

JULY 16, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Three English Songs (1926)

Daybreak (1940)

Three Irish Country Songs (1926)

REBECCA CLARKE

Born: 1886

Died: 1979

The Divine Image (1957)

Merciless Beauty (1921)

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Born: 1872

Died: 1958

Ralph Vaughan Williams is well-known: his nine symphonies, orchestral and choral works, and his years of teaching at the Royal College of Music made him a force in twentieth-century music. Rebecca Clarke is less familiar. A violist, she became the first woman member of a professional orchestra in London when she joined the Queen's Hall Orchestra in 1912. Clarke spent much of her life, including the last forty years of it, in the United States. She and Vaughan Williams were long-time friends: as a young woman she sang in a choral group he conducted, and when Vaughan Williams, then in his eighties, toured the United States in 1954, he had dinner with Clarke and her husband in New York.

A distinctive feature of the songs on this program is that none requires piano accompaniment—here the accompaniment consists of various combinations of strings or—in one of them—nothing at all. The Clarke songs show her interest in folk music: she wrote both *Three English Songs* and *Three Irish Country Songs* in 1926, when she was living in the United States; both sets are scored for voice and violin. Her *Daybreak* (1940), on a text by John Donne, is accompanied by string quartet.

Vaughan Williams composed his *Ten Blake Songs* in 1957 for a film about that poet. Those songs were scored for voice and oboe, though Vaughan Williams specified that a violin might substitute for the oboe; *The Divine Image* is sung a capella. *Merciless Beauty* (1921), which the composer described as “Three rondels for high voice,” is a setting of three texts from Chaucer, with accompaniment by two violins, cello, and piano.

CONCERT

Serenade for Two Violins and Viola, Op. 12 ZOLTÁN KODÁLY

Born: 1882

Died: 1967

Composed: 1919-20

I. Allegramente — Sostenuto ma non troppo

II. Lento ma non troppo

III. Vivo

Kodály composed this music in 1919-20, when he was in his late thirties. The *Serenade* is for the unusual combination of two violins and a viola, and Kodály may well have had in mind Dvořák's *Terzetto*, Opus 74, the one established work for these forces. This was an extremely difficult period for Kodály. The post-war political turmoil in Hungary appeared to subside when a popular revolt established a democratic government, and Kodály took a position as deputy director of the Academy of Music in Budapest. The liberal government was short-lived, however: a repressive right-wing regime overthrew it after only four months and cracked down on anyone who had held a position of authority under it. The new government wanted to fire Kodály completely, but a stout defense by Bartók and Dohnányi prevented this. Instead, the new regime could only put him on leave for a year, and it was during this year that he composed the *Serenade*.

One might expect music composed under such circumstances to be anguished or bitter, but quite the reverse is true: Kodály's *Serenade* is vibrant music, a clear symbol of his ability to separate external events from his art. Like so much of the best music of Kodály and Bartók, the *Serenade* fuses classical forms with Hungarian musical idioms. Beyond this, the music appears to tell a story, and Kodály scholar Laslo Eosze believes this *Serenade* is literally just that: a love song, a serenade sung by a suitor to a woman, and Eosze has made out what he feels is the program behind the music.

The marking for the first movement is unusual: *Allegramente* is an indication more of character than of speed—it means “brightly, gaily.” The movement opens immediately with the first theme, a sizzling duet for the violins, followed by a second subject in the viola that appears to be the song of the suitor; these two ideas are then treated in fairly strict sonata form. The second movement offers a series of dialogues between the lovers. The viola opens with the plaintive song of the man; this theme is reminiscent of Bartók's *parlando*

style, mimicking the patterns of spoken language. The first violin, taking the part of the woman, laughs at the man's appeal: the violin replies to his heartfelt song with a rising series of chirping gracenotes in a passage Kodály marks *ridendo*: "laughing." The brilliant final movement rounds things off by invoking the old Hungarian recruiting dance, the *Verbunkos*, at several points. Eosze believes this movement "confirms the understanding between lover and mistress, the light-hearted banter between viola and violin developing into a song of satisfied love; and the tale is brought to an end with an invigorating dance."

Sonatine

AARON JAY KERNIS

Born: 1960

Composed: 2019

- I. Oracle, Cetacea, Larkspur
- II. Shaded Blue
- III. Catch That Train

Aaron Jay Kernis took violin lessons as a boy, taught himself to play the piano, and soon was trying to write his own music. Kernis came to attention early with his dream of the morning sky, premiered by the New York Philharmonic in 1983 when he was 23, and his music has been widely performed and (more to the point) widely enjoyed. He was awarded the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for his String Quartet No. 2 and later served as New Music Adviser to the Minnesota Orchestra. Kernis' music is eclectic—it draws on a number of styles and influences—and if it can be melodic and appealing, it is also frequently animated by the composer's strong social conscience.

