

PROGRAM NOTES

NAPERVILLE CHAMBER PLAYERS

NOVEMBER 23, 2008

Philippe Gaubert was one of the greatest flautists of all time, as well as an acclaimed composer and conductor at the very center of French musical life in the late 19th century. He was born in Cahors, France in 1879 and lived out his 62 years of musical life in Paris, France. He is representative of the musical movement of French Impressionistic artists such as Claude Monet and composers Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Gabriel Fauré.

Autumn Evening is characterized by melancholy images and sequences with many varied tonal colors and moods that are at times very bright but not too dramatically emotional such as is found in Romantic era music. Perhaps the melodies lack a sense of clear direction at times but the musical imagery is hauntingly beautiful perhaps suggesting the darkness that precedes winter.

Pièce Romantique is a more passionately written work than is typical for a French impressionistic artist. The opening seductive cello solo gently lures the flute to join her in alternating rippling themes depicting romantic pleasure. The keyboard weaves the pulse of the piece forward towards a climax where clearly different themes are competing against one another in 2 against 3 rhythmic configurations. By the end of the piece all is calm and we enjoy a satisfying and peaceful conclusion to all the impressionistic "romantique" upheaval.

Ignace Pleyel was an Austrian born composer, music publisher and piano maker who lived from 1757-1831. At the age of 15, he became a piano student of the great F. J. Haydn and in time was honored as Haydn's greatest student. His compositions were being performed at the same time as Haydn's and the critics and press turned them into rivals in the papers but they always remained great friends. Pleyel was regarded as one of the greatest composers of his time but the styles were changing to a more Romantic era flavor and when Beethoven gained fame, Pleyel's name, since he was such an ardent and conservative Classical composer, was lost to obscurity. He eventually moved to Paris and gained the favor of the elite in France, which enabled him to prosper as few musicians did. He comfortably retired to a rural farm in France living off the profits of his publishing house (which published well over 4,000 works) and piano manufacturing business. Living to the ripe old age of 74, his output comprises 41 Symphonies, a Requiem, 6 Symphonies Concertantes, 8 Concertos, a large amount of chamber music including: 17 Quintets, 70 Quartets, 48 Trios, and 64 Duets, plus countless songs, church music and a couple of operas. The Duo No. 1, Op. 30 was written for violin and cello but we have transcribed the violin part for flute, editing the cello part to cover violin double stops that are impossible on the flute. The entire duo resonates like the Haydn pieces we have come to love over the years with a characteristic humor, spritely character, raucous folk tunes and clearly classical structure. The enthusiastic virtuosity required from both instruments is certainly evenly divided.

Arias from St. John Passion (BWV 245)

Johann Sebastian Bach is regarded as one of the greatest composers of all time. He was a German organist, choir director and composer who lived between the years of 1685-1750. His output was tremendous and his genius has never been questioned, except perhaps in his own lifetime. A devout Lutheran, his sacred music was absolutely central to his writing.

St. John's Passion was first performed on Good Friday, April 7, 1724 at St. Nicholas' Church in Leipzig. Bach took passages from the Bible's Book of John to vividly tell the story of the Passion of Christ. However, for this soprano aria "Ich folge dir gleichfalls" (I follow Thee also), Bach, used the source Der Grünen Jugend Nothwendige Gedanken (Thoughts Necessary to Innocent Youth) by the Saxon poet and playwright Christian Weise.

Ich folge dir gleichfalls

Just prior to this soprano aria, the Evangelist has sung the words, "And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple," whereupon the soprano, speaking for the Christian congregation, declares her intention also to follow Jesus "with joyous footsteps." Sadly, not long after this declaration, Simon Peter denies Jesus three times. The use of the flute gives the aria a pastoral feel, with Jesus as the shepherd. Note the way Bach musically illustrates the "push, pull, and urge me on" phrases using chromatic scales and rising sequences.

Ich folge dir gleichfalls
mit freudigen Schritten
Und lasse dich nicht,
Mein Leben, mein Licht.
Befördre den Lauf
Und höre nicht auf,
Selbst an mir zu ziehen,
zu schieben, zu bitten.

I follow you likewise
with joyful steps
and do not leave you
my life, my light
Bring me on my way
and do not cease
to pull, push
and urge me on.

Zerfließe, mein Herze

This aria appears in Part II of St. John Passion and is a true Good Friday meditation as a vivid depiction of anguished mourning for the death of Christ; the soprano sings it after Jesus has been crucified and died. There are times when the music pauses dramatically in the very low bass line to depict the cold impact of this death.

Zerfließe, mein Herze,
in Fluten der Zähren
Dem Höchsten zu Ehren!
Erzähle der Welt und dem Himmel die Not:
Dein Jesus ist tot!

Dissolve, my heart,
in floods of tears
to honor the Almighty!
Tell the world and heaven your distress:
your Jesus is dead!

Chansons Madécasses (written 1925-26)

Music by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Texts by Evariste Désiré de Forges Parney (1753-1814)

Maurice Ravel defined early 20th century French instrumental music and was viewed as one of the most sophisticated and original composers of his time. He lived from 1875 to 1937, primarily in Paris. Like Gaubert, he was part of the French Impressionistic group of musical composers but he brought a certain scientific objectivity to his work. His aim was technical perfection and a certain efficiency that was not without emotional involvement. The great composer, Stravinsky slyly criticized Ravel by calling him "the Swiss watchmaker." Perhaps this was because he was also the son of an engineer or maybe Ravel just enjoyed rebelling against the musical establishment in France. As a student, he managed to get banned by a number of musical composition competitions for using parallel 5th and major 7ths in ending chords of his compositions. However, as much as the musical establishment tried to dampen his compositional aspirations, the public loved his music. He often includes classical melody lines but mixes it up with semi-tonal clashes, tritones, added 7ths and lush chromaticism.

