

PROGRAM NOTES

Giacomo Puccini: *Crisantemi*

In January 1890, Puccini received word of the death of his friend Prince Amadeo di Savoia (Duca d'Aosta and King of Spain (1870–1873)). In a single evening, he composed an elegy for string quartet in memory of his friend, titling it *Crisantemi* (“Chrysanthemums”), the name of the traditional Italian flower of mourning.

Around the same time, possibly in 1890 as well, Puccini also wrote *Tre Minuetti* (“Three Minuets”) for string quartet. The first minuet was dedicated to Augusta Vittoria di Borbone, Princess of Capua; the second to “the distinguished violinist” Augusto Michelangeli; and the third to the conductor Paolo Carignani, Puccini’s lifelong friend.

While *Crisantemi* is by far the most programmed of Puccini’s quartet pieces, it is not often noted that it is intimately related to the lesser known *Tre Minuetti*. Superficially, all four pieces are for string quartet; all were composed at about the same time early in Puccini’s career, before his most celebrated operas; all are dedicated to people of note that Puccini was close to; and all, unsurprisingly, share the common ternary A-B-A thematic structure. But the deeper relationship of all four pieces only becomes apparent when we consider that, between 1890 and 1893, Puccini was composing *Manon Lescaut*, the opera that gave him his first great success.

Whatever the chronological relationship of the string pieces to one another and to the opera, it is indisputable that thematic material from all four quartet pieces shows up prominently in the opera. Puccini used parts of the first and third minuets in Act II; the first theme of the second minuet was transformed into the orchestral introduction for the opera; and some of the most poignant moments in Acts III and IV of *Manon Lescaut* are based on themes from *Crisantemi*.

But before the opera – before the book, the libretto, the costumes, the scenery – in the string quartet works alone there is still an operatic magic in this music. Listening to *Crisantemi*, it is not necessary to envision the prison duet between the ill-fated lovers when the second theme is introduced, or, while listening to *Crisantemi*’s first theme, to imagine Manon and des Grieux wandering to their death in the Louisiana wilderness.

Even without the story, this music comes across as dramatic narrative – *as operatic*.

Stephen Soderberg

Ottorino Respighi: *Il Tramonto*

Text: The Sunset (1816)

By Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)

Italian tr. Roberto Ascoli (fl. 1891–1930)

In 1886, Symbolism as a movement in the arts was officially born when poet Jean Moréas published his manifesto in *Le Figaro*. He declared the Symbolist goal was “to clothe the Ideal in a form perceptible to the senses”; or as Stéphane Mallarmé put it,



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Symbolism depicts “not the thing but the effect it produces.” The Symbolist goal is to evoke rather than to describe.

Symbolism’s reach in Europe of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stretched from Impressionism to Expressionism and beyond – from Mallarmé/Debussy (*L’après-midi d’un faune*) to Dehmel/Schoenberg (*Verklärte Nacht*). Given all its predecessors and successors, Symbolism was, or is, less a clearly defined movement or period in history than a conscious recognition of one of Art’s timeless expressive possibilities. It may be outside the time-frame some believe delimits Symbolism, but another work in this year’s Chamber Music Festival, Toshio Hosokawa’s 2013 *Im Nebel*, inspired by the scenario of Hermann Hesse’s poem, clearly falls within Moréas’s and Mallarmé’s “criteria” for a Symbolist work.

Il Tramonto, Respighi’s setting of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Sunset*, has links with the Italian Symbolist movement, which took particular interest in Shelley as a source of inspiration. Some have evoked Wagner’s *Tristan* as a comparison for its “night-obsessed” lovers. But a better comparison would be to Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* for the characters and setting and the finely crafted writing for strings. It would be difficult to believe that Respighi was not familiar with, and admiring of, the highly chromatic tonal writing in the Schoenberg sextet.

The Sunset is the story of a woman haunted. A young couple falls in love. Without reason, the young man dies. But the woman neither dies nor goes mad. She lives on in the semblance of a life which “were a kind of madness, / If madness ‘tis to be unlike the world.” – and finally, to her departed lover: “Oh, that like thine, mine epitaph were – Peace!”

