

Tales of the Unexpected

MONDAY, MARCH 30, 5 PM
KEHOE IRON WORKS

NOTES BY KEN MELTZER

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp (1915)

I. Pastorale. Lento, dolce rubato

II. Interlude. Tempo di Minuetto

III. Finale. Allegro moderato ma risoluto

Tara Helen O'Connor, flute

Philip Dukes, viola

Bridget Kibbey, harp

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809–1849)

The Masque of the Red Death (1842)

Mervon Mehta, narrator

ANDRÉ CAPLET (1878–1925)

Conte fantastique for Harp and String Quartet (1919)

Benny Kim, violin

Giovanni Guzzo, violin

Robin Ashwell, viola

Eric Kim, cello

Bridget Kibbey, harp

INTERMISSION

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

Pavane pour une infante défunte (for flute and piano) (1899)

Tara Helen O'Connor, flute

Sebastian Knauer, piano

Piano Trio in A minor (1914)

I. Modéré

II. Pantoum. Assez vif

III. Passacaille. Très large

IV. Final. Animé

Giovanni Guzzo, violin

Keith Robinson, cello

Ana-Maria Vera, piano

Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp (1915)

Claude Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-Laye, France, on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris, France, on March 25, 1918.

🕒 *Approx. performance time: 17 mins.*

📅 *SMF performance history: SMF premiere*

Claude Debussy's Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp was a product of the most desperate period in the French composer's life. With the outbreak

of the First World War in August of 1914, Debussy experienced a feeling of helplessness. On August 8, Debussy wrote to his friend, music publisher Jacques Durand:

You know that I have no *sang-froid* and certainly nothing of the army spirit. I've never had a rifle in my hands. My recollections of 1870 and the anxiety of my wife, whose son and son-in-law are in the army, prevent me from becoming very enthusiastic.

All this makes my life intense and troubled. I am just a poor little atom crushed in this terrible cataclysm. What I am doing seems so wretchedly small. I've got to the state of envying (French composer Erik) Satie who, as a corporal, is really going to defend Paris.

Ten days later, Debussy wrote to Durand: "it's almost impossible to work! To tell the truth, I don't care. The side-effects of war are more distressing than people think." In addition to the horrors of war, Debussy was suffering from the cancer that would claim his life.

But the following year, Debussy found new inspiration for composing: "I want to work, not so much for myself, but to give proof, however small it may be, that even if there were thirty million Boches (French slang for German soldiers) French thought will not be destroyed." On October 9, 1915, he declared to Durand: "I shall be writing up to the last minute, like André Chénier who wrote poetry just before mounting the scaffold!" During this period, Debussy signed his compositions "Claude Debussy, Musicien Français."

In the summer of 1915, Debussy stayed in the seaside village of Pourville in Normandy. There, Debussy composed his *Douze Études* for solo piano, and pieces for two pianos, *En blanc et noir*. During that same period, Debussy also wrote two Sonatas—one for Cello and Piano, the other for Flute, Viola and Harp. The Flute, Viola and Harp Sonata received its first (private) performance at the Longy Club in Boston, Massachusetts, on November 7, 1916. The public premiere took place at London's Aeolian Hall on February 2, 1917.

Debussy intended the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp to be the second in a series of six such compositions. The third Sonata, for Violin and Piano, came two years later. Debussy contemplated a fourth Sonata for oboe, horn and harpsichord that he never composed. Debussy, who had been suffering the ravages of cancer, died on March 25, 1918, at the age of 55.

I. Pastorale. Lento, dolce rubato—The lyrical *Pastorale* opens with a flowing melody, played by the flute in melancholy fashion (*mélancoliquement*). It is the first of several themes that are introduced and developed before yielding to the next, including a playful dance sequence (*Vif et joyeux*). The *Pastorale* journeys to a delicate close.

II. Interlude. Tempo di Minuetto—For the Sonata's second movement, Debussy turns to the minuet, a court dance in triple meter popular in the Baroque and Classical eras. The *Interlude* opens in the minuet's traditional 3/4 time, with a flute melody that is marked *dolce semplice*. The minuet is juxtaposed with lively episodes in 4/4 time. A final reprise of the minuet, played "sweetly and sadly" (*dolce e tristamente*) concludes the second movement.

III. Finale. Allegro moderato ma risoluto—The *Finale*, the liveliest of the Sonata's three movements, alludes to thematic material from the opening *Pastorale*. The connection between the two movements is solidified by a brief quote of the *Pastorale* toward the close. From there, the Sonata dashes to the energetic finish.

