Program Notes

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Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Aborada del gracioso

Composed in 1905 originally as one of five pieces in a piano suite entitled *Miroirs*, Ravel would later create an orchestral version in 1918 which was premiered in Paris in May of the following year. Traditionally translated into English as 'Morning Song of a Jester', the work has been traced to both its French and Spanish roots, and includes the Spanish mixed meter rhythms that suggest an exaggerated dance of a jester, as well as a contrasting heartfelt melody.

The strumming of guitars is aptly depicted by pizzicato strings and harp, while the solo bassoon is featured on a recitative-like passage full of pathos, only to return to the jester's dance full of energy and even parody with lively accents from a variety of percussion in the mix. Ravel's pupil and biographer Alexis Roland-Manuel describes the work as one "in which the dry and biting virtuosity is contrasted, Spanish-wise, with the swooning flow of the lovelorn melodic line which interrupts the angry buzzing of guitars." However, some scholars have argued that rather than 'angry,' those guitar rhythms are full of passion.

Ravel had orchestrated many of his own works for piano including *Le tombeau de Couperin* and *Valse nobles et sentimentales.* In addition, shortly after the premiere of this work in its original form for piano, the composer orchestrated the third piece in the suite *Une Barque sur l'ocean*. It would be more than ten years on before he would orchestrate *Alborada*, and it has since become one of his most well-loved works, demonstrating

his amazing ability to use the full range of sonorities in the orchestra to bring the piece to full life.

Work composed: 1905 **World premiere:** 17th May, 1919, Paris
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, triangle, crotal, castanets, xylophone), 2 harps, strings

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Piano Concerto in G major

Ravel has been recognized for his influence on 20th century music, especially through his detailed attention to tonal colors, as part of the contingency of the French composers of that time, another of whom was Debussy. Ravel's father was of Swiss descent and his mother from Basque. Ravel was also born in Basque, but raised primarily in Paris. However, it seems he spent many summers returning to Basque, learning the language and traveling throughout the region. In light of this, it is not surprising to learn that the *Piano Concerto in G major* may very well have had its roots in an uncompleted Basque piece called *Zazpiak Bat*, sketches of which were found to be near completion around 1911, but abandoned seemingly due to the outbreak of World War I.

Upon returning from a tour in America in 1928, Ravel began working in earnest on this piano concerto, which he originally intended to perform himself. Called away for a festival given in his honor he was quoted as saying: "In the midst of my pregnancy with the concerto (I am at the stage of throwing up) I am suddenly called to Biarritz. You must have seen the billboards designed by Fujita [a famous Japanese painter] announcing 'Le grand festival de Maurice Ravel.' Two hundred francs for a ticket! It's lucky that I can get in 'on the house.'"

Shortly after this, yet another interruption kept him from completing the piano concerto, when he was commissioned to compose a concerto for the left hand only by Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein. He finally returned to composing the *Piano Concerto in G*, completing it in 1931, but by that stage he either realized he wasn't up to the task of performing it himself, or the debilitating disease from which he suffered began to get the better of him. Either way, he offered the premiere of this piece to pianist, Marguerite Long, resigning himself to the role of conductor for that special occasion in January of 1932.

Ravel modeled this piano concerto after divertimentos and concertos by Mozart and Saints-Saëns. In addition, Spanish and jazz influences can be heard, the latter of which may have come from his exposure to various jazz clubs in America on his tour there in 1928. He was fortunate enough to have had George Gershwin as his guide it seems, and even had the honor of having him perform his *Rhapsody in Blue* on the occasion of his birthday that year. Perhaps it is for this reason one may detect some aspects of Gershwin's influence in various parts of this concerto.

The first movement, *Allegramente*, incorporates several themes that are meticulously written and introduced by the piano, soon to be answered by the woodwinds. In the second movement, *Adagio assai*, the piano plays a beautifully lyrical line with long phrases intermingled again with the woodwinds, which is finally passed over completely to the English horn as the piano line floats above and trills it's way to end the movement, before the orchestra returns in a frenzy to open the final movement, *Presto*. Here again, flavors of jazz are interspersed throughout, with reminiscent slaps from the whipstick previously heard to open the first movement.

