

# October 2024

by Rebecca Winzenried

## Kazuo Fukushima (1930-2023)

### Mei, for solo flute (1962)

It has only been a year since the death of Japanese composer Kazuo Fukushima, at the age of 93. His life and work represent a remarkable span from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the millennium. Fukushima was born in 1930 in Tokyo, and came of age during the traumatic experiences of World War II and its aftermath. He was 15 when the war ended; his father and two older brothers had been killed and his formal education had ended with the bombardment of Tokyo. Nevertheless, Fukushima went on to become a self-taught composer and musicologist whose work was influenced by his studies of traditional Japanese Noh theater and Gagaku, a classical style that descended from imperial courts of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. His horizons were broadened in the early 1950s by his involvement with the experimental art collective Jikken Kobo, whose members included composers like Toru Takemitsu, along with visual artists, dancers, and designers who were exploring the intersection of traditional and modern movements.

All these influences came together in 1962 when Fukushima was invited to speak on the topic "Noh Music and Modern Music in Japan," at the Darmstadt International Music Institute in Germany. There he encountered Severino Gazzelloni, longtime principal flute of the RAI Symphony Orchestra in Turin, Italy, and a champion of new music. Gazzelloni commissioned a solo piece from Fukushima, and the resulting Mei became his first composition for Western transverse flute.

One of numerous works Fukushima would write for flute, Mei captures the tonality and bending pitch of the shakuhachi, a traditional, end-blown bamboo flute. Its hypnotic sound has become more familiar to Western audiences in recent decades through its use in film scores and elsewhere as a signifier of Japanese, or general Far East, settings. However, the composer said Mei could be traced to the noh-kan, a shorter, transverse bamboo flute with an unstable pitch used in Noh theater.

The title, Mei, is taken from a Chinese character that translates as "dark," "dim," or "intangible." It was dedicated in memory of Wolfgang Steinecke, founder of the Darmstadt Music Institute, who had died in an accident shortly before the commission. Fukushima wrote in the score that "according to ancient Japanese legend it is believed that the sound of the flute can reach the other world in the beyond, when played with faithful intensity."

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## **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)** **Moments musicaux, Op. 16 (1896)**

Moments musicaux, enchanting to the ear, and often devilish to perform, was written early in Sergei Rachmaninoff's career, a result of pure necessity. The composer was in need of some fast cash in late 1896. He was anticipating the premiere of his first major orchestral work, the Symphony No. 1, set for early the next year, when he had a substantial sum of money stolen during a train trip. Various reports indicate the funds were not his own, but that he was obliged to recoup the loss. So he turned to smaller publishable works, producing Moments musicaux in quick order from October to December of 1896. It comprises six pieces styled after established musical forms—nocturne, etude, prelude, funeral march, barcarolle—demonstrating Rachmaninoff's own considerable prowess in piano technique and composition, stamped with his undeniable Romanticism.

Rachmaninoff was in his early 20s at the time, just four years out of the Moscow Conservatory, where he had won a gold medal for his one-act opera, Aleko, and emerged with a publishing contract. He had also been touring as a pianist, performing works such as his immensely popular Prelude in C-sharp Minor. In Moments musicaux, Rachmaninoff gives a nod to predecessors, notably Chopin, in the opening Andantino, a nocturne that moves through theme and variations, and the churning sextuplets of the Allegretto and Presto.

The composer's Russian soul emerges in the introspective funeral march of the Andante cantabile, and in the grand textures of the Maestoso Rachmaninoff seems to be setting the stage for his future works. The Moments musicaux are designed as stand-alone pieces and their technical challenges help ensure that is how they may be best known. It is a rather rare treat to hear a live performance of the complete set, as here.

Moments musicaux may have provided some financial respite, but it proved to be one of the last compositions Rachmaninoff would complete for some time. Critical backlash accompanied the premiere of his Symphony No. 1 in March of 1897, sending him into a tailspin of depression and a creative block from which he would finally emerge in 1901 with the Piano Concerto No. 2.

