MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

RAPSODIE ESPAGNOLE (Spanish Rhapsody)
I. Prélude à la nuit (Prelude to the Evening)
II. Malagueña
III. Habanera
IV. Feria (Festival)

PIANO CONCERTO IN G MAJOR
I. Allegretto
II. Adagio assai
III. Presto
Claire Huangci, piano

INTERMISSION

OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879–1936)

FONTANE DI ROMA (The Fountains of Rome)
The Fountain of Villa Giulia at Dawn
The Triton Fountain in the Morning
The Trevi Fountain at Noon
The Villa Medici Fountain at Sunset

CLAUDE-ACHILLE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

LA MER (The Sea)
I. De l’aube à midi sur la mer (From Dawn to Midday on the Sea)
II. Jeux des vagues (Play of the Waves)
III. Dialogue du vent et de la mer (Dialogue of Wind and Sea)
PROGRAM NOTES

RAVEL

RAPSODIE ESPAGNOLE
(SPANISH RHAPSODY)

Though Maurice Ravel is counted among the greatest of French composers, he was the son of a wealthy Swiss engineer and a Basque woman from Madrid. Ravel was born in 1875 at Ciboure, in the Pyrenees, a hair’s breadth from the Spanish border.

A number of Ravel’s early compositions are rooted in his Spanish heritage, and much of his music is fueled by exoticism. In 1895, he composed a suite for two pianos which opens with a stately Habanera. The piece made an impression on Debussy, who was present at an early performance. Debussy’s Evening in Granada, in fact, borrows heavily and unmistakably from it.

In 1908, Ravel decided to orchestrate his Habanera and to build around it an orchestral showpiece in several movements, a rhapsody of Spanish character. Ravel would go on to orchestrate many of his own piano pieces throughout his career, leading some to describe the piano originals as charcoal sketches and the orchestrated versions as finished paintings. The Habanera notwithstanding, Rapsodie espagnole is the only one of Ravel’s orchestral works which is neither the transcription of a piano piece nor a ballet score, and is thus squarely concert music for the orchestra.

The rhapsody’s four miniatures are united by a few common motives and a sultry, shimmering ambience. Prelude to the Evening introduces the four-note descending idea common to three of the movements and sets a mood of curiosity and suspense. The Malagueña, a traditional Spanish dance, is led by the trumpet; then comes the ethereal Habanera, and finally Feria, or “Festival,” which gradually releases the prevailing tension in a pulsating jota—the setting is a carnival, and it is not difficult to imagine bright-colored dresses spinning madly in the cool, orange-scented evening air.

With its successful Paris premiere in 1908, Rapsodie espagnole brought Ravel considerable attention. By late 1909, it was being heard in London and New York. While some attacked Ravel’s music as thin on substance and heavy on gratuitous effect, others spoke with reverence of the music’s masterful orchestration and titillating pacing. At any rate, Ravel’s heady portrayal of Iberian local flavor is second to none in effect—its authenticity is in part the product of his family ties to the peninsula. [ca. 18’]

PIANO CONCERTO IN G MAJOR

Ravel made a tour of the United States in 1928, appearing with the orchestras of twenty-five cities in exchange for high fees and a stockpile of Gauloises cigarettes. He met George Gershwin and other American musicians, heard New Orleans jazz, saw the Grand Canyon, and attended a program of his own music in Boston which culminated in an uproarious ovation.

He had made it through most of a full career without setting his pen to a concerto, but in the early 1930s, he found himself at work on two at once, both for the piano. The first, written for the left hand alone, was commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein (brother to philosopher Ludwig), who lost his right arm in Ukraine in World War I. The other one Ravel originally intended to premiere himself, using both hands. Rather out of practice as a pianist, he decided in the end to give the honor to his friend Marguerite Long. Long premiered the Piano Concerto in G major in Paris in January 1932, and she subsequently took it on a well-received tour of Europe.

Both of the piano concertos are full of oblique and direct references to jazz, but the influence is less prominent in this one, bubbling just beneath the surface. The piano plays as part of the orchestra nearly as often as it is in the spotlight, and the music features a cadenza for harp and prominent solos for other orchestral instruments.

