



Oxford Chamber Music Society

Pixels Ensemble

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Claude DEBUSSY 1862-1918. An introduction to the late Sonatas.

Debussy arrived at Pourville on the Normandy coast in July 1915, accompanied by his wife Emma and ten-year-old daughter, Claude-Emma, called Chouchou, who gave the composer much solace in troubled times. Like the whole of Europe, he was profoundly troubled by the War. He was also very ill, and in never-ending pain. An operation the previous year had removed a bowel cyst, but he had to wait until November/December, and after more surgery, for the diagnosis of rectal cancer – in those days a slow death sentence. The composing of these three sonatas was prompted by patriotism, but accompanied by *the tortures of the damned*, not to mention humiliation, often hovering on the brink of total breakdown. The music, as we have it, is miraculously pure delight, raising questions about life and art. The stay at Pourville lasted until October, and it enabled him to compose again at a time when his Paris study was *a factory of nothingness*. First, came a remarkable work for two pianos, *En blanc et noir* (i.e. the keys of the piano). In scale and character it belongs with the sonatas: I wish I had space to discuss it. And the *Douze Études*, his piano testimony, in which Debussy – the supreme musical poet of the visible world – embraced abstract music – as he did in the sonatas.

In these works, Debussy sought to recreate a national aesthetic to counter that of Germany. *It would be a form of cowardice to think only of the horrors being committed without trying to react by creating, to the best of my ability, a little of that beauty against which the enemy rages.* He said, *I think of the youth of France ... the music I write will be secret homage to them.* His idea was to write six sonatas for different instrumental combinations, and as he published them announcing himself on the cover as *Claude Debussy: Musicien français*. He had already asked: *Why are we so*

indifferent towards our own great Rameau ... and to Couperin, the most poetic of our harpsichordists, whose tender melancholy is like that of an enchanting echo which emanates from the depth of a Watteau landscape, filled with plaintive figures ... In the Sonatas, then, Debussy tried to evoke in sound, qualities which he understood as peculiarly French: clarity, elegance, wit, the gently poetic, melancholy, even whimsy – and economy: these works are very short, and I give their running times in the headings to the notes below. *They were conceived in the ancient, flexible mould, with none of the grandiloquence of modern* (i.e. German) sonatas. So, as you listen, do not seek for a tradition which isn't there; Debussy has his own rigour. The Cello Sonata was composed quickly in late July/early August; the one for Flute, viola and harp (the viola replaced the oboe) was a work of late September/early October. His physical and mental state from the end of 1915 made composing often impossible, and the Violin Sonata was a major struggle: he almost gave up on the finale, but managed to finish the piece early in 1917. The remaining projected sonatas were never written. He died on 25th March 1918.

DEBUSSY

Sonata for cello and piano 11 minutes

1. **Prologue.** *Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto*
2. **Sérénade.** *Modérément animé* –
3. **Finale.** *Animé, léger et nerveux*

Despite its compactness, Debussy's sonata is one of the most important in the history of the cello. Along with the treatment of the instrument by the so-called Second Viennese School (one thinks of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* of 1912 and Webern's *Three little pieces for cello and piano* of 1914), the piece transformed just about all ways of thinking about its potential, for composer and thus for performer.

The sonata opens in a noble D minor, quoting Rameau's Overture to *Les fêtes de Polymnie* (1745), but this is immediately ironically subverted by vaporous harmonies exuding melancholic sighs, back-lit by glowing piano chords. Another motif arouses itself to give way to a sudden crescendo, like a Rameau storm, with the opening theme as the ringing fulcrum of this movement. But what happens? Development or recapitulation, it's an exhausted, bone-stretching lull into exquisite torpor. 'Brahms would be moving mountains,' Debussy seems to be thinking, 'but my music curls up like a boudoir cat.' To be sure, thus far the cello writing has not wandered from the traditionally soulful and songful. But in the ensuing role of the serenading Pierrot (the working title for the second movement seems to have been *Pierrot fâché avec la lune / Pierrot angry at the moon*) the costume change is instant. Debussy – although the old commedia dell' arte figures were hardly strangers (the *Suite bergamasque*, for example) – had been doubtless prompted by *Pierrot lunaire*, which offered him lurid fascination. However, far from sickly-decadent, this Pierrot sounds like a jerky doll, as inept as some comic cartoon character, and the movement is as volatile and capricious as it is brief. *Ironically, nervously, fantastically* are the directions, and the

cellist, plucking and bowing like crazy, is asked to be a mandolin and a guitar and, in a nugget of repose, a flute. The *Finale* enters without a break, with the loose-limbed, two-pronged rondo theme bringing another change of gear. Debussy's direction is *light and nervous*, with seventeen tempo changes. There are two episodes, the second recalling the languor of the first movement. The final appearance of the theme brings an exciting *moto perpetuo* until the very final bars, which return to echo the opening D minor of the whole work, adding a feeling of real triumph, like catching a ball which has been ricocheting through the air for the last eleven minutes.

