



MONTREAL

CITY OF MUSIC 2004

Monday, November 22, 2004 8:00 p.m. (EST)
Thursday, November 23, 2004 7:00 p.m. (UTC)
SALLE WILFRID-PELLETIER, PLACE DES ARTS

JAMES EHNES, violin
EDUARD LAUREL, piano

Sonata for Violin and Piano in G Minor Claude Debussy

Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in G Major, op. 13 Gabriel Fauré

Intermission

Ma mère l'oye (for four-handed piano) Maurice Ravel

Sonata for Violin and Piano in G Major Maurice Ravel

Sonate no 2 en sol majeur, pour violon et piano Maurice Ravel

Tzigane Maurice Ravel

PROGRAM NOTES

Claude Debussy

b St Germain-en-Laye, 22 August 1862; d Paris, 25 March 1918
Sonata for Violin and Piano (1917)

By the end of 1917 Debussy had completed half of a set of six sonatas for various combinations of instruments. The violin sonata was the last of the three, as well as his last composition altogether; cancer would take his life before he could finish the set. The sonata has three movements, as do its two predecessors, which proceed with a sense of spontaneity that borders on the improvisatory. This is not to suggest that the work reached its final form quickly, however. Debussy had some difficulty putting it together, particularly relating the third movement to the work as a whole. Indeed, the movement caused him enough consternation that he initially discarded it. He would eventually decide to use it after all, albeit with some changes, and certain reservations: "It goes through the most curious contortions before ending up with a simple idea which turns back on itself like a snake biting its own tail — an amusement whose attraction I take leave to doubt!" Stylistically, the sonata (again, as with the previous two) is quite deliberately set apart from both programmatic music and compositions of a type that Debussy considered overly intellectual. Instead, they return to the era of the French *clavecinistes*. This is reflected in the work's classical sonata structure, as well as the fact that it was to be part of a set of six. The opening *allegro vivo* even goes so far as to be structured in what is for all intents and purposes sonata form, although it has been noted "the component parts are treated rather episodically." The *intermezzo* that follows, light and delicate, with a decidedly Spanish flavour, is in the Harlequinesque manner of the *Fêtes galantes*. The rondo finale begins with a brief reference to the theme of the first movement, but then launches into an exuberant dance reminiscent of *Iberia*.

Gabriel Fauré

b Pamiers, Ariège, 12 May 1845; d Paris, 4 November 1924
Violin Sonata No. 1, opus 13 (1875-6)

Fauré's first violin sonata was composed in 1875-6 and dedicated to the violinist Paul Viardot (to whom the composer's sister was briefly engaged in 1877). Most of the sonata was written in the summer of 1875, while Fauré was a houseguest of Camille Clerc. It was through Clerc's influence that Boosey and Hawkes took on publication of the sonata, although this was done on the condition that Fauré receive no royalties. It is one of Fauré's most popular works, and indeed a landmark in the renaissance of French chamber music (it arrived ten years before Franck's celebrated Sonata in A). It was reportedly received with enthusiasm at its first performance, especially by Saint-Saëns, who published a glowing review in the *Journal de Musique*,

making note especially of "Faure's elusive combination and urbane charm and 'unexpected audacities.'" The first movement opens "without preliminaries", the impassioned first theme (exceptionally long at 21 measures) introduced by piano and continued by the violin. This, along with the second theme, provides the bulk of the material for the movement. It is remarkable how Faure creates a sense of continuous forward momentum, while integrating dynamic shifts that provide momentary cessations of tension and enhance the effect of the arrival of the climax. The D minor slow movement is the emotional center of the work, well described as "a disquieting marriage between the gently swaying barcarolle rhythms, and the intense, at times visionary chromaticism." The beautifully shaped principal theme is underpinned by rich harmonies, and Faure "slips through a succession of keys with the equivalent of a conjurer's sleight of hand." The scherzo that follows is a movement of "delicious individuality," in which violin and piano toss material back and forth, was encored at the first performance. The "quirky" offbeat accents that provide so much of the movement's character also have the effect of dividing the phrases into unusual lengths. The trio section brings with it a sense of relaxation, before the scherzo returns, "lighter than air," to round out the form. The *allegro quasi presto* finale opens with the theme that is gentle in character, and which seems for some time to simply run around in circles, "chasing its own tail" about a recurrent C sharp. Once the syncopated octaves arrive in the piano however, we are down to business, and the music proceeds to build towards a very intense peak. The calmer middle section is familiar in its chromaticism, after which there is a reprise of the principal material. In the coda with which the work concludes, Faure allows, for the first time, virtuosity to come to the fore.

Maurice Ravel

b Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, 7 March 1875; *d* Paris, 28 Dec 1937

Mother Goose Suite (1908)

Tzigane (1922-24)

Violin Sonata in G (1927)

Ravel's *Mother Goose* originated in 1908 as a set of five piano duets for Mimie and Jean Dodebski, the children of a friend, who Ravel wanted to encourage to practice. As they were somewhat shy, the first public performance of the piano duet version was given in Paris in 1910 by two other young musicians, Jeanne Leleu and Genevieve Durony, who were all of ten and six. Ravel wrote that "the idea of evoking in these pieces the poetry of childhood naturally led me to simplify my style and to refine my means of expression," and this can be felt in each of the pieces, which depict the Mother Goose fairy tales *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Beauty and The Beast*, *Tom Thumb*, *The Empress of the Pagodas* and *The Fairy Garden*.

Ravel described *Tzigane* as "a virtuoso piece in the style of a Hungarian rhapsody," by which he meant that while it may have authentic Gypsy music as its inspiration (as well as their culture in a more general sense), it is written in that familiar *stil hongrois* that has been with us since Haydn. It was in July 1922, at a private musicale in London, Ravel heard some of his pieces played by a Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arányi, whom he then asked to play some Gypsy melodies; Ravel was apparently so captivated by them that he made her play until it was almost dawn. While the virtuoso showpiece was conceived that night, it was not finished until two years later, in 1924. The form is loose and episodic, with several distinct themes and changes of tempo, though it does fit the bi-partite, slow-fast form of pieces such as Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*.

The Violin Sonata in G major was premiered in 1927, by Georges Enescu. Enescu was, at that point the leading violinist of his generation, which is illustrated by the fact that he not only played the work on short notice, but had it memorized within the space of two readings. The first performance was quite successful, though the violinist was not, apparently, fond of the jazz idioms present in the work. The second movement, in particular, offering a *blues* as the slow movement of a 'serious' chamber work, drew more than a little criticism. However, the jazz elements are not limited by any means to that movement alone. "The stylistic peculiarity of the [first] movement," Gerald Larner tells us "is that it is consistently taunted by mischievously percussive little figures from the same ragtime background as Debussy's *Minstrels*." The aforementioned *blues*, of course, makes the popular element quite explicit. It opens with a pizzicato imitation of the banjo, and is rife with multivalent harmonies, "provocative syncopations...sensual melodic slides, [and] the self-consciously casual ending on an unresolved dissonance." the last movement, which is not the one Ravel originally had in mind, works well as a finale due to the momentum is gathers from the ragtime figure that was introduced in the first movement.

Source : Michael Free – Pro Musica