

BOLÉRO!

Saturday, April 11, 2015 – 8pm at The VETS, Providence
Amica Rush Hour Concert – Friday, April 10, 6:30pm

Larry Rachleff, *conductor*

Alban Gerhardt, *cello*

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| BERLIOZ | <i>Romeo & Juliet: Queen Mab Scherzo</i> |
| SAINT-SAËNS | <i>Cello Concerto No.1, A minor, op.33</i> |
| RAVEL | <i>Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose): Suite</i> |
| RAVEL | <i>Boléro</i> |

Romeo and Juliet: Queen Mab Scherzo **(Dramatic Symphony, op.17, excerpt)** **Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)**

The genesis of *Romeo and Juliet* went back more than ten years before Berlioz began to work on it. His introduction to Shakespeare (in David Garrick's 17th-century adaptations) came in 1827, when an English company played in Paris. *Romeo and Juliet* was one of the productions, and he described in his memoirs:

Shakespeare, bursting upon me so unexpectedly, was like a thunderbolt. His lightning flash, opened the entire heavens of art for me with a sublime tumult, illuminating its most distant depths. I recognized, I grasped true grandeur, true beauty, true dramatic truth.

Berlioz right then determined to make a musical setting of a Shakespearean play. *Romeo and Juliet* was a strong possibility, but it would be many years before the composer would have the opportunity and the inspiration to carry out his desire.

Those desirable ingredients came in 1838 on the heels of his failed opera, *Benvenuto Cellini*. Despondent and deeply in debt, Berlioz conducted a concert of his orchestral music late that year, including *Harold in Italy*. Niccolò Paganini was in the audience, and two days later the famous violinist sent Berlioz a note that began, "Since the death of Beethoven, none but Berlioz has been able to make him live again...." With the note were 20,000 francs, enough to live on comfortably for two years. Paganini's generosity was even more amazing, since he had previously declined to play for the premiere *Harold in Italy*. Berlioz paid his debts with the gift and then determined to compose a large work, which he would dedicate to his friend and patron, Paganini.

The composer quickly settled on *Romeo and Juliet* as the subject of a massive work — a hybrid between symphony and opera. Only a few characters would sing (the pair of lovers would not), and the music would supply a lyricism that might transcend the possibilities of text. There would be a small recitative chorus and also a larger double chorus representing the disputing families. The orchestra would be monumental in size, providing not only a grand sound, but also nearly unlimited combinations and contrasts in tone color.

Romeo and Juliet was finished before the end of 1839. It received three exceptionally

successful performances that year, and its popularity was durable. In our time, *Romeo and Juliet* (either complete or in excerpts) has been among his most widely performed and recorded works.

The *Queen Mab Scherzo* (for orchestra without voices) is a scherzo light enough to make Mendelssohn jealous (if that had been his nature). Bright, cheerful, mercurial, this “comic relief” from the main tragedy is pure delight. Subtitled “the fairy of dreams,” the music reflects Mercutio’s famous speech in a masterful proximity to the Shakespearean spirit. Harp harmonics and antique cymbals add sparkle to this brilliantly orchestrated essay in poetic wit.

Cello Concerto No.1 in A minor, op.33

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

At age 37, Saint-Saëns was a productive, crusading composer. He was determined to resuscitate the true spirit of French music, which he viewed as having become stagnant and sterile under the heavy influence of Wagner. Not that Saint-Saëns was entirely anti-German. In fact, that year (1872) under the pen name of “Phémus,” he began writing music criticism favoring Germanic composers Handel and Liszt alongside his particular French favorites, Rameau and Gounod. His own music also showed strong traces of the German symphonic school, since there was no real French symphonic tradition at the time.

One of Saint-Saëns’ most concise yet most important contributions to the symphonic idiom is his Cello Concerto in A Minor, written the same year he took up the pen as “Phémus.” It is a work that makes effective, occasionally showy, use of the solo cello without ever degrading the part with empty virtuosity. It is a tightly knit work as well, written in three compact movements that connect without pause. The music has a thematic economy: The first movement’s main theme returns prominently in the finale and then is transformed into a new theme. Continuous form, thematic recursion and transformation — these are Lisztian techniques that Saint-Saëns adapts expertly for his own purposes.

The first movement immediately introduces the main theme, a melody of flaring arabesques that shows off the cello well. A second, sustained theme contrasts sharply, and both themes play important roles in the movement’s working-out.

The middle movement is an *Allegretto* in minuet rhythms. Scored chiefly for muted strings, the movement allows the solo cello to outline the dance in delicate gestures. In place of a trio section, the composer gives the cello a short, restrained solo cadenza (the only one in the concerto). A reprise of the minuet follows, but more vividly colored and more romantic.