Kernis' Sonatine was premiered in 2021 by James Ehnes and Orion Weiss. The composer has supplied a program note:

Sonatine is a very misleading title. The "ine" at the end of Sonata would imply a small-ish, intimate effort — a miniature sonata, but that's not the case here. This is a full-fledged sonata — if anything is small about it, it's the second movement, which is shorter and less conclusive than my usual extended slow movements.

No, the reason the title is Sonatine is that it rhymes with my daughter Delphine's name, and the piece is dedicated to her. She plays the violin (though doesn't plan to go on with it as a career), and she did give the actual premiere of the second movement at home last year. The originating idea was that I'd write a piece at her level of accomplishment, but as usual I went a bit further than that, giving her a piece to work up to. A few years before,

I'd written First Club Date for her cellist brother, and so I certainly had to complete the circle of inspiration from my children. (Over the years I also wrote a number of other pieces inspired by those wonderful creatures.....)

The first movement has a bold opening, with a jazzy second theme and a lyrical center. The name Delphine alludes to the Oracle at Delphi, dolphins and the Larkspur flower (also known as wild Delphinium), hence the title and slightly silly internal section headings listed above.

Delphine has often colored her hair blue, so the harmony of the second movement also has slightly bluesy harmonies along with highly colorful highlights. I've always loved bluegrass and music of the American vernacular, and wanted to write a train-influenced, bluegrass-inspired final movement that reminded me of that first nail-biting day my wife and I allowed our kids to take the subway on their own. So rather than making a new arrangement of Orange Blossom Special, I found an unaccompanied song sung by Sam Ballard from the Lomax folk song collection from 1934, and based the movement on it to end the piece as a rip-roaring end to Delphine's Sonatine. (Aaron Jay Kernis)

Piano Trio No. 3 in F minor, Op. 65

ANTONÍN DVORÁK

Born: 1841

Died: 1904

Composed: 1883

- I. Allegro ma non troppo
- II. Allegretto grazioso — Meno mosso
- III. Poco adagio
- IV. Finale. Allegro con brio

When Dvořák wrote this powerful music in the early months of 1883, he was at a crucial moment in his life and career. After years of working in obscurity, he suddenly found himself—at age 41—a successful composer: his Slavonic Dances of 1878 had been an international success, and now his music was being performed throughout Europe and America and publishers were asking for more. Yet these were also difficult years for Dvořák. His mother had died late in 1882, and for the composer the loss was devastating. In the weeks following her death, Dvořák set to work on this trio, completing a first draft on March 31, 1883. It is a mark of how seriously he took this music that he revised it completely before its first performance the following October.

Many have detected the influence of Brahms on this trio. The Trio in F minor is full of the same sort of darkly-impassioned and soaring music that Brahms wrote, and perhaps it was natural for Dvořák at so difficult a moment to find inspiration in the music of the older composer. But whatever the influences that shaped this trio, it remains unmistakably the music of Dvořák, stamped throughout with his individual melodies, rhythms, and harmonies. And it speaks with a passion rare in his music—and rare in chamber music at all. Dvořák's admirable biographer John Clapham hears an "epic" quality in this music, and that term—with its suggestion of drama and breadth and vision—may be exactly right for Trio in F minor: at this moment of new artistic maturity and personal pain, Dvořák produced one of the most wide-ranging and intense works in the entire chamber music literature.

The very beginning of the Allegro ma non troppo is deceiving. The strings' subdued entrance in octaves is instantly energized by the almost electric intrusion of the piano, and this opening statement quickly grows searing and intense. This trio never threatens to become orchestral in its manner—it remains true chamber music throughout—but there are moments when its emotional character strains our conception of chamber music. The dramatic opening idea continues to evolve throughout this movement, and the final cadence grows directly out of it.

The Allegretto grazioso dances with a sprightly energy, but even here the C-sharp minor tonality keeps the mood subdued. The rhythmic variety of this movement

is particularly pleasing. Dvořák's cross-rhythms at the very beginning (strings' triplets against the piano's duple meter) provide a lively frame for the main theme, which sounds very much like one of Dvořák's own Slavonic Dances.

If the opening movement of this trio is one of the most dramatic in chamber music, the third is among the loveliest. It opens with the cello's long, heartfelt melody, and soon the strings are trading soaring phrases, yet Dvořák takes care to specify dolce espressivo: "sweet, expressive." While it is dangerous to read a composer's intentions into a piece of music, it is hard not to believe that this lovely movement was written in response to the loss of his mother. The concluding Allegro con brio is based on furious rhythms, but its second episode (another excursion into C-sharp minor) is a waltz, and Dvořák subtly bases both themes on the same rhythmic shape. This brisk finale is in a sort of rondo form, and near the end—in a wonderful touch—Dvořák briefly recalls the main theme of the opening movement. It returns here like a distant memory, rounding off the trio beautifully.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger