

Petite Suite

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Written: 1886–89; orchestrated in 1907

Movements: Four

Style: Impressionistic

Duration: Fifteen minutes

None of the music on today's program was originally for orchestra. The works by Debussy, Prokofiev, and Ravel all started out as piano pieces. The piece by Takemitsu was originally for alto flute and guitar. There is nothing wrong or deficient with the originals, and there is certainly nothing wrong with a piano. But when that music gets dressed up by an orchestra, there is a new dimension to the sound.

These days, the music of Debussy may strike us as merely beautiful and colorful. But when he was writing it, Debussy was breaking the cherished rules of composition established through hundreds of years of practice from before the time of Bach, through Mozart and Beethoven, and all the way up to Brahms. Dissonance, that tension-producing clash of sound that must be resolved properly into a relaxing consonance (according to the rules), became an opportunity for new color. Rhythm, the thing that organized sound into manageable packets, disintegrated under Debussy: "Barlines are like children; they should be seen and not heard." Even the long soaring romantic melody of the nineteenth century was under pressure from Debussy.

Debussy disliked having the term *impressionism* applied to his music. However, there are similarities between the great impressionistic painters like Monet and Renoir and the music of Debussy. Monet's paintings are not so much about a particular subject as they are about light and color. Debussy continuously experimented with harmony to develop a huge palette of musical color.

The *Petite Suite* was originally for piano, four hands. Henri Büsser orchestrated it in 1907. Büsser was ten years younger than Debussy. Both attended the Paris Conservatory, and both won the coveted Prix de Rome. While Büsser's compositions

didn't garner the acclaim—or notoriety—of Debussy's, he had a successful career as a conductor. He lived well into the twentieth century, dying at the age of 101.

The first two movements of the *Petite Suite* take their titles from poems by Debussy's favorite poet, Paul Verlaine. *En bateau* (In a boat) depicts a sensual ride in a boat as it dreamily floats on the water. The *Cortège* describes a refined woman promenading with her pet monkey. The *Menuet* has the same pastoral sensibility as a French *Rococo* painting while the *Ballet* is full of Parisian *joie-de-vivre*.

©2019 John P. Varineau

Toward the Sea II

Toru Takemitsu (1930–1996)

Written: 1981

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Twelve minutes

Toru Takemitsu was the first Japanese composer to become known in the West, primarily through the efforts of Igor Stravinsky and Aaron Copland. Takemitsu saw himself as a bridge between the two cultures, introducing Japanese music to the West while at the same time introducing contemporary Western composers to Japan.

Takemitsu was heavily influenced by American Jazz and the classical music played on American Armed Forces Radio. Western music was forbidden during World War II, but while he was working on a forced labor crew (at age fourteen), an officer played some French music for the workers. "I did not know there was such beautiful music in the world," Takemitsu said. "I made the decision that if the war ever ended, I would become a musician." He started composing when he was sixteen. "Being in music I found my *raison d'être* as a man," he said. "After the war, music was the only thing. Choosing to be in music clarified my identity."

He was essentially self-taught as a composer, but he assimilated much from Western avant-garde composers. In the 1950s he was a part of the anti-academic group known as the “experimental workshop” and began to gain international recognition.

“For a long period I struggled to avoid being ‘Japanese,’ to avoid ‘Japanese’ qualities,” he said. “It was largely through my contact with John Cage that I came to recognize the value of my own tradition.” From the early 1960s on, Takemitsu started incorporating traditional Japanese musical instruments. By the 1970s, he was in the forefront of the avant-garde worldwide; but a decade later brought an almost about-face: Takemitsu started using “normal” diatonic scales and plain, tonal triads along with jazz harmonies.

“Music is like a river or sea,” Takemitsu wrote in his book *Confronting Silence*. “As many different currents create those oceans, so does music deepen our lives with constantly changing awareness.” *Toward the Sea* belongs to a group of compositions from the 1980s that referenced water. The Greenpeace Foundation commissioned it for its “Save the Whales” campaign. Originally for alto flute and guitar, tonight’s version is for alto flute, harp and strings. Three notes are critical to this work: E-flat, E and A. (Es, E, A in the German system: SEA.)

