FrenchFest

Program #1 Notes

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Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944)
Piano Trio No. 2 in A minor, Op. 34, mvt. III

Cécile Chaminade, born and educated in Paris, received much honor and recognition in the first few decades of her career. She was the first female composer admitted to the Légion d'Honneur. She composed several large-scale works in the 1880s, including a ballet, a comic opera, an orchestral suite, and the dramatic symphony Les amazones, along with her two piano trios. From the 1890s on, she emphasized songs and piano character pieces. In all, she composed about 400 works.

Chaminade traveled widely as a pianist-composer, with tours to England, where she was a guest of Queen Victoria, and in 1908 to the United States, where her music was already popular. Several American musical clubs had been named after her. (Chaminade Clubs still exist in Providence, Rhode Island, Yonkers, New York, and North Attleboro, Massachusetts, for example.) She did not visit Grand Rapids, but her music was performed at various club events and St. Cecilia concerts.

In later years, Chaminade's reputation declined as the modernist style came into favor, and also because of contradictory standards applied to women composers. As Marcia Citron writes, "pieces deemed sweet and charming . . . were criticized for being too feminine, while works that emphasize thematic development . . . were considered too virile or masculine and hence unsuited to the womanly nature of the composer."

The final movement of her second piano trio is notable for its varied themes and textures. Chaminade uses the three instruments in various ways: at times all playing one theme together in octaves, at times supporting and contrasting one another in a more complex texture. Altogether, the movement is designed to create excitement, building toward its climax at the very end of the piece.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
Sonata in G minor for Violin and Piano, L. 140

Debussy's violin sonata is one of his last works, composed under difficult conditions: during the hardships of World War I, while the composer was suffering from terminal cancer. As Marianne Wheeldon observes, the composer moved away from theatrical music in these years and toward traditional genres such as the sonata. He also tried to link his works with French identity, though his works in the period just before this had been much more open to outside influences and cross-fertilization. The violin sonata is the last of a set of three sonatas that represent his late style; the other are one for the unusual combination of flute, viola and harp, and a cello sonata with piano that will be heard in program 3. All these works have a spare, simplified texture when compared with earlier pieces by Debussy, such as his symphonic work La Mer and the opera Pelléas et Mélisande. In the midst of war, the effect is something like the illusory calm in the eye of a hurricane.

French musicians in the early years of the twentieth century were very aware of what was called the "cyclic sonata": a multi-movement work in which a theme from the first movement is reused in later movements. There were varied positions about how this should be done, one linked with the Belgian composer César Franck and one with Vincent d'Indy, a composer and teacher who had studied with Franck. D'Indy believed that the recurring theme should be used to integrate the whole piece, creating a kind of mystical unity, although his teacher Franck had not always done so. In two of his three late sonatas, as Wheeldon writes, Debussy does quote an earlier theme, but "simply recalls the theme and moves on, with apparently little attempt to further integrate the quoted material." As d'Indy held right-wing and anti-Semitic views in this period, Debussy may have chosen to separate himself from

those associations by limiting the extent of cyclic composition.

The opening theme of movement 1 is memorable. The violin enters with a melody made of descending triads over held piano chords. The slow held-back sound of that melody results because it is in half notes in ¾ time and thus in a slower tempo than the meter suggests. This creates a contemplative atmosphere for the opening of the sonata. Eventually, much quicker passages are heard, often alternating with the original theme. After a charming intermezzo, the third movement opens with the recurrence of that opening theme (this time over a much more active piano part), but then moves on to new material for the remainder of the piece. Though one section is marked "twice as slow," most of this third movement is quick and energetic, ending the sonata with a flourish.

Throughout the sonata, Debussy uses diverse rhythms and meters. As usual, his approach to harmony and pitch is unconcerned with convention: one passage in the first movement is built on parallel fifths, and one melody toward the end of the middle movement uses the pitches of an augmented triad The sinuous flexibility and agile caprice of this sonata make it an exemplar of his approach to composition, reminiscent of his comment to his teacher Ernest Guiraud as a young musician that "There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law." Amid the struggles of illness and war, Debussy's violin sonata met the special needs of the time, but has also remained in the repertoire as a classic work.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)
Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 15

Fauré wrote his first piano quartet in the late 1870s; it was first performed in 1880, and in 1883, the composer revised the final movement. Jean-Michel Nectoux, pioneer scholar of Fauré's music, describes this quartet as one of "the three masterpieces of his youth." (The others are his first violin sonata, to be heard in Program 2, and his Ballade for piano and orchestra.) Fauré's music is admired for its subtlety, fluid approach to rhythm, and the rich harmony drawn from his training in the church modes at the École Niedermeyer. All these qualities are present in this relatively early piece, even as it conforms to the expected musical structures for a multi-movement piece of the nineteenth century.

A few notable qualities are the rhythmic displacement at the end of the first movement's development (for a time, what sounds like beat 1 is actually beat 3); the delightful scampering playfulness of the scherzo; the floating upper line in the piano at the very end of the slow movement; the jubilant energy of the final movement (as the piece that started in C minor concludes in E-flat major), and the shimmering piano phrases toward the end of this final movement. Throughout the quartet, Fauré's idiosyncratic harmony provides numerous beautiful and unexpected moments.

In Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics, Carlo Caballero discusses Marcel Proust's appreciation of Fauré, saying that he "often reflected Fauré's music back into the works of his fictional composer, Vinteuil." Proust mentioned in one of his notebooks that a descriptive phrase he wrote about Vinteuil's music in The Captive, the fifth volume of Remembrance of Things Past, refers to a moment in this piano quartet. In the key phrase of the literary passage, Proust connects the multitude of sensory experiences in the music to "this certain something I might compare to the perfumed silkiness of a geranium." This phrase is typical of Proust in its synaesthesia, or combining of senses. Here he refers to smell and touch to describe an art form based on sound. Whether or not this specific image speaks to an individual listener, the idea of overlapping sensory experiences is a fascinating model with which to approach Fauré's music.

For further reading:

Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
Marcia Citron, "Chaminade, Cécile" in Oxford Music Online.
Marcel Dietschy, *A Portrait of Claude Debussy*, edited and translated by William Ashbrook and Margaret G. Cobb. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
Jean-Michel Nectoux, "Fauré, Gabriel" in Oxford Music Online
Marianne Wheeldon, *Debussy's Late Style*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009.