

KISHWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey Decker

Ancient Airs and Dances – Suite No. 3 by Ottorino Respighi (1979-1936)

Although we know him as a composer and sometimes conductor, Ottorino Respighi was a notable musicologist and took great interest in Italian – and sometimes French – music of the Renaissance and early Baroque eras, especially popular lute music. Before composing his most well-known works, *Roman Triptych* consisting of *Pines of Rome*, *Fountains of Rome*, and *Roman Festivals*, he wrote works based on the early music of his studies.

Among those works are his three orchestral suites titled *Antiche arie e danze*, or *Ancient Airs and Dances*. All music included in the suites is freely transcribed from original pieces for solo lute or guitar. Respighi composed the third suite – which is performed tonight – in 1931. Among the influencing pieces are lute songs by the French lutenist Jean-Baptiste Besard (1567-1625), a guitar work by Ludovico Roncalli (1654-1713), lute pieces by Santino Garsi da Parma (1542-1604), and several anonymous works. It is a beautiful, solemn set of pieces with an overall melancholic or perhaps retrospective mood. Perhaps the anti-fascist Respighi was feeling a strong nostalgia for a pre-Mussolini Italy.

Like the other suites, it is scored for strings. In fact, Respighi wrote in the printed score that Suite No. 3 could be performed by a string quartet. This beautiful suite combines four works: 1) *Italiana*, a somewhat slow piece by an anonymous composer, 2) *Arie di corte*, or *Court Airs*, of several different speeds by Besard, 3) *Siciliana*, another somewhat slow piece also by an anonymous composer, and 4) *Passacaglia*, of a lighter, faster speed written in 1692 by Roncalli. It lasts about 20 minutes.

Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33 by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Tchaikovsky composed his *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, Op. 33, between December 1876 and January 1877. With the German cellist and fellow professor Wilhelm Fitzenhagen as soloist, Nikolai Rubinstein conducted the Moscow Conservatory Orchestra in the premiere in Moscow on November 30, 1877.

It being Tchaikovsky's first work for cello and orchestra, he recruited Fitzenhagen to review sketches and a version of them for cello and piano and offer advice. After Tchaikovsky completed the work, and during a period of confusion as to which publishing house Tchaikovsky had chosen to publish it, Fitzenhagen stepped in and made radical changes. He reordered

variations and even removed one to hopefully inspire more applause for the soloist mid-performance, something quite common at that time.

In spite of the somewhat unauthorized changes, Tchaikovsky approved the publishing of the version for cello and piano in November 1889. But, when the full score for cello and orchestra went for printing, Tchaikovsky had changed his mind and was upset about the changes. Even so, audiences today more commonly hear Fitzenhagen's edited version and it is that one heard tonight. Tchaikovsky's original version was finally performed for the first time on April 24, 1941, in Moscow.

The work as first published presents the so-called Rococo theme followed by seven variations on that theme. In a letter, Tchaikovsky emphasized that Rococo was, to his mind, a pure style emerging at the time of Haydn and Mozart, but that the meaning of the term had deteriorated because of the coloristic excesses of Romantic-era composers. A great admirer of Mozart, Tchaikovsky composed a simple theme for his variations in a manner he believed to be Mozartian, or Rococo.

In his original conception, Tchaikovsky very carefully crafted a relaxed work that was a progressive expansion and evolution of the theme's original phrases with faster rhythms and up-and-down scales. Unfortunately, Fitzenhagen's reordering destroyed this relaxed progression and evolution. It is still a wonderful work to hear performed, though, and pays homage to a great performer's virtuosity.

The composition is scored for solo cello with an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, and strings. The work is about 19 minutes long.

D'un matin de printemps (Of a Spring Morning) **by Lili Boulanger**

Although not as famous as her older sister Nadia (1887-1979), who is counted among the greatest pedagogues in music composition in the 20th century, Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) was a remarkable composer who achieved much in her 24 and a half years and, had she lived longer, may even have reached a greater level of fame than that achieved by her much longer-lived sister.