The Masque of the Red Death (1842)

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809, and died in Baltimore, Maryland, on October 7, 1849.

🕒 *Approx. performance time: 15 mins.*

📅 *SMF performance history: SMF premiere*

The Masque of the Red Death, a Gothic short story by American author Edgar Allan Poe, was first published in the May 1842 edition of *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*. The story was then titled *The Mask of the Red Death. A Fantasy*. When the work was republished in the July 1845 edition of the *Broadway Journal*, it bore the now-familiar title *The Masque of the Red Death*.

In Poe's tale, a country is ravaged by the Red Death, a plague that claims its victims in horrific fashion, and in just a half-hour's time. Rather than come to the aid of his subjects, the Prince Prospero walls himself and a thousand of his friends within one of his abbeys. One night, the Prince holds a lavish masked ball in the abbey. A robed and masked figure, assuming the appearance of a victim of the Red Death, arrives at the ball. The Prince, dagger in hand, chases after the visitor, but falls dead at his feet. When the revelers unmask the visitor, they find nothing underneath:

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

Conte fantastique for Harp and String Quartet (1919)

André Caplet was born in Le Havre, France, on November 23, 1878, and died in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, on April 22, 1925.

🕒 *Approx. performance time: 16 mins.*

📅 *SMF performance history: SMF premiere*

André Caplet studied at the Paris Conservatoire from 1896-1901. In 1901, Caplet won the coveted Prix de Rome. Caplet had a distinguished career as a conductor, both in Paris, and in Boston, where he led the Boston Opera from 1910-1914. Caplet was a close friend of Claude Debussy, and participated in the orchestration of several of the great Impressionist composer's works.

Caplet was a successful composer in his own right. One of Caplet's best-known works is a piece for harp and string quartet, inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's 1842 short story, *The Masque of the Red Death*. Caplet's full title for the work is: *Conte fantastique d'après une des Histoires extraordinaires d'Ellen Edgar Poë: "Le Masque de la Mort Rouge"* (*Fantastic Tale*, after one of the extraordinary stories of Edgar Allan Poe: "The Masque of the Red Death"). In his score, Caplet also includes a written summary of Poe's tale.

It is certainly possible to trace the outline of Poe's tale in Caplet's musical work, from the opening measures suggesting the horrors of the Red Death, to the depictions of Prince Prospero's opulent ball, and the horrible end he and his courtiers suffer. And to be sure, the harp's recreations of the guest's knocks at the door and the clock striking twelve, represent a very specific and precise type of musical word-painting. But for the most part, Caplet allows the audience the space to let its imagination roam free, with music remarkable for its harmonic daring and brilliant, kaleidoscopic deployment of instrumental colors.

Maurice Ravel was born in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France, on March 7, 1875, and died in Paris, France, on December 28, 1937.

Pavane pour une infante défunte (for flute and piano) (1899)

🕒 *Approx. performance time: 7 mins.*

📅 *SMF performance history: SMF premiere*

Maurice Ravel originally composed his *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (*Pavane for a dead princess*) in 1899 for solo piano. In explaining the work's enigmatic title, Ravel insisted: "I let myself be led into writing that title because of the pleasure I got from the assonance of the words." He further commented: "It is not a funeral lament for a dead child, but rather an evocation of the pavane that could have been danced by such a little princess as painted by Valasquez at the Spanish Court."

Ravel dedicated the *Pavane* to his friend Princess Edmond de Polignac. The Princess, born in the United States as Winnaretta Singer, was the heiress to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune, and a great patron of the arts.

Ravel was somewhat bemused by the *Pavane*'s immense popularity, both in its original piano and 1910 orchestral versions. "I no longer see in it any virtues but, alas, I do see its faults—the influence of (French composer Emmanuel) Chabrier, very flagrant and its poor form." Still, Ravel maintained definite opinions as to how the piece should be performed. Pianist Charles Oulmont recalled:

One evening I sat down to play the piano for one of my mother's *soirées*, not knowing that Ravel was one of the many guests. I played, from memory of course, his *Pavane*. When I had finished the piece Ravel came up to me. I taxed him with not having warned me by some sign that he was in the audience. He ignored my complaint and, with a grimace that defies description, murmured:

"Listen, dear boy, remember another time that I wrote a Pavane for a dead princess."

"But..."

"And not a dead Pavane for a princess."

This concert features an arrangement of the *Pavane* for flute and piano.

Ravel's delicate *Pavane* is in rondo form. The slow tempo (*Lento*), 4/4 meter and pervasive elegance

recall the original stately court dance of the 16th and 17th centuries. The flute introduces the haunting principal melody that alternates with graceful interludes. A final reprise of the melody resolves to a serene conclusion.

