September 2024

by Derek Katz

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Sonata for Violin and Cello (1920-22)

Maurice Ravel's Sonata for Violin and Cello is linked to both of the other two works on the program in multiple ways. It began as a tribute to Claude Debussy, whose second set of piano *Images* will follow the Sonata. The three pieces are also joined by their instrumentation, with the concluding Ravel Trio combining the violin and cello of the Sonata with Debussy's solo piano. Finally, the Ravel Trio was composed as World War I began, and the Sonata was one of Ravel's first works after the war's conclusion.

Ravel was one of ten prominent composers asked to contribute to a 1920 publication and concert dedicated to the memory of Debussy, who had died in 1918. Ravel's offering was a Duo for Violin and Cello, which ended up as the first movement of a four-movement Sonata, finally completed in 1922. Ravel's relationship with Debussy had been somewhat thorny. The composers admired each other's work, but the press attempted to drum up controversies between them, and Ravel was sensitive about being perceived as an imitator of Debussy.

Ravel described the Sonata for Violin and Cello as a "turning point" in his compositional career, writing that "the music is stripped to the bone. The allure of harmony is rejected and more and more there is an emphasis on melody." A certain austerity is already guaranteed by spare scoring, but even in this context, Ravel seems primarily interested in the possibilities created by combining two melodic lines. He also seems to have wanted both the violin and cello to produce similar tone colors. The two instruments are often in the same register, with the cello part cruelly high and the violin almost always in the lower positions. Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, the violinist who played the first performance of the Sonata, reported that "Ravel would not allow the tiniest discrepancy between the sounds of the two instruments, dissimilar though they are." She also described Ravel as working against the comfortable idioms and techniques of the violin: "the Duo hides its treasures, but it treats the violin rather harshly. The composer permits the instrument no charming, facile seduction: it is naked, the poor violin!"

The first movement opens with an insistently repeated figure in the violin, oscillating between major and minor. Ravel may have taken this figure from a brief repeated passage in the cello part of Debussy's String Quartet, near the end of the second movement. This violin line both establishes the importance of mechanical repetition for the Sonata (Stravinsky called Ravel a "Swiss watchmaker") and also reappears in the later movements. The even stream of notes activated at the beginning of the movement remains almost unbroken for its duration, speeding up a little in the middle before returning to its original pace. The cello melody that is combined with the violin ostinato is actually higher than the violin arpeggios, and is one of many melodies in the Sonata that have a folk-like simplicity to them.

The second movement is a whirlwind scherzo that makes extensive use of plucked notes (in rapid alternation between the two players at the beginning and also in strummed chords) and flute-like harmonics. The themes of the movement are again in a folk-like character, and perhaps even have a Hungarian flavor to them. The best-known piece for violin and cello at the time was the 1914 Duo by Zoltán Kodály, and Ravel probably had that work in his ear when composing his Sonata. The third movement is again an even flow of notes, but sounds very different by virtue of being slow and stately, and by exploiting the lower registers of both instruments. Both instruments are muted at the end of the movement, providing further contrast.

The final movement is brilliant and virtuosic, combining thrown, bouncing bow strokes with plucked chords and more (possible Hungarian-flavored) folksy-melodies. Ravel asked the first cellist to perform the Sonata to think of a "mechanical rabbit" when playing the opening of this movement. Jourdan-Morhange, the violinist, complained to Ravel that "it must be great fun writing such difficult stuff but no one is going to play it except virtuosos." Ravel replied, "Good! Then I won't be assassinated by amateurs!"

September 2024

by Derek Katz

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
***Images*, Series II (1907)**

Despite Debussy's distaste for being labeled an Impressionist ("just about the least appropriate term possible," according to the composer), he was very closely connected to and interested in the world of the visual arts. He claimed to "love pictures almost as much as music," and to have "received his most profitable lessons from poets and painters, not from musicians." The three piano pieces on this program are just one of multiple sets of *Images* for piano or for orchestra, and many other pieces either have titles or subjects connected to seeing and portraying. These three *Images* are linked by Debussy's fascination (typical of his time and place) with East Asian cultures and by the sounds of bells. They are also surrounded by a certain amount of plausible but unverifiable lore about Debussy's thoughts and intentions.