Submitting her 1913 cantata *Faust et Hélène*, Lili Boulanger became the first woman to win the famed *Prix de Rome*. During the last five years of her life, she composed tonight's work, *D'un matin de printemps*, or *Of a Spring Morning*, and its companion piece, *D'un soir triste*, or *Of a Sad Evening*, both first for violin and piano and later scored for orchestra. *D'un matin de printemps* is remarkable for its sharpness and vigor. Despite her youth and presumed inexperience, someone wrote after hearing the version for violin and piano that "her textures and harmonic language placed her music in the French mainstream of the period." In addition, her sensitivity to the expressive character and technical demands of the violin are in evidence throughout what the writer called "this striking piece."

The orchestral version of the work premiered on March 13, 1921, in the concert hall of the Paris Conservatory, with René-Emmanuel Baton (1879-1940) conducting the orchestra of the Concerts Padeloup. Sadly, Lili had passed away several years before on March 15, 1918. A person of fragile constitution since childhood, she suffered terribly from what we know today as Crohn's disease.

Other commentary and praise for the work comes from Belgian musicologist Harry Halbreich (1931-2016), who wrote, "*D'un matin de Printemps* is on the whole a Scherzo with impulsive verve, with an airy and transparent orchestration, but we see emerging in the middle a vehement orchestral gradation which reveals the pain underlying this serenity so precarious." And music critic Gerald Lamer wrote that the work contains more accents of Debussy than any of her other works.

In its orchestral version as played tonight, *D'un matin de printemps* is scored for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, sarrusophone (a metal reed instrument, its part optionally played by contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, triangle, suspended cymbal, small snare drum (alternatively castanets), harp, celesta, and strings. The work lasts about six and a half minutes.

Daphnis et Chloé Suite No. 2 **by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) released a new world of sound, first with his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, or *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, and continued with his three-movement description of the Sea, *La Mer*. These two works, and some from in between their compositions, represented a wholly different approach to music, one that could be described as dialogs of spontaneity and planning, the unstable and the solid.

Debussy's *Prélude* disconcerted his contemporaries. One of those colleagues, Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), conceded that the work was "pretty sound" to which to listen but that it contained "not the slightest musical idea in the real sense of the word." There is truth in that remark, though. The opening flute theme is not an idea like those that came before it in music history that could become a subject for musical development but is instead, over and over again, the starting point for new departures in music, for what some might say are variations that are more away from theme than upon it.

Debussy's orchestral works that included and followed *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* were unquestionable predecessors – or preludes – to those of Maurice Ravel. The musical language of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, and his works that followed, opened a direct path to the music Maurice Ravel created for his ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (of 1909-1911) for impresario Sergei Diaghilev's (1872-1929) *Ballets Russes* in Paris. Like Debussy's *Prélude*, Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* lives in the same mythological landscape where nature is just as our imagination would have it.

Ravel's ballet music, or symphonie chorégraphique (choreographic symphony), premiered with Diaghilev's ballet company at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris on June 8, 1912; Pierre Monteux (1875-1964) conducted. The choreography was that of dancer Michel Fokine (1880-1942), who had adapted the story from a pastoral romance by a Greek writer of the 2nd century that told of the love between a goatherd named Daphnis and a shepherdess Chloé. (It is interesting to note that Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* ballet premiered in Paris on May 29, 1913, just a week less than a year later!)

Ravel later created two suites from the music he composed for the ballet. Although it consists of what is essentially the whole Part III of the original ballet, it is known in its extracted form as Suite No. 2, and that is what is performed tonight. It is in three parts: 1) *Lever du jour*, or *Sunrise*, 2) *Pantomime*, a musical description of *Les amours de Pan et Syrinx*, or *The Love of Pan and Syrinx*, and 3) *Danse générale*, or *Bacchanale*, a wild event of drunk revelry. It can be performed with chorus, as used in the original ballet, or without.

The orchestra employed for the full ballet – and which is mostly the same in the suites – is huge and consists of one piccolo that doubles third flute, two flutes with the second doubling second piccolo, one alto flute, two oboes, one English horn, one E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, one bass clarinet, three bassoons, one contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets in C, three trombones, one tuba, snare drum, castanets, crotales, cymbals, wind machine, bass drum, field drum, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle, celesta, glockenspiel, xylophone, two harps, and strings divided into ten parts. In the full ballet, there are parts for piccolo and E-flat clarinet onstage, one horn and trumpet offstage, and a wordless four-part choir offstage! The Suite No. 2 lasts about 15 minutes.