

Boston Artists Ensemble

2019-20

CHAMBER MUSIC SERIES

CONCERT 4

French Connection

Live Stream: March 28, 2020

*This concert is dedicated to the memory
Elizabeth Simons*

Sharan Leventhal - violin

Jonathan Miller - cello

Randall Hodgkinson - piano

About the Artists

Sharan Leventhal, violin, has toured four continents as a soloist, chamber musician and teacher. She has received grants from the NEA, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music Recording, Chamber Music America, New Music USA, and the Fromm and Koussevitzky Foundations, and has premiered well over 150 works. Leventhal has appeared as a soloist with numerous orchestras, is a founding member of the Kepler Quartet, Marimolin, and Gramercy Trio, and can be heard on the New World, Northeastern, Newport Classic, Naxos, Parma, Navona, GM and Catalyst labels. She is a professor at Boston Conservatory at Berklee and Berklee College of Music, and is founder and director of Play On, Inc., a non-profit supporting chamber music programs for children.

Jonathan Miller (Artistic Director & cellist) was a pupil of Bernard Greenhouse. He is a 43-year veteran of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and has performed as soloist with the Hartford Symphony; the Boston Pops; the Cape Ann and Newton Symphonies; Symphony By The Sea, and the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra of Boston. Miller won the Jeunesses Musicales auditions, twice toured the US with the New York String Sextet, and appeared as a member of the Fine Arts Quartet. He performed as a featured soloist at the American Cello Congress in both 1990 and 1996. He is a founding member of the Gramercy Trio. Miller has recorded the complete Beethoven Sonatas with Randall Hodgkinson for the Centaur label. Recently Mr. Miller has commissioned and is recording new chamber music by distinguished composers Judith Weir, Matthew Aucoin, Scott Wheeler, Harold Meltzer, and Gabriela Frank. He performs on the "Paganini-Piatti" Matteo Goffriller cello, built in Venice in the year 1700.

Randall Hodgkinson (piano) won the International American Music Competition in 1981 and his October 1986 formal New York recital debut at Alice Tully Hall under the competition's auspices was greeted with critical acclaim. Mr. Hodgkinson has, in recent years, performed with orchestras including those of Philadelphia, Atlanta, Albany, Buffalo, Westchester, Oakland, and Caramoor and has collaborated with such conductors as Leonard Bernstein and Gunther Schuller. 1985 saw his European orchestral debut with the Santa Cecilia Orchestra of Rome. He is a featured artist on the Bösendorfer Concert Series aired over WNYC - FM in New York City and has recorded for the Nonesuch, CRI and New World labels. Mr Hodgkinson studied with Veronica Jochum and Russell Sherman at the New England Conservatory where he now serves on the faculty. He is a member of the Gramercy Trio.

Mr. Miller, Ms. Leventhal, and Mr. Hodgkinson are all members of the Gramercy Trio

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CONCERT 4

FRENCH CONNECTION

SAINT-SAËNS

Piano Trio No. 1, Opus 18

Allegro vivace

Andante

Scherzo: Presto

Allegro

?????????

Mystery Piece

Guess the composer and win a pair of tickets!

I N T E R M I S S I O N

RAVEL

Piano Trio

Modéré

Pantoum: Assez vif

Passacaille: Très large

Final: Animé

This concert is dedicated to the memory of our

long-time board member **Elizabeth R. Simons**

a dear friend, brilliant scientist, and lover of music who was tireless in her enthusiastic support of the BAE

Program Notes

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) Piano Trio No. 1 in F, Opus 18

A precocious, ambitious Paris Conservatoire graduate, Camille Saint-Saëns made a definitive mark on the sociétés and aesthetic debates of the French music scene in the latter half of the 19th century. He was a true polymath, excelling not only in organ, piano, and composition, but also in classic French literature, languages, mathematics, and natural sciences. His advocacy looked both into the past and ahead: he contributed to editions of Gluck, Mozart, and French baroque keyboard music, and was an early champion, in his circles, of the Bach revival. Saint-Saëns broke rank with conservative opinion in his admiration for both Wagner and Schumann, and he co-founded the Société Nationale in 1871 to promote contemporary music. He was a dedicated supporter of his protégés, including Gabriel Fauré. Although the fabled Prix de Rome escaped him, Saint-Saëns won many honors and accolades for his work. He could be sarcastic and exacting, but still enjoyed widespread if not universal respect and popularity, particularly among his students and colleagues. He was often compared to past masters, with Charles Gounod dubbing him “the French Beethoven.”