Brief and intense, the outer movements are propelled by a gregarious urban bustle in which virtuoso pianistic effects alternate with languid lyricism—the streets of New York or Chicago, perhaps, vaguely reminiscent of Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue—while the poignant Adagio, sandwiched between them, provides a precious glimpse into the complicated heart of a composer who habitually kept his audiences at an emotional distance. “I tore that melody out of me in bits and pieces,” Ravel said of its theme, which is presented first by the piano and later by a plaintive English horn. [ca. 22’]

RESPIGHI

FONTANE DI ROMA
(THE FOUNTAINS OF ROME)

The poet Shelley opined that it is worth visiting Rome only to see the splendor of its many fountains. Over two thousand of them dot the city, homage to the intricate, extensive water works of the ancient caesars.

A native of Bologna, Respighi was an accomplished violinist and pianist and a student of Rimsky-Korsakov, who taught him orchestration. The Fountains of Rome, the first part of a Roman Trilogy, was a formidable success and brought its author international recognition and a substantial profit. The conductor Toscanini helped to popularize the work overseas, performing and recording it in the United States.

Respighi, a conservative artist in essence and an earnest student of Renaissance music, had recently been appointed professor of composition at Rome’s Saint Cecilia Academy when he composed The Fountains of Rome in 1915-16. Respighi may have been inspired by Liszt’s Fountains of the Villa d’Este, one of the best-known pieces from Years of Pilgrimage, and an important influence on some of Ravel’s aqueous soundscapes.

Each of the work’s four sections evokes a particular fountain at a certain time of day, from the Valle Giulia at sunrise to the Villa Medici, where Debussy had once studied, at dusk. The mode of expression is highly impressionistic, with manifold suggestions of water achieved through subtle but finely-crafted orchestral effects. A pastoral mood surrounds the fountain of Valle Giulia, while Triton’s fountain blends the joyful horn of the sea god with the dancing of attendant water nymphs; the sunset depicted behind the Villa Medici imparts the feeling of a well-earned rest at day’s end. [ca. 16’]
DEBUSSY
LA MER (THE SEA)

Uncomfortable with the Viennese grip on symphonic form and harkening to counterexamples by Berlioz and Liszt, some French composers infused their symphonies with literary or even polemical programs in lieu of purely abstract architecture. Of course Debussy’s program is one of imagery rather than prose, but this three-movement masterwork, subtitled “Three Symphonic Sketches,” is a coherent symphony in all but name.

Debussy began work on La mer as early as 1903; he finished the orchestration while vacationing at Eastbourne on the English Channel coast in early 1905. The state of his life in this period was as turbulent as the roaring sea itself: his opera Pelléas et Méliande had been enthusiastically received, but he nonetheless found himself in dire need of money. His relationship with his first wife, Rosalie Texier, was coming unraveled and would soon end in divorce. The premiere of La mer with the Lamoureux Orchestra in Paris was met with lukewarm murmuring. Critics, like the perennially incredulous Pierre Lalo, found the large scale and tight organization of the music baffling in light of Debussy’s previous offerings, especially the sensational Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, but the work eventually captured the public imagination and came to represent the apex of its composer’s orchestral vision and genius.

Just as in Respighi’s Fountains, the program of La mer is represented as taking place across the span of a single day. Dawn breaks over the ocean, the waves tumble and coruscate in the noonday sun, and wind and sea engage in spirited conversation as the sun sinks toward the horizon. The coda of the last movement recalls the conclusion of the first, bringing closure to the journey in a manner rather uncharacteristic of Debussy, who so often preferred to punctuate his endings with trailing ellipses.

The composer’s deft use of sound to evoke visual stimuli in La mer contributes to his reputation as an Impressionist, to which Debussy remained ambivalent and noncomittal. It is also an imposing piece of architecture, one in which the sensuality on display may obscure the inner workings of a mind focused on organization and painstaking proportion—just as the raging seas may appear chaotic but are in fact influenced by highly regular, unseen forces. [ca. 25’]