career Grant and Musical America’s “Young Artist of the Year” Award and has since been performing in the world’s leading concert halls.

BARRY SHIFFMAN, viola

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