

## PROGRAM NOTES

### Le tombeau de Couperin

*Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)*

*"We should always remember that sensitiveness and emotion constitute the real content of a work of art." (Maurice Ravel)*

**Joseph Maurice Ravel** was born on March 7, 1875 in the Basque town of Ciboure, France. He was born to a loving family where his father, Pierre-Joseph, taught him how to appreciate arts and music and his mother, Marie, introduced him to French folk songs which later became a major influence in his music. He once said, "Throughout my childhood, I was sensitive to music. My father, much better educated in this art than most amateurs are, knew how to develop my taste and to stimulate my enthusiasm at an early age."

Ravel began taking piano lessons with Henry Ghys at the age seven and took lessons in composition, counterpoint and harmony with Charles-Renes, a pupil of Leo Delibes harmony. At the age 14, Ravel auditioned for the Paris Conservatoire and got accepted. He won a piano competition at the Conservatoire in 1891 but was expelled by the school in 1895 because he was known someone who was "only teachable in his own terms." In 1887, Ravel was readmitted by the Conservatoire and he studied composition with Gabriel Faure for a few years but he finally left the school for good in 1903. From here on, he started to compose many notable works including *Pavane pour une infante defunte*, *Daphnis et Chloe* (Ballet), *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, *Tzigane* (violin/piano) and *Bolero*, made famous by the movie 10.

Although Ravel was regarded by the French government as a national treasure, he refused to accept all state honours from his native country. However, he did accept awards such as the Belgian Ordre de Leopold (1926) and an honorary doctorate from the University of Oxford (1928).

Even though there were stories about Ravel's romantic relationships and his frequent visits at local brothels, he was never married and lived with his mother until she died. Some people suspected Ravel might have been a homosexual but this remains a mystery up to this day.

Ravel passed away on December 28, 1937 in Paris due to Pick's disease, a form of dementia complicated by the injuries that he suffered in a cab accident earlier on. He was buried next to his parents at a cemetery at Levallois-Perret, Paris, France.

*Le tombeau de Couperin* was originally written for solo piano between 1914 – 1917 but Ravel

orchestrated four of its movements for orchestra in 1919. It is scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two French horns, trumpet, harp and strings. "Tombeau" means "In memorial" of a specific person. But in this instance, Ravel was not only paying homage to the great 18<sup>th</sup> century French composer Francois Couperin but also dedicated each movement to his friends who sacrificed their lives during the Great War. All movements are all based on Baroque dances – *Prelude*, *Forlane* (an Italian dance), *Menuet* and *Rigaudon*.

Here are the titles of each movement and its dedicatee(s):-

- I. Prelude – In memory of First Lieutenant Jacques Chariot
- II. Fugue – In memory of Second Lieutenant Jean Cruppi
- III. Forlane – In memory of First Lieutenant Gabriel Deluc
- IV. Rigaudon – In memory of Pierre and Pascal Gaudin (Brothers and childhood friends of Ravel, killed by the same shell)

### **Danses Sacrée et Profane**

*Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)*

Claude Debussy is regarded as one of the most influential French composers of Impression period. He was born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France in 1862 to china shop owner Manuel-Achille Debussy and seamstress Victorine Manoury Debussy. He began taking piano lessons when he was seven years old and in 1871, Debussy gained the attention of Marie Mauté de Fleurville and took him under her wing. A year later, Debussy entered the Paris Conservatoire and spent eleven years there. During his time at the Conservatoire, he studied with many great teachers including the great César Franck. As a performer, Debussy was talented enough to have a solo career but he chose to become a composer instead. From 1880 to 1882, he lived in Russia as the music teacher to the children of Madam von Meck, the patroness of Tchaikovsky. Unfortunately, her close ties to Tchaikovsky had little impact on Debussy. In fact, Tchaikovsky's comment on Debussy's *Danse bohémienne* was, "It is a very pretty piece, but it is much too short. Not a single idea is expressed fully, the form is terribly shrivelled, and it lacks unity". In 1884, he won the Prix de Rome with his composition *L'Enfant prodigue* and received a scholarship to study at the Académie des Beaux-Arts. His personal life was less glamorous than his professional life. He had a number of affairs before he married Emma Bardac, the wife of a Parisian banker and had a daughter. Unfortunately, she died shortly after the death of Debussy in 1919.