Stephen Soderberg

Francis Poulenc: *Clarinet Sonata*

A new, post-World War I generation of French composers – Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Darius Milhaud and Francis Poulenc – were brought together under the patronage of Eric Satie in 1919. They were labeled “Les Six” in a 1920 article by the arts critic Henri Collet, a comparison to the famous “Russian Five” (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov). Satie’s purpose in gathering these young composers was to encourage a new French music that he envisioned would not only set aside foreign (especially German and Anglo-American) influences, but would also explore new territory that would go beyond even the revered Debussy and the music of French Impressionism. This attitude toward the Impressionists was summarized by Jean Cocteau who shared Satie’s ideas. In his 1918 propagandist pamphlet, *The Cockerel and the Harlequin*, Cocteau wrote:

Nothing is so enervating as to lie and soak for a long time in a warm bath. Enough of music in which one lies and soaks. Enough of clouds, waves, aquariums, water-sprites, and nocturnal scents; what we need is a music of the earth, everyday music. Enough of hammocks, garlands, and gondolas; I want someone to build me a music I can live in, like a house.





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Early Salon performances of Les Six were small, staged in an artists' studio with a "malodorous heating system and hard wooden benches." They immediately attracted a fashionable in-crowd who flocked to hear the trend-setting new sounds in a Bohemian space. And before long the concerts were attracting a high-brow society set. Poulenc wrote of these times, "In the Montparnasse studio, under the title *Lyre et palette*, we became associated with the artists Picasso, Braque, Modigliani and Juan Gris, who exhibited there." But, with respect to pursuit of *the avant-garde*, Les Six, as a unifying concept, turned out to be another "false summit." Cocteau's rhetoric notwithstanding, these were six very different composers with disparate styles and personalities. Looking back years later, Milhaud wrote:

Collet chose six names absolutely arbitrarily simply because we knew each other and we were pals and appeared on the same musical programmes, no matter if our temperaments and personalities weren't at all the same! Auric and Poulenc followed some ideas of Cocteau, Honegger followed German Romanticism, and myself, Mediterranean lyricism.

Still, to one degree or another, there was something of the prankster that was retained in these six composers for the rest of their careers.

None retained the cabaret spirit of the age of Toulouse-Lautrec more than Francis Poulenc, but a somber strain emerged after the tragic death of a close friend in 1936. He remained affected by the spirit of Cocteau's manifesto and Les Six of his salad days, but his music was now tempered by a new seriousness – he was labeled "half bad-boy, half monk" by the Paris press. This expressive juxtaposition dominated his music for the rest of his life and is clearly heard in one of his last compositions, the sonata for clarinet and piano completed in 1962. It was commissioned by jazz musician and clarinetist Benny Goodman and dedicated to his old friend from Les Six, Arthur Honegger.

The first movement has what at first seems to be an impossibly contradictory tempo marking, "allegro tristamente." But taking this as a "character" indication instead of a tempo instruction, Poulenc appears to be telling us to treat (and hear) this movement by the literal meaning as "sadly cheerful" or "cheerfully sad." Indeed, throughout we hear playful figurations punctuating a foreboding landscape. The second movement, "romanza," is more consistently pensive, and at times mournful. The third movement, "allegro con fuoco" – with fire – wrenches us back to the streets and cafes, the garrets and salons. But we are looking back at a life lived; this landscape too is a dream. The main tune has been called "delightfully clownish," and it is true, there is something of Till Eulenspiegel (and his fate) in this finale – especially in the final bars.

The premiere of the sonata was scheduled to be performed in Carnegie Hall in 1963 with Benny Goodman, accompanied by the composer. But Poulenc died suddenly of a heart attack. The premiere was given by Goodman, with Leonard Bernstein at the piano. Poulenc was buried in a simple ceremony at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, to music by J.S. Bach.

Stephen Soderberg



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Luciano Berio: *Folk Songs*

Art makes the familiar strange so that it can be freshly perceived. To do this it presents its material in unexpected, even outlandish ways: the shock of the new.

— Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984)

We now seem to have gotten past one of the most remarkable periods in music history, although many would still argue its residual effects. For lack of a better term, it has been labeled “Post-1945 Music.” A more helpful motto and thumbnail description for these past 75 years can be found in the title and plot of Elliott Carter’s 1999 opera, *What Next?* There is a car crash. The survivors wake up physically unhurt but are entirely confused and have lost all memory of who they are and how they came to be together.

It’s tempting to say that this was an age that made for strange bedfellows. It’s more accurate to say that it was an age made up of “strange attractors.” This applies to both personalities and ideas. Frank Zappa listened to Webern and Stravinsky and was particularly obsessed with the music of Edgard Varèse. John Cage studied with Arnold Schoenberg. Members of The Grateful Dead, Velvet Underground, and Mothers of Invention regularly hung out in Mort Subotnick’s Greenwich Village studio while he worked. Phil Lesh of The Grateful Dead was a student of Luciano Berio. The Beatles with Yoko Ono, inspired by Karlheinz Stockhausen, created the experimental tape piece “Revolution 9.” Stephen Sondheim, who revolutionized the Broadway musical, studied with America’s foremost serial composer, Milton Babbitt, and to this day credits him as his most important teacher.

But it went in the opposite direction as well. In the 1950s and 60s the attraction that many popular musicians felt to the music and techniques of many “modern” “classical” composers was mutual: Following the early lead of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, composers’ interest in folk music likewise intensified. Among the techniques that aided in the “popular” “classical” exchange were quotation, sampling, collage and, exemplified in Berio’s 1964 *Folk Songs* and his 1967 *Beatles Songs*, arrangement or, as he preferred to call it, recomposition:

I have always sensed a profound uneasiness while listening to popular songs performed with piano accompaniment. This is one of the reasons why, in 1964, I wrote *Folk Songs* – a tribute to the artistry and the vocal intelligence of Cathy Berberian.

It is an anthology of eleven folk songs of various origins (United States, Armenia, France, Sicily, Sardinia, etc.), chosen from old records, printed anthologies, or heard sung from folk musicians and friends. I have given the songs a new rhythmic and harmonic interpretation: in a way, I have recomposed them. The instrumental part has an important function: it is meant to underline and comment on the expressive and cultural roots of each song. Such roots signify not only the ethnic origins of the songs but also the history of the authentic uses that have been made of them.



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Two of the eleven songs (“La donna ideale” and “Ballo”) are only intentionally popular: I composed them myself in 1947 to anonymous Genoese and Sicilian texts.

Beyond the problem of the mostly unfamiliar languages/dialects Berio seems to be asking us to follow (tempting us to ponder a too-clever Tower of Babel interpretation that he never alludes to), it soon becomes clear that he is subtly leading us away from our old, safe, traditional, *expected* world of harmony, counterpoint and meter. This is a problem for the audience in virtually all “Post-1945 Music” to one extent or another. It’s *not* that the old concepts and techniques have been replaced or are no longer valid, but they have been expanded and joined by others that demand a new terminology – *and a new way of listening*.

One helpful tool for the listener confronting a new piece, whether for the first or twentieth time, has been provided by composers Elliott Schwartz and Daniel Godfrey in their book *Music since 1945*. They give seven basic attributes to listen for: pitch logic, time, sound color, texture, process, performance ritual, and parody (or historicism). We leave you to ponder these elements on your own. How you choose to interpret them and listen as they interact is, after all, entirely up to you, the audience.

Stephen Soderberg

Charlottesville Chamber Music Festival

Outreach Programs



This season, Festival musicians are offering two free concerts open to the public. The first is at 12:30pm on September 9th at The Paramount Theater. The second is at 12:30pm on September 12th at Christ Episcopal Church on High Street. They will also perform a special program for Charlottesville City Schools 5th graders at Piedmont Virginia Community College on September 17th.

These programs are being supported by the generous grants from Bama Works of Dace Matthews Band at the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation and from the Maurice Amado Foundation. We are deeply grateful for their support. The musicians are also pleased to continue the tradition of bringing their music to the residents of University Village.