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756-1791

Quartet for flute, violin, viola and cello in D major, K285

1. *Allegro* 2. *Adagio* 3. *Rondeau*

In 1777/8 Mozart was in Mannheim – a four month stop-off on the way to Paris – where he received a lucrative commission from a surgeon with the Dutch East India Company, for *three little, easy and short concerti and a pair of quartets for the flute*. But he did not like the flute – *I become quite powerless whenever I am obliged to write for an instrument I cannot bear* – and composed with reluctance. That said, the D major Quartet, dated Christmas Day 1777, is in Mozart's best rococo style, maybe bringing to mind the elegance of a bronze dalliance, cast, chased and gilded by Gouthière. The first movement has a scent-drop of minor/major key drama enveloped in its charm; the *Adagio* is a B minor aria for flute and plucked strings, the song of a shepherdess cut short after 35 bars by the swain delights of the *Rondeau*, made all the more attractive as the strings come at last into full play.

DEBUSSY

Sonata for flute, viola and harp 18 minutes

1. ***Pastorale***. *Lento, dolce rubato* 2. ***Interlude***. *Tempo di minuetto*
3. ***Finale***. *Allegro moderato e risoluto*

It belongs to that era when I still knew something about music. It even recalls a very early Debussy, that of the Nocturnes, it seems to me. Debussy's words indicate something backward-looking in this piece, which – whatever the baroque trio disguise – is as elusive as anything he wrote. *It's terribly sad, and I don't know whether one should laugh at it or cry! Perhaps both?* The sonorities in this work are as original as they are seductive, and along with the quietly innovatory rhythms and structures, the enchantment veils an advanced imagination, duly appreciated by

Pierre Boulez and his generation. In the title *Pastorale* we must assume Debussy had in mind the landscape of shepherds and herdsmen, with Pan and nymphs, as perfected in the poetry of Virgil. The use of the flute and harp is consistent with this. The whole piece can even be linked as a kind of triptych with *Prélude à 'L'Après-midi d'un Faun'* and *Syrinx*. The movement is based on a sensual procession of five interlocked fragments, like wisps of recall, maybe of passion and loss, but fading away in a twilight languor. If anything coalesces at all it is in the short central dance, where music and memory, in true pastoral style, visit a sunny Arcadian glade. Here recapitulation is also development, with the fugitive elements reordered, and the opening now an ending. *Tempo di minuetto* is the direction for the *Interlude*, but this is really a rondo with a shape-shifter of a dance, only rhythmically unveiled on its joyous second visitation. The triple time is interrupted twice by shadowy duple time music; the last appearance of the 'minuet' is unforgettably announced on coruscating waves of harp arpeggios. The *Finale* is the shortest and most energised of the movements, an effervescent experience only appreciated by repeated listening or performance. It is based largely on what one hears at the very opening: the viola pizzicatos and its own nervous motif, and the airily dancing arpeggios from the flute. Towards the end of the movement the tempo broadens for the flute theme which opens the whole work.

Jean FRANÇAIX 1912-1997

Quintet for flute, violin, viola, cello and harp [no 1]

1. *Andante tranquillo* 2. *Scherzo (Presto)* 3. *Andante* 4. *Rondo (Presto)*

Debussy's desire to enshrine a French style which had clarity, elegance and wit became – combined with Jean Cocteau's aesthetic of hedonism – Françaix's lifetime manifesto. This is not to say his music had no depth – his wartime oratorio *L'Apocalypse de Saint-Jean* is greatly admired by those who know it – but one normally experiences scrupulously *chic* feather-light sophistication (I call it 'Coco music'), laced – as in today's piece – with a sense of time lost. Françaix was quite a prodigy (the great Nadia Boulanger maintained she could teach him nothing new about harmony when he enlisted as her pupil at the age of twelve), and enjoyed his first major success with his Piano Concerto, composed in 1932, first performed in 1934. In the latter year he wrote this Quintet, an early example of the fertile stream of perfectly formed chamber works composed for all manner of combinations. This is essentially another piece of rococo nostalgia on our menu, reminding me in turn of Watteau's silvery sadness and the outré playfulness of Boucher or Fragonard. In the cantilenas of the two *Andante* movements Françaix's sense of the exquisite is that of a master craftsman – and how well he choreographs the frolicsome dalliance in the *Scherzo*; the entertaining little *Rondo* is so here-and-gone you might feel robbed.