Debussy was a thoroughly trained and accomplished pianist, but he did not have a concert career. His solo piano pieces were not intended for his own use, nor do they take advantage of the technical vocabulary of pianistic bravura developed in the 19th century by pianist-composers like Franz Liszt. This is not to say that the pieces are not difficult (quite the contrary), but merely that the technical challenges are less obvious, and of a different nature than those found in Liszt's works. These Images are printed on three staves of music, rather than the usual two, suggesting one of the main tasks for the pianist, that of simultaneously articulating multiple layers of musical textures.

The idea of combining independent musical layers is especially prominent in the first piece, *Cloches à travers les feuilles (Bells Heard Through the Trees)*. According to Debussy's friend and biographer Louis Laloy, a distinguished musicologist and sinologist, the piece was suggested by Laloy's account of church bells in his home region of Jura "traversing the yellowing forests, from village to village, in the silence of the evening." The idea of a quiet evening is certainly appropriate for the piece, which is confined to a dynamic range from triple-piano to mezzo piano for all but two of its bars. There may be multiple kinds of bells in the piece. The very opening, which is constructed from whole-tone scales, may have been inspired by the Javanese gamelan orchestras that Debussy encountered and was entranced by at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1889.

While gamelan gongs do not conform to the Western temperament system used for pianos, nor are they consistent from gamelan to gamelan, the Javanese *sléndro* tuning system (like Western whole-tone scale) divides the octave into equal parts. The different musical layers at the beginning, separated by register and pace, may also have been suggested by the gamelan gongs of different sizes, played at different speeds. A brief middle section has a slow melody over rippling figures that Debussy asks to be played "like an iridescent mist." The remainder of the piece has what must be Laloy's church bells ringing out ever more distinctly and rising to the one moment of full sonority before fading into the distance.

While the first Image was inspired by sound, the second, *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut (And the Moon Sets over the Vanished Temple)* evokes a scene from the natural world. This piece is dedicated to Laloy, who suggested the title, and described the location as "a dreamland that they gladly visited together." This piece is even quieter and more elusive than the first, possibly as it is depicting an absence or a memory (the temple that is no longer there), or possibly as is placed at night instead of the evening (if a full moon, it would be setting in the small hours of the morning). The remembered temple is apparently an Asian one, as the main ideas are not just generally reminiscent of gamelan music, but closely connected to a published transcription of music from the Universal Exposition.

The last of the three pieces, *Poissons d'or (The Golden Fish)* is the most concrete, both in terms of the meaning of the title and of its musical expression. The piece was suggested by a specific object, a Japanese lacquered wood panel with two golden carp highlighted with mother-of-pearl and gold. This panel hung in Debussy's study, and is still on display in the museum at his childhood home. The corresponding piece is one of Debussy's many sonic translations of moving water. Here, the water seems to tremble in the shimmering opening moments, and it is easy to imagine the fish moving through the water with increasing vigor, possibly jumping out of in a middle section marked "capricious and flexible." The tempo slows for a passage that strikes 21st century American ears as bluesy before finally reaching a full sonority of the sort that Debussy had withheld in the preceding pieces.

September 2024

by Derek Katz

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Trio for Piano, Violin and Cello (1914)

Ravel completed his Piano Trio in a great rush after the outbreak of war in August, 1914, planning to enlist in the French armed forces as soon as possible, and viewing the piece as a potentially posthumous work. Ravel was repeatedly rejected by the military medical authorities on account of his weak heart and slight build, but he did serve as a nurse's aide and as a volunteer truck driver for the Army. While the piece was finished amidst turmoil and high drama, most of the Trio was composed under considerably calmer conditions, and seems to reflect personal concerns more than world events.

The Trio was composed in the seaside resort town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, where Ravel regularly spent his summers. Saint-Jean-de-Luz is in the Basque region, about ten miles from the Spanish border, and barely more than a mile from Ravel's birthplace. Ravel's mother was Basque, and at the same time that he was composing the Trio, he was also working on a piano concerto based on Basque themes. Ravel never completed the concerto, but it seems likely that some of the material intended for that work made its way into the Trio, especially the first movement.