Piano Trio in A minor (1914)

🕒 *Approx. performance time: 26 mins.*

📅 *SMF performance history: 4/02/16*

Ravel composed his Piano Trio in the summer of 1914, while vacationing in the Basque village of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, near his birthplace of Ciboure. Ravel completed the work between April 3 and August 7 of that year. But it appears that Ravel had been contemplating a piano trio for some time. Earlier, Ravel told his friend Maurice Delage: "My Trio is finished. I only need the themes for it." (A jest reminiscent of Ravel's comment to composer Arthur Honegger: "I have written only one masterpiece. That is the *Boléro*. Unfortunately, it contains no music.")

As Ravel worked on the Trio, the prospect of war was intensifying at a horrific pace. In March of 1914, Ravel wrote to the wife of Alfredo Casella (he played the piano part in the Trio's 1915 premiere): "I am working on the trio despite the cold, the storms, the thunder, the rain, and the hail." Shortly before Ravel completed the Trio, he wrote to Cipa Godebski: "I think that at any moment I shall go mad or lose my mind. I have never worked so hard, with such insane heroic rage."

During the same period Ravel worked on his Piano Trio, he was composing the piano suite, *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Ravel did not finish that work before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. In 1915, Ravel volunteered for military service, during which time he tended to the wounded, and transported war materials at night. After his discharge in 1917, Ravel completed *Le tombeau de Couperin*, dedicating the movements to friends who died in WWI.

Ravel, mindful of the challenges a piano trio poses for achieving ideal instrumental balances, found guidance and inspiration from Camille Saint-Saëns's works in that same genre. As Ravel's friend Roland-Manuel recalled: "Ravel placed himself under Saint-Saëns' discipline, delighted to deal in material thus contrasted and to build upon recalcitrant foundations...In the most successful movements, especially the first and the Passacaglia, the incompatibility of opposing sonorities is solved with consummate lightness and distinction."

Ravel dedicated the Piano Trio to his teacher, André Gédalge. The premiere took place at the Paris Salle Gaveau on January 28, 1915, performed by an ensemble comprising pianist Alfredo Casella, Gabriel Willaume, violin, and Louis Feuillard, cello.

I. *Modéré*—Ravel noted that the opening theme of the Piano Trio “has a Basque flavor.” That melody, introduced by the piano, features a 3—2—3 rhythm (the movement is set in 8/8 time). It’s not long before the melody receives a passionate, voluptuous treatment by the ensemble. The violin introduces the second principal melody, played more slowly than the first (*plus lent qu’au début*), but featuring the same 3—2—3 rhythm. The movement is notable throughout for the virtuoso writing and brilliant variety of instrumental sonorities. A hushed, mysterious episode brings the movement to a close.

II. *Pantoum. Assez vif*—Ravel titles the second movement of his Piano Trio a *Pantoum*, a reference to a form of poetry of Malaysian origin. A classic pantoum (or *pantun*) features a series of rhyming (abab) quatrains. The second and fourth lines of the quatrain become the first and third of its successor. Ravel’s purely instrumental evocation of a *Pantoum* is a vivacious scherzo, set in 3/4 time. In the central episode, the piano plays in 4/2 time, while the strings continue in triple meter. Those roles are briefly reversed, leading to a reprise of the opening section, and the dashing final bars.

III. *Passacaille. Très large*—For the slow-tempo third movement, Ravel turns to the *passacaglia* (Fr. *Passacaille*), a Baroque musical structure in which a repeated sequence serves as the foundation for a series of variations. The piano, introducing the eight-bar sequence, is soon joined by the cello, followed by the violin. The movement is constructed as an arch, building to a powerful climax before resolving to the final bars. The musicians depart in the reverse order of their initial entrance, leaving the solo piano for the closing bars. The *Finale* ensues without pause.

IV. *Final. Animé*—After a measure of introduction by the strings, the piano sings the *Finale*’s (Fr., *Final*) opening theme, based upon an inversion of its counterpart in the first movement. The music juxtaposes (here and throughout) 5/4 and 7/4 time signatures. The second theme is a grand statement by the piano (*Moins animé*), accompanied by the strings’ extended, stratospheric trills. The writing for the trio of instruments is stunning throughout (Ravel,

a superb keyboard artist, proclaimed himself “absolutely incapable of playing the piano part”) and radiating the most brilliant sonorities. A grand reprise of the two principal themes brings the Trio to a resounding close.