It was thanks to a great native Chicagoan patron of new music named Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge that Ravel was commissioned to write *Chansons Madecasses* (Songs of Madagascar). With her great vision and financial generosity, she enabled hundreds of great 20th century composers to express their work. Composers such as Copland (she commissioned "Appalachian Spring"), Bartok, Bloch, Crumb, Hindemith, Martinu, Poulenc, Prokofiev, Respighi, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Villa-Lobos, Webern, etc. And the list goes on.

The *Chansons Madecasses* is an expression of Ravel's fascination with the exotic. In *Nahandove*, Ravel projects images of the archetypal sensuous, seductive and voluptuous African beauty using the flute's lines. The cello often keeps the music grounded in a certain tonality as the rest of the players often play in different keys from one another. *Aoua!* is a sobering and violent warning about the treacherous ways of tyrannical white men who force their religion upon native people, and both steal and poison the natives' land. In *Il est doux* (it is sweet), a certain childlike innocence hints at a purer form of love that is also not without its sensual overtones in both the poetry of the libretto and in the naturalistic instrumental lines.

I. Nahandove

Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!
The nocturnal bird cries,
The full moon shines on my head,
And the new-born dew moistens my hair.
Here the hour is come;
Who can stop you, Nahandove
Oh beautiful Nahandove!
The bed of leaves is prepared;
I have strewn it with flowers
And with sweet-smelling herbs;
It is worthy of your charms,
Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!
She comes.
I recognized the rapid breathing
Caused by a brisk walk;
I hear the rustle
Of the loin-cloth which envelopes her;
It is she, it is Nahandove,
The beautiful Nahandove!
Catch your breath, my young love;
Rest on my knees.
How enchanting is your glance!
How the movement of your breast
Is delicious under the hand
Which presses it! You smile,
Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!
Your kisses penetrate my soul;
Your caresses burn all my senses;
Stop or I shall die.
Does one die of voluptuousness, Nahandove,
Oh beautiful Nahandove!
Pleasure passes like a flash of lightening.
Your sweet breath falters,
Your moist eyes close again,
Your head bends softly
And your ecstasies melt
Into languor. Never were you
More beautiful Nahandove,
Oh beautiful Nahandove!
You leave and I will languish in regrets
And desire. I will languish until evening.
You return this evening
Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!

II. Aoua!

Aoua!
Inhabitants of the shore,
Beware of the white man.
During the time of our fathers,
Some whites descended on this island.
We told them: Here are lands,

May your wives cultivate them;
Be just, be good,
And become our brothers.
The whites promised,
And yet they built entrenchments.
A menacing fort arose;
The thunder was closed in mouths of brass;
Their priests wanted to give us a God
That we did not know,
They spoke at last of obedience
and slavery.
Death sooner.
The carnage was long and terrible;
But despite the thunder that they vomited,
And that destroyed entire armies,
They were all exterminated.
Aoua!
Beware of the white man.
We have seen new tyrants,
Stronger and more numerous,
Planting their flag on the shore.
They sky has fought for us.
It has made rain fall down on them,
Tempests and poisoned winds.
They are no more,
And we live, and we live free.
Aoua!
Inhabitants of the shore,
Beware of the white man.

III. Il est doux

It is sweet to rest,
During the heat,
Under a leafy tree,
And to wait for the evening wind
To bring its freshness.
Women, approach.
While I rest under a leafy tree,
Occupy my ear with your prolonged accents.
Repeat the song of the young girl,
When her fingers weave the plait,
Or when sitting beside the rice,
She chases away the greedy birds.
The song pleases my soul.
The dance is for me
Almost as sweet as a kiss.
May your steps be slow;
May they imitate the attitudes of pleasure
And abandon of voluptuousness.
The evening wind rises,
The moon begins to shine
Through the trees of the mountain.
Go, and prepare the evening meal.

Bohuslav Martinu lived from 1890 to 1959 and is considered to be the most substantial and famous Czechoslovakian composer of the 20th century. Although he came from humble beginnings, he supported his dream of being a composer with his skills as a violinist. He grew up living at the top of a church tower while his father rang the bells of the church, was a fire watcher for the village and worked a third job as a part-time cobbler. Martinu was a violin prodigy and entered the Prague Conservatory at age 16. However he was quickly expelled from the school for “incorrigible negligence” or simply put, poor attendance. He was a renegade but soon learned by living with his parents well into adulthood that he had to make a living as a symphony violinist in the Czech Philharmonic before he could achieve his dream of being a composer.

Martinu fled from France to New York City in the early 1940’s to evade the Nazi invasion. The trio we are playing today was written in New York City in 1944. Although it is considered Martinu’s most prolific year for composing, it was a hard time for him as he had difficulty adjusting to our culture and did not speak English very well. He was said to be depressed and very homesick. However, it seems that his music breaks free emotionally during this year of creativity and in this trio he experiments with very fast jazz-like rhythms and melodic tunes in the first and final movements. The middle slow movement is heartbreakingly forlorn, sad, and perhaps even lonely, and seems to give voice to the context of the Nazi wartime era in which it was written.

Martinu’s sense of isolation but also intense individuality can be found in his own words about the kind of artist he aspired to be:

“The artist is always searching for the meaning of life, his own and that of mankind, searching for truth. A system of uncertainty has entered our daily life. The pressures of mechanization and uniformity to which it is subject call for protest and the artist has only one means of expressing this, by music.”