The first movement begins very quietly with the piano alone, playing a theme in a distinctive rhythmic pattern that fails to conform to a regular pulse. Instead, the small beats are grouped into an arrangement of 3+2+3 typical of the Basque folk and popular music that Ravel would have heard at local cafés. According to Ravel's friends, he may have thought that the melody itself was Basque, although one member of his circle suggested that Ravel lifted the tune from a dance done by ice-cream vendors. Whatever the origins, Ravel's presentation of the material at a moderate tempo over a static bass makes it more mysterious than dance-like. The melody is immediately repeated by the strings before the violin and cello each present more expressive solo fragments as the music speeds up and becomes more intense. The contrasting theme, first given to the violin, is slower than the opening, but has a similar uneven rhythmic contour, hushed dynamic, and lack of harmonic motion. The opening theme reappears in the lower reaches of the piano keyboard, and will remain prominent throughout the rest of the movement, giving way briefly to a return of the contrasting theme, very high on the cello and eventually fading away to silence.

Both middle movements have titles, and both titles are somewhat misleading. The second movement is labeled "Pantoum." As both a quick internet search and most commentary on the Ravel Trio will unhelpfully tell you, a pantoum is a very old verse form, originating in Malaysia, in which lines from one stanza of a poem reappear in the next, recontextualized to change their meaning. There is no reason to think that Ravel knew anything about Malaysian folk poetry, nor does this idea of shifting lines appear to have anything to do with the Trio movement. Ravel would, however, have been familiar with pantoums by 19th century French symbolist poets, and, in particular, would have know Charles Baudelaire's *Harmonie du soir (Evening Harmony)*, which was set as a song by Debussy. The element of Baudelaire's example that seems to have inspired Ravel is the idea of stanzas that tell two stories at once. That is, one could create one coherent poem by assembling all of the first and second lines of a poem's stanzas, and another equally meaningful one from all of the third and fourth lines. This finds a direct analogue in the second movement of Ravel's Trio which alternates two types of music. The first is light and spiky, marked by plucked chords, fancy left-hand pizzicato mixed with bouncing bow strokes, and harmonics from the violin, and the second is smoother and waltz-like. The British composer and scholar Brian Newbould has demonstrated that it would be possible to cut up the score and reassemble it with all of the bouncy music creating one piece and all of the waltz fragments making up a second. Leaving all talk of poetry aside, the movement is otherwise a fairly conventional scherzo and trio, with the trio a lovely middle section in which the piano plays a slow-moving chorale as the strings continue with the lively scherzo materials.

Ravel calls the following slow movement a Passacaglia, and this is another problematic designation. If this is a passacaglia, it is most similar to J.S. Bach's very famous, but also very atypical, Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor for organ in which a theme rises up from the organ pedals and is repeated over and over again as the basis for a series of variations. As with the Bach Passacaglia, the Ravel movement starts with an unaccompanied theme in a very low register, here at the far left end of the piano keyboard.

September 2024

by Derek Katz

The theme then rises in register as it is repeated first by the cello and then by violin, gaining first a bass line below the cello and then a fully harmonized accompaniment for the violin. These three statements of the theme are the first of a series of eleven eight-bar phrases. The repetitions of the theme are not exact, however, and from the violin's entrance, they constitute something more like references to motives from the theme than statements of it. Even clearer than the series of variations is a three-part form, with the theme played by each of the three instruments in turn at the beginning and end of the movement (rising in register and intensity at the opening, and reversing the process at the end), with a more impassioned section for the full ensemble in the middle. This is an extraordinarily beautiful movement, and one that seems to be inspired by something more than a Baroque structure. Would it be stretch to connect the movement to a letter from Ravel about the composition of the Trio in which he wrote "suddenly there I am sobbing over my sharps and flats?"

The final movement is marked by washes of sound created by trills, tremolo chords and rapid arpeggios. The trills, in particular, are energetic and exciting for listeners, but very taxing for the players. Somewhat like the first movement, the thematic material does not fit into a regular meter, but is here grouped into measures of five and seven beats. This is the movement that seems most directly connected to the war, expressing the optimism and patriotic fervor of its early months. There are two passages in which the strings play a long series of trills while the piano plays figures in the style of brass fanfares. Ravel apparently complained if performances of these sections weren't "trumpet enough." The second of these passages comes at the very end of the trio, bringing it to a brilliant and affirmative conclusion.