DEBUSSY

Sonata for violin and piano 13 minutes

1. *Allegro vivo* 2. *Intermède. Fantasque et léger* 3. *Finale. Très animé*

This work is pure musical quicksilver; throughout the three movements micro-structures mutate in ever-changing light. Sonata form is certainly there in the first movement (there has been investigative analysis!), but it is as ever in these works unpredictable, with a main theme which has nestling curves of melancholy, nostalgia and languor (I think I've used these words before) which smother metre and tonality: the home key is G major. The elements, pushed and pulled by violin and piano in turn, slowly crystallise together, the movement unexpectedly but firmly ending in G minor. Listen for the *portamento* sighs just before the development section, echoed seductively, feline, in the remaining two movements. In the *Intermezzo* they occur in what might seem a droll silent film scenario, both agilely comic and sensual, and introducing – it would seem – a gypsy fiddler. However, there is a crepuscular fade touching on something deeper. Yes, this movement is indisputably *whimsical and light!* The *Finale*, which gave its composer such trouble, opens with a reference back to the first movement's main theme, then – propelled by joyful flourishes – the gypsy fiddler dances. The slinky *portamento* 'sighs' are now 'smiles', for the glissando curve upwards (I think of the 'happy' moustaches in Seurat's paintings). The violin gathers energy again, there are two half-closes, and then, as Debussy said, *the material is subjected to the most curious deformations and ultimately leaves the impression of an idea turning back on itself, like a snake biting its own tail.* Indeed, there is a veritable torrent of triplet semiquavers, all ending in G major with the kind of conventional tonal bull's eye which at one time Debussy wouldn't have put on paper to save his life.

INTERVAL – around 15 minutes

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756-1791

Quartet no 1 for piano, violin, viola and cello in G minor, K478

1. *Allegro* 2. *Andante* 3. *Rondo Allegro*

It was enterprising of Viennese publisher FA Hoffmeister to commission from Mozart no less than three specimens of the comparatively virginal genre of Piano Quartet. The first work was duly delivered, having been entered in the composer's personal catalogue on 16th October 1785; surprisingly, the work was published singly. It was a dire flop. HOFFMEISTER: *Write more popularly, or else I can neither*

print nor pay for anything of yours. MOZART: Then I will write nothing more, and go hungry, or the devil take me! When a contemporary critic joined the fray and opined that the work was *able and intended to delight only connoisseurs of music ... and hardly bears listening to when it falls into mediocre hands*, he was identifying something significant happening between composer and audience. The imprudent order for a set of piano quartets was duly cancelled, but Mozart wrote a second the following year, in E flat, doubtless to play at one of his own concerts. Both are now judged to stand among his very finest chamber works.

At the time of writing the two pieces, Mozart was also busy creating the modern piano concerto, again divisively: the minor key works were found to be especially unpalatable. One can easily sense this actively in the quartets, with the expanded three movements, the uncompromising piano writing (i.e. the rondo of today's piece), with its greatly expanded emotional range, and the new subtlety in the blending of piano and strings. And the string writing we hear had been transformed by the composing of the six quartets dedicated to Haydn, a task just completed, thus gaining a sense of the character of each instrument, not least his favourite, the viola. Yes, listen to the viola. You can understand why the amateur market reacted so strongly.

I know of no other sonata movement greater than this inexhaustibly rich opening Allegro. Alfred Einstein, the musicologist, identified G minor as Mozart's key of fate (the string Quintet K516, the Symphony K551), and it is easy to sense such *Sturm und Drang* drama in the clenched unison motif we hear immediately. This becomes a theme which is the first of ...2, 3, 4... There are signposts, but in the midst of the sweeping abundance they hardly matter.

The exposition should be repeated (then the movement will occupy half the duration of the work); and there is a false recapitulation which launches a vast development upon a development, and a real one which promises yet more, but Mozart decides enough is enough, and with grim finality hammers home the 'fate motif'. The Andante, in B flat, starts with an expansive melody of grave beauty, heard quietly on the piano and then with the strings. After it has run its course, there is a poignant link to the second theme, perhaps the most desolate to come from Mozart. Not for the first and last time we seem to be looking into the composer's very soul. The two themes are repeated. The finale is a rondo, but – hold on! – just a miserly three tunes? But the central part is dominated by a development of the first of them, which (as they say) is alone worth the price of admission. And Mozart has one last surprise in the final bars before we are free to applaud his genius (and our performers!).

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