Program Notes
Leila Josefowicz, violin, and John Novacek, piano
November 15, 2015

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Manuel de Falla: *Suite Populaire Espagnole*

In 1914, Manuel de Falla (1876–1946), a native of Spain but then living and working in Paris, composed a set of Spanish songs for voice and piano. They proved immediately and enduringly popular, prompting arrangements for cello and piano, voice and orchestra, and (as set by prodigy Paul Kochański) for violin and piano. In every version, the influence of Spanish folk sources—and especially Moorish music—shines through.

De Falla borrowed his melodies from printed folksong collections and set them in the tradition of the "rural miniature," featuring fast runs, filigreed ornamentation, and *pizzicato* plucking. All are meant to mimic a guitar. Yet the violin also carries the instrumental line, and juggling the two roles—of guitarist and singer—is part of the joy of listening to the set and the challenge of performing it. In "Jota," for example, the violinist actually strums the strings just like a guitarist at the opening, then steps forward to take over the vocal line. The contrast between the lively accompaniment and languorous melody seems to reflect a romantic tension in the lyrics of the original song. "Jota" speaks of a hidden love. A young man bids his beloved farewell, stealing away into the night to avoid her mother's disapproval. Thus his loving goodbyes float above restive fears of being caught and a hasty departure. Throughout the set, various novel *pizzicato* techniques are employed. In "El Paño Moruno," the *pizzicato* plucking requires the use of both hands, which increases the technical difficulty.

Tonight marks the first performance of this work on our series.

Messiaen: Thème et variations

Gifted with synesthesia, meaning the ability to see colors while hearing music, Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) relished the kaleidoscope of colors produced by different scales. Indeed his music is easiest to describe in visual terms: full of vibrant and varied instrumental hues pulled from an enormous sound palette to depict Impressionistic landscapes of moods. The rhythms can seem Cubist, the dense musical textures akin to sculptures. Many of his works reflect his spiritual and religious commitments (a devout Catholic, Messiaen served as organist at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité for some sixty years) as well as his interests as a naturalist by incorporating actual birdsong.

Thème et variations was composed in 1932 and is dedicated to violinist Claire Delbos, whom he married that same year. She premiered the piece, with the composer at the piano.

The very short, simple theme is followed by five variations that become increasingly more elaborate and more distant from the theme. Each is introduced by the piano, which is a truly an equal partner in this work. The second variation moves more quickly, beginning the long run-up

to the climactic final variation, which features a clear return of the theme in the upper reaches of the violin with lush, organ-like sonorities underneath in the piano. After a searing climax, the whole piece seems almost to jump off a cliff and float gently down, coming to a satisfying conclusion.

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Schumann: Sonata No. 1 in A minor, Op. 105

Robert Schumann (1810–1856) was a composer, a performer (at least until an injury ended his career at the piano), and one of the first music critics. His writings feature two imaginary characters, Florestan and Eusebius, who wage battle in a war against conservative views of how music should sound and be structured. Florestan was brash and confident, Eusebius quiet and retiring, introspective rather than assertive. Schumann threw support behind such composers as Berlioz, Liszt, and the young Brahms. As a composer, he championed novel genres and forms that captured the spirit of Romanticism: character pieces for piano that depicted varied temperaments and brief, evocative miniatures; passionate art songs and elaborate song cycles; and the very first "cyclic symphony," which finds a single theme recurring throughout the movements.

The piano and voice were his instruments of choice, but late in life, at the request of the concertmaster of the leading orchestra in Leipzig, he composed the first of two violin sonatas. "Robert is working away on something new," his wife Clara (herself a gifted composer and successful concert pianist) recorded in her diary on September 15, 1851. "I can't get him to tell me what." By the end of the month, she knew. "I have finally seen Robert's new sonata and am thoroughly delighted by it." Clara gave the premiere the following March.

The alternating moods in the sonata recall the characters Schumann created in his music criticism. The first movement, designated "With passionate expression," immediately evokes Florestan, as does the fiendish scherzo-like finale. The middle movement, however, is more like Eusebius. Although a sunnier episode bespeaks the return of his twin, a gentle melancholy persists. The very end of the sonata features a return of music from the opening—a feature wholly typical of Schumann's music, which seeks to create and sustain its own special world, removed from quotidian concerns.

Last performed on our series December 15, 1993 (Pamela Frank, violin)

Tüür: *Conversio*

The music of Estonian composer Erkki-Sven Tüür (b. 1959) encompasses a remarkable variety of influences, from Mozart to Stravinsky and folk music to minimalism. *Conversio* (1994) draws most directly on Irish fiddling and Steve Reich's ideal of music as a gradual process, unfolding and shifting slowly over time, without obviously moving toward a goal. The piece opens with a catchy, accessible pattern that is then repeated and subtly varied for some nine minutes. The idea is for the listener to let go of the need for narrative—of a beginning, middle, climax, and conclusion—and instead feel the patterns, melodies, rhythms. (These harmonies are consonant

and accessible, even familiar from jazz and popular music.) There are moments of breakthrough and departure as new ideas suddenly soar above the repetitive patterns. But just as the music seems to reach a kind of climax, suddenly the patterns break down. The second half of the work becomes instead a study in fragments rather than flow, silence rather than seamlessness, dissonance rather than consonance, sharp accents and abrupt chords. Hence, perhaps, the suggestive title, as midway through, the music undergoes a conversio(n).

Tonight marks the first performance of this work on our series.

Adams: *Road Movies*

“After years of studiously avoiding the chamber music format, I have suddenly begun to compose for the medium in real earnest,” writes composer John Adams (b. 1947). “For years the chamber music scenario remained not a particularly fertile bed in which to grow my musical ideas.” True, Adams seemed drawn first and foremost to the textures and colors of a full orchestra or even orchestra plus singers. But writing for opera—and Adams is among the most prolific and significant contemporary composers in that genre—actually led him back to chamber music. Composing for the voice taught him to prize melody, “something that chamber music demands above and beyond all else,” he maintains.

Road Movies was composed in 1995 on a commission from the Library of Congress. The title is “total whimsy,” Adams explains, yet names of individual movements are nevertheless revealing. The first, “Relaxed Groove,” actually sounds a bit more insistent than truly relaxed as a kind of study in perpetual motion, but “Meditative” is just that. It features open fourths and fifths—sonorities that seem somehow to capture the American landscape, whether the vast expanse of the West or the grassy central greens in small towns. Its harmonies come from the blues. The final movement, “40% Groove,” playfully references MIDI computer programs that pretend to perfectly calibrate certain rhythms. It’s for “four-wheel drives only,” Adams cautions, referring to the breakneck speed and thrilling turns in the music.

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