Notable Debussy's works include *La Mer*, *Nocturnes*, *Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp*, *Prelude to an Afternoon of the Faun*, *Premiere Rhapsody for Clarinet and Orchestra*, *Petite Suite* and *Suite Bergamasque*, to name a few.

*Danse Sacree et Danse Profane for Harp and String Orchestra* was commissioned by the famous Parisian instrument maker, Pleyel in 1904 for his newly designed "chromatic" harp and its purpose was to showcase its capabilities. In compared with the traditional harp, Pleyel's invention does not need pedals to play the chromatic notes but has strings for each note of the piano. Although the idea was brilliant, it was extremely impractical because of two reasons – the widened size of the harp and the amount of time required to tune the instrument before every performance. Fortunately, Debussy's work has become a favourite among harpists while the "Pleyel's harp" went straight to the museum.

This work has two sections: *Danse Sacree* and *Danse Profane* and are without a break. *Danse Sacree* is written in a more traditional style with chordal progressions in the solo harp while *Danse Profane* is a ¾ dance and it is contrapuntal than *Danse Sacree*. It is in this movement that the French impressionistic style is evident.

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## **Piano Concerto in E-Flat Major, "Emperor", Op. 73**

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827)

*"Music should strike fire from the heart of man,  
and bring tears from the eyes of woman."  
(L. van Beethoven)*

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany in 1770 to a family of seven children and died in Vienna in 1827. Over 20,000 Viennese attended Beethoven's funeral; one of the torchbearers was Franz Schubert, who was buried beside him a year later in 1828. Beethoven's father was his first teacher and he made his first public performance at age seven in 1778 in Cologne. He later studied with Gottlob Neefe, Haydn, Albrechtsberger, Salieri, among others, and quickly gained a reputation as a virtuoso pianist. Knowing how Leopold Mozart exploited Mozart, Beethoven's father, Johann, also attempted to do the same but without success. Beethoven was never married but there is no doubt that he had had a few romantic relationships during his life time. During the late 1790's, Beethoven noticed that there was a problem with his hearing but was unsuccessful in finding a cure. Although no one knew for certain his actual cause of death, some of the medicine that he had taken contained so much lead that there was common belief that he died of lead-poisoning.

Notable compositions of Beethoven include nine symphonies, five piano concertos, numerous great solo sonatas for instruments such as cello, piano and violin, 17 string quartets and one opera "Fidelio".

**Piano Concerto No. 5** in E-flat major was written between 1809 and 1811 in Vienna, and was dedicated to Archduke Rudolf, Beethoven's patron and pupil. It was premiered on January 13, 1811 in Vienna at the Palace of Prince Joseph Lobkowitz with Archduke Rudolf as the soloist. It was not until February 12, 1812 that this concerto made its debut in Vienna with Carl Czerny, also a Beethoven's student, as the soloist. The reason why Beethoven was not the soloist at these premieres was because he was already deaf by this time and to play with an orchestra would be totally impossible.

The concerto is divided into three movements; *Allegro - Adagio un poco moto - Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo* and it is scored for double winds, two French horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. Donald Francis Tovey, a famous musicologist wrote the following to describe this concerto, "*The orchestra is not only symphonic, but is enabled by the very necessity of accompanying the solo lightly to produce ethereal orchestral effects that are in quite a category from anything in the symphonies. On the other hand, the solo part develops the technique of its instrument with a freedom and brilliance for which Beethoven has no leisure in sonatas and chamber music.*"

The first movement, *Allegro*, opens with an authoritative E-flat major chord before a series of cadenzas played by the soloist; it is as if the soloist is announcing the arrival of the "Emperor". Although the exposition is rather lengthy, it sets the tone for the entire concerto. For the most part, the orchestra acts as the accompaniment rather than sharing the stage with the piano. The second movement, *Adagio un poco moto*, has totally different timbre or tonal colour because of the muted strings; they have created a melancholy and sombre mood to the music. We can also see how Beethoven used the materials in the third movement in the final two bars of the movement to prepare for the entrance of the final movement. The finale is a *Rondo* (ABACADA), which means the main theme is repeated four

times with varied episodes in between. The music is extremely lively and it is probably because it is written in 6/8 time. One of the amazing composing features of this movement is to see how Beethoven used the haunting sound of the timpani to slow down the music towards final bars of the piece. Here, he composed a sixteen bars duet between the timpani and solo piano before he reintroduced the theme in a varied form one final time and bring the concerto to a roaring finish.

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