Creeping in quietly, the original main theme announces the opening of the finale. A gradual dynamic build leads to the cello’s entrance on the theme, which is rhapsodically spun out, leading soon to a second theme. This, however, is a subtle transformation of elements from the minuet theme and the main theme. The rise-and-fall shape of the minuet theme joins the twisting motion and triplet rhythms of the main theme to generate the new idea. Later in the movement, just before the restatement, the cello plays a particularly effective high scale, mainly in harmonics. A full, quick-tempo coda in a major key gives the cello some brilliant scale passages and rounds out the work. Musicologist/conductor Donald Tovey summed up this concerto with the remark that it is “pure and brilliant without putting on chastity as a garment, and without calling attention to its jewelry at a banquet of poor relations.”

Mother Goose: Suite

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Ravel loved children. He had none of his own, but he delighted in the children of his friends, bringing them gifts and spending time with them. *Mother Goose (Ma mère l'Oye)* was one of his more extravagant gifts. Ravel's friends, Cyprien and Ida Godebski, had two precocious children, Mimi and Jean, who played the piano extremely well. In 1908, Ravel began to compose *Mother Goose*, a five-movement suite, for these children to play as a piano duet. Each movement illustrated a fairy tale from the 17th century, collectively known as "Mother Goose." Ravel wrote of the suite, "My intention of evoking the poetry of childhood in these pieces naturally led me to simplify my style and thin out my writing."

Two other children, both aged ten, premiered the work in Paris in 1910. The possibility of orchestrating the suite was immediately obvious. The possibility of a ballet was also intriguing to Ravel, and he set to work in 1911 to expand and orchestrate *Mother Goose* for the ballet stage. For the ballet, the composer changed the order of the original movements somewhat, added two new movements at the beginning, and composed substantial interludes that merge the movements into a continuous work. The concert version of *Mother Goose*, however, restores the original five movements.

I. Pavan of the Sleeping Beauty (Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant): After a beginning of the greatest delicacy, the limpid melody is carried by woodwinds until near the end, where muted violins close with a fragment of the pavan tune.

II. Hop-o' My Thumb (Petit Poucet): In this nocturne, Tom Thumb has left a trail of bread crumbs into the woods, only to discover in the morning that birds have eaten them. The sound of birds can be heard in high violin harmonics and the flutter-tongued piccolo.

III. The Ugly Little Girl, Empress of the Pagodas (Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes): "She undressed and got into the bath. The mandarins and mandarinettes began to sing and play instruments: some had arch-lutes made of walnut shells; some had viols of almond shells. . . ." The Oriental theme of the story is illustrated by an exotic scale, a piccolo simulating an oriental flute, and a clangorous percussion section including xylophone, glockenspiel, and celesta.

IV. Conversations of Beauty and the Beast (Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête): Beauty first refuses Beast's marriage proposal. Then, out of compassion, she accepts, turning Beast into a handsome prince. In this light waltz (reminiscent of Erik Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies*), the graceful treble melodies of Beauty are answered by Beast's contrabassoon motives. As the conversation reaches its joyful outcome, the contrabassoon becomes literally swallowed up in the lush orchestral texture.

V. The Fairy Garden (Le Jardin féérique): The scene is Sleeping Beauty's awakening, an awesome scene represented in a hymn-like passage for strings only. Gradually, the size of the orchestra increases until the moment of apotheosis, when the Good Fairy blesses the happy couple.

Boléro
Maurice Ravel

“I have written only one masterpiece. That is the *Boléro*. Unfortunately, it contains no music.” This remark of Maurice Ravel concerning his most popular piece proves how it had become both a blessing and a plague to him during the last decade of his life. Orchestras everywhere played *Boléro*, originally conceived in 1928 as a short ballet for Ida Rubinstein. As an orchestral concert piece, *Boléro* soon became the subject of controversy, since it was indisputably attractive and significant, yet it contained no real musical development. This prompted Ravel to write about the work, referring to it as “orchestral tissue without music” and describing it dryly as “a rather slow dance, uniform throughout in its melody, harmony and rhythm. . . . The only element of variety is supplied by the orchestral *crescendo*.”

Ravel was being too modest about “the only element of variety.” In *Boléro*, with an insistent rhythm that communicates directly with the listener’s primal instinct, the broad and fascinating variety of tone color is even more striking than the gradual crescendo that creeps up throughout the piece. Ravel combines colors in unusual, experimental ways, and he augments his normally sumptuous orchestra even further with unusual woodwind instruments: an oboe d’amore and three saxophones.

Ravel’s orchestration is intimately entwined with the long, gradual crescendo in a work constructed strictly on the repetition of two 16-measure phrases. Beginning quietly with a solo flute, *pizzicato* strings and the ubiquitous snare drums, the composer gradually builds an orchestral edifice that explodes at the moment of dynamic climax. Considering the heat and excitement of this final passage, it is difficult to agree with Ravel when he wrote, “it is for the listeners to take it or leave it.”
