

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet No. 1, *Metamorphoses nocturnes*

GYÖRGY LIGETI

Born May 28, 1923, Târnăveni,, Romania

Died June 12, 2006, Vienna, Austria

Performance Time

approximately 22 minutes

Premiere

In the Wiener Musikverein on May 9, 1958 by the Ramor Quartet

Györgi Ligeti survived not only the Holocaust but also the early years of oppressive Stalinist Hungary, from which he fled in to Austria 1956. His unique combination of technical innovation and humor sets him apart from other 20th century modernists. Many of his compositions involve complex masses of sound and shifting tone colors and use unconventional sounds as well as traditional instruments, such as in his *poème symphonique* (1962) for ten musicians operating 100 metronomes. A wide audience became familiar with music from Ligeti's *Requiem* when it was used by director Stanley Kubrick in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, apparently without the knowledge of the composer.

His two string quartets are among his most accessible works. String Quartet No. 1 is written as one movement with seventeen separate sections, each lasting only a minute or two. The composer wrote: "The first word of the sub-title refers to the form. It is a kind of variation form, only there is no specific 'theme' that is then varied. It is, rather, that one and the same musical concept appears in constantly new forms - that is why 'metamorphoses' is more appropriate than 'variations'. The quartet can be considered as having just one movement or also as a sequence of many short movements that melt into one another without pause or which abruptly cut one another off. The basic concept, which is always present in the intervals but which is in a state of constant transformation, consists of two major seconds that succeed each other transposed by a semitone. In this First String Quartet there are certainly some characteristics of my later music, but the writing is totally different, 'old-fashioned'; there are still distinct melodic, rhythmic and harmonic patterns and bar structure. It is not tonal music, but it is not radically atonal, either. The piece still belongs firmly to the Bartók tradition (remember my situation as a composer in Hungary at the beginning of the fifties), yet despite the Bartók-like tone (especially in the rhythm) and despite some touches of Stravinsky and Alban Berg, I trust that the First String Quartet is still personal work."

Ligeti wrote String Quartet No. 1 in 1953-54 when he had no hope that it would ever be performed. Bartók's third and fourth string quartets, which Ligeti acknowledged as major influences, were also banned in Hungary at the time.

--Program note by Robert Strong © 2015

Images, Book I

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

b. August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

d. March 25, 1918, Paris, France

Performance Time: approximately 17 minutes

Premiere: *Hommage à Rameau* was premiered on December 14, 1905 by Maurice Dumenil; *Reflets dans l'eau* and *Mouvement* were first performed in the following year by Ricardo Viñes.

In the early years of this century, Debussy's piano music, already a miracle of subtlety and tone color, took on a new depth and sophistication. It may be possible to find reasons for this in the composer's life. After years of struggle, Debussy—now in his early forties—had two significant successes: the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* was produced in 1902, and *La Mer* followed three years later. With these achievements behind him—and with a new sense of orchestral sonority derived from composing the opera and *La Mer*—Debussy returned to composing for piano. He produced the first book of *Images* in 1905, the second in 1907.

Audiences should both take the title *Images* seriously and they should ignore it. It is true that some of these six individual pieces have visual titles and seem at first to proceed from the images they suggest. Yet Debussy's intention here is much more subtle than mere tone-painting. He aims not for literal depiction of the title but for a refined projection of mood, a combination of title, rhythm, and sonority to create an evocative sound-world all its own. Debussy was quite proud of his achievement in this music. When he sent the first set off to his publisher, he wrote: "With no false vanity, I believe that these three pieces are a success and that they will take their place in the literature of the piano, on the left hand of Schumann, or the right hand of Chopin, as you like it." Few would argue with that claim.

The first book consists of three quite different pieces. Some of Debussy's finest works were inspired by water, and the first of this set—"Reflections in the Water"—is one of them. The repetition and growing complexity of the chordal melody from the beginning has inevitably been compared to dropping stones into the surface of water and watching the patterns of ripples interweave. The music rises to a shimmering climax and fades into silence on fragments of sound.

At the same time he was writing *Images*, Debussy was also editing an edition of the opera *Les Fêtes de Polymnie* by eighteenth-century French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, and he wrote this movement quite literally as homage to the older composer. Debussy does not quote Rameau but instead writes in a baroque form, the sarabande, as a way of honoring a master whom he revered. A sarabande is an old dance (originally from the sixteenth century), and this one—in G-sharp minor—dances gravely. The abstractly-titled *Mouvement* is characterized by great rhythmic energy (Debussy marks it *Animé*); some have heard pre-echoes here of the sort of ostinato-based piano music Stravinsky and Bartók would write a generation later.