Saint-Saëns was always drawn to both composing and performing chamber music, and he became popular as a pianist at a semi-amateur chamber music society called La Trompette. His unpublished early works included a number of chamber compositions with strings and piano. His first published piano trio, opus 18, was composed in 1867. It displays a masterful texture, full of lightness and energy. The first movement, *Allegro vivace*, juxtaposes sweeping, broadly contoured lines with incisive gestures. The lilting

opening theme is both infectious and versatile, appearing as it does in intimate moments and majestic climaxes alike. There is a remarkable dialogue between the three instruments, with the voices sometimes finishing each other's sentences, sometimes swelling and receding together, and at other times complementing one another with figures that are at once at odds and perfectly suited.

The *Andante* begins with an antique feeling: a hypnotic melody unfolds over drones that are first glassy in the violin, then throaty in the cello. The movement eventually warms, then heats with passionate duets in the strings. Halfway through, the opening chant reappears, this time with the piano providing crystalline ambiance. The *Scherzo*, with its off-beats and pizzicato, bubbles over with good-humored swagger and perhaps a touch of drunken affection—yet it's no less virtuosic for its magnanimity. The finale brings us back to noble romanticism, with episodes of drama and tenderness. A swooping four-note motive—down then back up—reappears, sometimes unexpectedly, throughout. The work winds to a refined close, having both delighted and satisfied.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Piano Trio

Threads of mentorship run through much of music history. As Saint-Saëns championed Gabriel Fauré, Fauré in turn championed a young composer spurned by the Paris Conservatoire: Maurice Ravel. When Ravel, in 1900, failed the Conservatoire's fugue-writing standards and was consequently expelled from the composition class, Fauré, seeing talent and vision in the young composer, allowed him to stay on as an auditor. It was true that Ravel had a nonconformist taste in counterpoint, fond as he was of elements like parallel fifths and non-triadic resolutions. He was also fascinated by glimpses of other cultures: when, with Debussy, he witnessed a Javanese gamelan ensemble and Rimsky-Korsakov's presentation of Russian music at the 1889 Paris Exhibition, he came away smitten. Yet Ravel also aspired to the clean lines and precision of classical composers. With a romantic spirit and an expressive use of color inspired by his contemporaries, Ravel had at his disposal a unique, varied, and adventurous voice.

Ravel's talent was apparent, and despite early rejections he gained plenty of supporters. He also tended to court controversy, both through his public feuds with other composers and through the risqué subject matter of some of his ballets, operas, and vocal works. Ravel had no shortage of collaborators for such projects, however, including the Ballets Russes impresario Sergei Diaghilev. Ravel's abiding interest in his French musical forbears was mirrored by his patriotism: he was eager to serve his country in World War I, eventually becoming a transport driver. In fact, he was working on the Piano Trio when war broke out in 1914, and by his own account hastily completed the work in five weeks in order to enlist.

Ravel referred to the first movement as Basque-inspired. (He was born in the Basque town of Ciboure and retained, through his mother, an

identification with his Basque heritage.) During this time he was also working on a piano concerto called *Zazpaik Bat*, based on Basque themes. From this work, left unfinished, Ravel took the idiosyncratic rhythm of the opening theme, notated in 8/8 with a 3+2+3 division. The expansive, suspended-in-time nature of the melody is heightened by the delicate scoring of cello and violin in widely spaced octaves. The music is nimble, turning corners quickly into the momentum of tremolando or glassy, timeless plateaus. The versatility of all three instruments is on full display: Ravel pushes to extremes of range, dynamic, and color to plumb the full emotional depths of the ensemble.

Ravel titled the second-movement scherzo *Pantoum*, after a Malaysian verse form borrowed by French Romantic poets—the structural connection, if there is one, is elusive. The movement is lively and elastic, constant movement and interlocking motives shot through with rapid starburst flourishes. The third movement draws on different inspiration: titled *Passacaille*, the simple, deep opening bass line in the piano and the slow melodic build hearken to a popular Baroque form built on a repeating bass line. The pacing is meditative and the climax gradual but relentless, giving the movement a graceful, large-scale arc. The finale demands great virtuosity from the players in the service of Ravel's incredibly varied color palette. All three instruments whipsaw across their ranges, with the strings called on to execute harmonics and rapid arpeggios (sometimes simultaneously), speeding trills and delicate melodies, pivoting with dizzying speed. The work ends with grandiose, sweeping gestures, awe-inspiring and transcendent.

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Danbi Um – violin, Zhanbo Zheng – viola, Jonathan Miller – cello, Diane Walsh – piano

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