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## Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) Three Pieces for Solo Clarinet (1919)

After blazing into public consciousness with his scores for the Ballets Russes (The Firebird in 1910, Petrushka in 1911, and The Rite of Spring in 1913), things slowed down for Igor Stravinsky when war broke out in Europe in 1914. The composer and his family spent the duration in Switzerland, where Stravinsky adjusted to the reduced circumstances of wartime performances by turning to music for smaller forces than the full-bore orchestras he had employed for Ballets Russes. One of the most notable, *L'Histoire du soldat*, from 1918, fielded an orchestra of only seven instruments.

That small-scale theatrical piece was dedicated to Swiss philanthropist Werner Reinhart, who had underwritten the production. Reinhart went on to back some other chamber performances of Stravinsky works as the war came to a close and the composer responded with a thank-you in the form of *Three Pieces for Clarinet*. Reinhart, an amateur clarinetist, may not have actually played the work, which was premiered by Edmond Allegra in November 1919 in Lausanne. However, Reinhart's little gift has since gained an important place in the clarinet repertoire, as one of the first works to focus on the instrument's solo potential and as a regular recital and audition component.

*Three Pieces* challenges the soloist technically and interpretively in unconventional meters, leaps in register, rapid-fire arpeggios, and in the case of the second piece, no time signature or bar lines. Theatrically, it calls for two clarinets, with the first and second pieces to be played on an A clarinet and the third in a B-flat clarinet. The brief work begins calmly, with the first piece marked "sempre pe molto tranquillo" (always quiet and very peaceful). Stravinsky's affinity for jazz improvisation can be heard in the second piece, and the third, "loud from beginning to end," carries along with the ragtime rhythms he had explored in *L'Histoire du soldat*.

Like many artists, Stravinsky emerged from World War I with a shift in perspective, moving away from his earlier Russian style (precipitated also by the Russian Revolution and his inability to return to his homeland) to a neo-classical period. Pared-down works like *Three Pieces for Solo Clarinet* are markers of the transition. As Stravinsky replied to the border crossing guard during the war, who asked for his occupation: "I am an inventor of music."

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## **Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) Chamber Symphony No. 1, Op. 9 (1906), arr. Webern (1883-1945)**

Because Arnold Schoenberg is so closely identified with the twelve-tone technique he developed, it is easy to overlook that he was once a young composer working in perfectly tonal, late-Romantic idioms, as with his string quartet *Verklärte Nacht* (1899) and symphonic tone poem *Pelleas und Melisande* (1903).

However, by 1906, as he was entering his 30s, the Austrian-born Schoenberg began to turn away from previous influences, like the massed forces and extended length of symphonies by Gustav Mahler, who was to become a friend and mentor. His Chamber Symphony No. 1 exemplifies that pivot, as Schoenberg rethought the scale and structure of a typical symphony. It is a single movement piece of about 20 minutes that follows the general parameters of a multi-movement symphony through five internal sections: Sonata, Allegro, Scherzo, Development, Adagio, and Recapitulation and Finale. The original version was scored for 15 instruments..

The disruption of distinct movements, along with Schoenberg's exploration of quartal harmony—based on intervals of fourths—presented a markedly different sound world, one with an unsettling sense of tonality being cast aside, if not entirely. Mahler himself confessed to not fully understanding the developments following the 1907 premiere in Vienna by the Rosé Quartet and a woodwind ensemble from the Vienna Philharmonic, which Schoenberg conducted.

That the public was not quite ready for the composer's musical leap forward was evidenced by reaction to another performance of work he led in 1913—part of what came to be known as the *Skandalkonzert*. The concert, which also featured music by Schoenberg acolytes Alan Berg and Anton Webern, prompted fights in the audience and the performance was shut down by police—predating the infamous premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris by a few months. Within a year Schoenberg became dedicated to what he later came to describe as the emancipation of dissonance.

Schoenberg did revisit the chamber symphony in 1935, arranging it for full orchestra and conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic in its debut. Meanwhile, his student in the Second Viennese School, Anton Webern (1883-1945) went the opposite direction in 1922-23, paring the already condensed forces of the original down to a quintet, in the arrangement for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano performed here. But no matter the version, Chamber Symphony No. 1 marks the work of a composer at a tipping point, poised between the century just past and his readiness to forge ahead into a new epoch and musical identity.

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