©2019 John P. Varineau

Summer Day, Op. 65bis

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Written: 1935

Movements: Three

Style: 20th Century Russian

Duration: 26 minutes

There are many stories about artists fleeing the Soviet Union during the early years of communist rule. Sergei Prokofiev’s story is an interesting contradiction to all of that. Prokofiev left revolutionary Russia in 1918 for the USA, spent four miserable years here, and then moved to Paris. He missed his homeland and his friends and moved *back* to Moscow in 1936. He became a Soviet citizen. (However, he too eventually fell afoul of the Soviet authorities.)

Prokofiev wrote some of his most endearing and charming works during his first few years back in Russia: *Lieutenant Kije Suite* (1934—drawn from his music for a film), the lush and romantic *Second Violin Concerto* (1935), the stunningly beautiful score for the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (1935–36), and the children’s blockbuster *Peter and the Wolf* (1936). For his homecoming, Prokofiev abandoned the more experimental aspects of his music and tried to return to a more lyrical, romantic style.

While he was working on *Romeo and Juliet*, he wrote twelve “easy pieces” for piano collectively called *Music for Children*. “My old love for the sonatina style reawakened,” Prokofiev recalled. What he meant by that is that virtually all of these short pieces each present a primary musical idea, departs from it briefly, and then returns to it. Six years after he wrote the *Music for Children*, he orchestrated seven of them and retitled the collection *Summer Day*.

One of the nice things about listening to “simple” music such as *Summer Day* is that you get a better sense of what Prokofiev ended up doing in his more “difficult” works. If you listen carefully to the melodies, you may notice that there are large leaps all of a sudden. Sometimes Prokofiev seems to write a “wrong” note in a chord or a melody. You can almost imagine a teacher leaning over to correct a young pianist, only to discover that the “wrong” note is actually what Prokofiev wanted. Finally, these short pieces give you the opportunity to revel in Prokofiev’s masterful command of an orchestra’s wide palette of color.

©2019 John P. Varineau

Ma Mère l’Oye (Mother Goose)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Written: 1908–1911

Movements: Five

Style: Impressionist

Duration: 16 minutes

Maurice Ravel was not much taller than a child. He never married and was childless, but he loved children, their toys, playing games with them, and telling them stories. One of his little friends, Mimi Godebski, remembered the visits by Ravel:

I would settle down on his lap, and tirelessly he would begin, 'Once upon a time . . .' It was 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Ugly Empress of the Pagodas' and, above all, the adventures of a little mouse he invented for me. I laughed a great deal at this last story; then I felt remorseful, as I had to admit it was very sad.

Mimi had a brother Jean. To entice the two to practice their piano, Ravel wrote a series of piano duets for them. He based them on some fairy tales from the "Tales of Mother Goose." Several years later, Ravel rewrote them for orchestra and recast them into a ballet. There are five short musical stories.

Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty introduces Sleeping Beauty with a short, slow, and stately procession. *Tom Thumb* tells the story of the little boy who drops bread crumbs to leave himself a path out of a forest. You can hear little Tom's wanderings by the constantly shifting meter of the music. High harmonics played by the violins imitate the birds, while the oboe and English horn suggest Tom's crying.

Ravel gave a written description of *Laidronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*:

"She undressed herself and went into the bath. The pagodas and pagodines [people who inhabit Asian temples] began to sing and play on instruments. Some had oboes made of walnut shells and others had violas made of almond shells—for they had to have instruments that were of their own small proportions."

Ravel's use of only the black keys of the piano (a pentatonic scale) is what gives this piece its oriental flavor.

In Ravel's telling of *Beauty and the Beast*, the clarinet takes on the role of Beauty while the Contrabassoon is the Beast. As they fall in love, their melodies entwine, and as the Beast is transformed, his melody gets played by a solo violin.

The Fairy Garden tells of Prince Charming awakening Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, while all of the characters gather around. The music begins peacefully but grows to provide the perfect storybook ending.