Préludes Book II (selections)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

b. August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

d. March 25, 1918, Paris, France

Performance Time: approximately 15 minutes**Premiere:** The first performance of the entire second book was in 1913 by Walter Morse Rummel in London. Earlier, groups of three or four préludes were performed by Ricardo Viñes, Norah Drewett and Debussy himself.

Debussy composed his two books of piano preludes relatively late in life. The first appeared in 1910, and he composed the second book of twelve preludes over the next several years while he was completing one of his most subtle orchestral scores, the ballet *Jeux*. Book II was published in Paris on April 19, 1913, just six weeks before Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* stood that city on its head.

Though he has been inescapably tagged an "impressionist," Debussy disliked that term. He would have argued that he was not trying to present a physical impression of something but instead trying to create in sound the character of his subject. So little was he concerned to convey a physical impression that he placed the evocative title of each prelude at its end rather than beginning—he did not wish to have an audience (or performer) fit the music into a preconceived mental set but rather wanted the music heard for itself first, identified with an idea or image later. In fact, some have gone so far as to say that perhaps Debussy wanted the music to suggest the title.

This recital offers four of the preludes from Book II. *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses* (Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers) takes its title—and inspiration—from one of Arthur Rackham's illustrations for Sir James Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. The picture shows a tiny fairy dancing upon a strand of web, accompanied by two grotesque insects playing oboe and cello. The music is in 3/8 time, and from time to time one catches faint fragments of some ethereal and distant waltz. *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (The Balcony Where Moonlight Holds Court) was inspired by tales of India; the last of the preludes to be composed, it features chords at the extreme ends of the keyboard. *Les tierces alternées* (Alternating Thirds) is the only prelude without an evocative title—it is literally a succession of thirds from both hands, sometimes at a slow tempo, sometimes in a blistering rush. The final prelude—*Feux d'artifice* (Fireworks)—brings a festival of fireworks, and the occasion becomes clear at the end: a bit of "La Marseillaise" sneaks in to remind us that these fireworks celebrate July 14—Bastille Day.

- Program note by Eric Bromberger

Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Major, Op. 81

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

b. September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, Austrian Empire (Bohemia)

d. May 1, 1904, Prague, Austrian Empire

Performance Time: approximately 42 minutes

Premiere: Composed between August 18 and October 8 of 1887, premiered in Prague on January 6, 1888.

Dvořák's Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81 was published in 1887, a time of great personal happiness for the composer. By then he was highly regarded throughout Europe and popular in many musical genres. Johannes Brahms and other musical luminaries were his enthusiastic supporters. Happily married, he had sufficient income for a small summer-house in the country where he could enjoy the beauties of nature and raise pigeons.

The Op. 81 quintet was created following an attempt to revise an early composition, the Piano Quintet, Op. 5, written in 1872 when he was still under the spell of Liszt and Wagner. Now the heir to Smetana's musical expression of Czech nationalism, Dvořák found he could not successfully revise Op. 5. He set it aside to compose the Op. 81 Piano Quintet, an entirely new work.

Dvořák used the melodic and harmonic patterns of Slavonic folk music to create melodies of great charm and beauty in all four movements of the Op. 81 quintet. The first movement is built around two darkly colored themes, the first a poignant song in the cello and the second a more rhythmic melody in the viola. Both are woven together in a series of elaborate transformations.

The second movement is marked "Dumka," a Slavic folk ballad form that begins with melancholy meditation before changing suddenly to exuberance. Dvořák unfolds an arch-form A-B-A-C-A-B-A design, with pensive A sections separated by brighter interludes. B sections playfully oppose triplets against eighth notes, while the giddy central C section dances to a rhythmic restatement of the movement's delicate opening bars in the piano.

Dvořák adds "Furiant" to the Scherzo's title to indicate that it is freely based on a fast Bohemian dance in triple time with shifting accents. The musical mood swings from the buoyant scherzo to the nostalgic trio's slow recollection of the scherzo's melody, then back again to the scherzo's gaiety.

The imposing Finale, a full sonata-form movement, opens with a rhythmic introduction and a high-spirited little dance in the violin echoed by the piano. These musical elements are developed skillfully, including a driving fugal section, with the quintet's characteristic alternation of good humor and seriousness. A stately chorale in the coda gives way to the energetic conclusion.

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