In an interview with the London Daily Telegraph, Ravel stated that he intended this concerto to be "light and brilliant, and in contrast to those heavier classical concerti which he felt were written 'against' rather than

'for' the piano…." It would seem he achieved his goal, with the piano and the orchestra intertwined in such a way that the piano's brilliance rings out, not only with new tonalities amongst the explorations of sounds Ravel was so renowned for in his orchestrations, but also highlighting the pianist amid the beautiful sonorities of the orchestra.

Work composed: 1929~1931 **World premiere:** 14th January, 1932, Paris
Instrumentation: piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, E-flat clarinet, clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, woodblock, ratchet), harp, strings, solo piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun

"The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarme's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature."

Such was the description Debussy himself wrote to indicate the intent he had when composing this work 'illustrating' Stephen Mallarme's poem *L'Apres-midi d'un Faune* ("The Afternoon of a Faun") which was published in 1876. The faun was representative of a mythological creature that was half man/half goat and lives in the woods. Since the faun plays a flute (a type of panpipe), of course Debussy features the flute in the opening bars and throughout the work with a now infamous and mystical sounding chromatic descending melody over the interval of an augmented fourth, often referred to as an unsettling tritone.

The harp is featured among the various orchestral sonorities to depict

this dream-like state, with the clarinet and oboe in turn highlighted with solos as well. The original orchestral arrangement was completed in 1894 and premiered in December of that same year, conducted by Gustave Doret, who is quoted as saying:

> "At this debut of mine, Claude Debussy was to entrust me with the first performance of his *Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faune*…. And never, I believe, did rehearsals take place in such an atmosphere of intimate collaboration. Debussy was constantly modifying this or that sonority…. There was a vast silence…as I ascended to the podium and our…flutist… unfolded his opening line. All at once I felt behind me… an audience that was spellbound. It was a complete triumph…. The orchestra was delighted to repeat this work, which it had come to love and which, thanks to them, the audience had now accepted."

Debussy's impressionistic compositional style in this symphonic poem would have far-reaching implications and is considered by many to mark a major turning point in music, with the limits of traditional harmonies and tonalities being stretched as never before.

Work composed: 1892~1894 **World premiere:** 22nd December, 1894, Paris
Instrumentation: 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, percussion (antique cymbals), 2 harps, strings

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches for Orchestra

> "…the sea is always endless and beautiful. It is really the thing in nature which best puts you in your place… The sea has been very good to me. She has shown me all her moods. You do not know perhaps that I was intended for the life of a sailor and it was only by chance that fate led me away from it… I have an endless store of memories …and passionate love for the sea…"

This what Debussy wrote in a letter, referring to his great love for the sea. In fact, Debussy's father was a sailor who had shared many stories with him about his own life on the high seas. Other than that the composer had very few direct experiences on the water, one of those being in rough seas. Instead he explored much of his love for the sea through his memories and various paintings, including Hokusai's "Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa", a copy of which he had hanging in his private studio and which he ultimately used for the cover of this work when it was published.

These symphonic sketches first took form beginning in 1903 and were completed in 1905, premiering in October of that same year in Paris. The opening **"From Dawn to Noon on the Sea"** begins with low, slow murmurs as the first light breaks on the waters. A variety of melodic fragments flit in and out with a mixture of sonorities from the ensemble, building to the full light of sun reflecting on the water at mid-day. **"The Play of the Waves"** continues exploring various melodic fragments in a scherzo-like dance, with subtle combinations of tonal colors employed, building to the final sketch. **"Dialogue of the Wind and Sea"** returns to motives from the opening section with even greater variation in dynamics and instrumental textures, building energy to evoke the power and majesty of the wind and waves, all in the composer's true impressionistic style.

Work composed: 1903~1905 World premiere: 15th October, 1905, Paris
Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel), 2 harps, strings

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