

SUMMER SONGS – PROGRAM NOTES

**Michael Manning (MM), Pamela Dellal (PD),
Roy Sansom (RS)**

When modern concert audiences consider the music of France, they think primarily of the music of the 19th and early 20th centuries, beginning with Hector Berlioz and ending, perhaps with Francis Poulenc, or for the more adventurous, Pierre Boulez. Between those poles we principally find George Bizet, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, and lesser composers like Charles Gounod, Camille Saint-Saens, and Darius Milhaud. But the longer view of history reveals a roster that challenges the German dominance we tend to concede in western music history – a dominance, again, that's attached to music from the 17th century forward. The great French names of the distant past begin with those of Pérotin, Guillaume de Machaut, and Guillaume Dufay, hitting the zenith with Josquin des Prez, who is widely considered the greatest composer of the early Renaissance. But despite modern efforts both in scholarship and performance, these composers remain relatively obscure to us, largely because the modern ear has been so attuned to the styles of composition that evolved from the Baroque and classical eras (in Germany) – what's actually referred to as the period of common practice. And the biographical information on these older masters is notoriously incomplete and speculative, as is the available primary source material describing the cultural milieu of their days.

And so we performers find ourselves returning time and again to that small but important handful of French masters represented on today's program: Berlioz, Debussy, Ravel – composers whose works are not only among the most original in the western canon, but also among the most emotionally ingratiating and aurally rewarding for audiences, musically and technically rewarding for performers. Three of today's four composers are genuine mavericks, inventors of sound, language, style, and technique. Or, in the case of Erik Satie, an iconoclast whose influence was more aesthetic than technical, who like the 20th century figure, John Cage, had enormous influence while leaving no great oeuvre. But much of his work is, well, pleasant, appealing in its simplicity, often provocatively cheeky, and his was a primary influence on composers of the 1920's, '30's and 40's. It's important to remember of all these composers that each was reacting against the mature styles in which they were raised and that continued to dominate the way music was understood. In this sense, Berlioz's first major work, *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830), was early Romanticism's analog to Igor Stravinsky's scandalous *Sacre du Printemps*, which shook the foundations of art almost a century later. Debussy rethought everything – rhythm, harmony, timbre, form, syntax and semantics, even what music is rhetorically capable of representing. His body of work establishes him as one of the most original, inventive and far-sighted composers in all of music history. Ravel, Debussy's junior by more than a decade, took his ideas in a completely different direction, marrying the language of Impressionism with a neoclassical approach to form and technique that presaged the next generation of French composers exemplified by Poulenc and Milhaud.

So when we performers add our voices to the throngs of contemporaries and predecessors who've interpreted these masterpieces, we're participating in the ongoing reenactment of revolutions so authentic and authoritative that they continue to compel the deep questions about the nature of art from which they, themselves, were born, and which they restated in newer applications for their own and all subsequent generations. (MM)

***Je te veux* (ca. 1897)**

After Erik Satie's two disastrous matriculations at the Paris Conservatory (where he was twice rebuffed as lazy and untalented), he spent much of his time arranging, playing and composing for the cabaret, producing several of his most ingratiating if unambitious works. The most often played of the pieces from this time is this little waltz, which Satie originally set as a song and later orchestrated and arranged for solo piano. One can hear in its self-conscious sentimentality the apology behind it – Satie was a man earning a living at the cost of realizing his ambitions. In his later years, he'd reject all his music from this period as being vile and contrary to his true nature. (MM)

***Images, 2ème Série* (1907)**

The two great piano composers of this era are Debussy and Ravel, and despite the outward similarity in harmonic languages, they carry forward very different traditions into very different compositional styles. Pianistically, Ravel very much draws on the tradition of Franz Liszt, frequently writing passages and entire works of fiendish difficulty using figurations not unlike those of the Lisztian virtuoso school. Ravel is also somewhat hidebound by classical forms, producing works that he called "Sonatina", "Concerto", "Minuet", and casting even his most pictorially evocative piano works within some antique mold. Debussy carries forward the tradition of Frederic Chopin, emphasizing melody, exploiting the coloristic resources of the piano in a signatory way, inventing form organically in accordance with the rhetorical and musical content of his pieces.

The three pieces in the second book of *Images* are principal examples of the fully mature Impressionistic style which Debussy invented. As with much of Debussy's piano music, the virtuosity demanded is all but entirely devoted to distinguishing layers of sound within the luminous, vertical textures, treating rhythm as poetry, chords as melody, melody as sinew, motivic connection as ligament. And as is almost always the case with Debussy, his titles are as evocative as the pieces they subtend. But Debussy never intended with them anything more palpable than evocation – you'll never be accosted by a literal-minded simulacrum of extramusical objects, such as those we find in the programmatic works of certain late Romantic composers (Richard Strauss, I'm looking at you). In each case, one can easily carry the imagery of the titles into the music, itself, but always as an insinuation of characteristic and never as a depiction of literal character. (MM)

***Histoires Naturelles* (1906)**

Histoires Naturelles is considered to be among the very greatest of the French song cycles. This is so even though the texts for these pieces are highly unusual for the classic French *mélodie*; they consist not of poetry, but prose – so-called prose-poems by Jules Renard (1864-1910). No one reading these beautiful texts could possibly doubt their “profound and latent poetry” (in Ravel’s own words). However, the demands of the prose style drew a revolutionary response from Ravel: he set these texts according to the rules of ‘spoken’ rather than ‘sung’ French, a difference greater in French than most other languages. Weak final syllables, traditionally sustained in French singing, are here to be dropped or elided as in speech; moments of lyrical line are contrasted with absolute parlando, and the rhythms of speech are painstakingly notated. All of this sophistication and subtlety of execution is at the service of absolutely charming subjects: four birds and an insect. *Histoires Naturelles* is like watching a National Geographic special – the animals are observed in their natural habitat, while the narrator supplies a subtext that is unabashedly anthropomorphic in character. The splendor of these songs lies in the uncanny balance Ravel achieves between humor, naturalistic precision, and ravishing beauty.

The first song, *Le paon* (the peacock), is a ceremonial French overture, solemn and dignified. This mimics the slow tread of the peacock, who struts around a barnyard trailing his long tail feathers. The text imagines the bird as an expectant groom, awaiting his bride on their wedding day – except that the ceremony repeats itself day after day, mindlessly! The light ridicule that imbues the first song is entirely absent from the second, *Le grillon* (the cricket). Here, instead of portraying the visual, we are focused on sound – the chirping cricket’s call that the text continually interprets and reimagines. This time the conceit is of a fussy homeowner who tidies up his little domain and carefully locks the door. Instead of mockery, there is a subtle tenderness to the delicacy with which Ravel portrays the rustling insect. A moment of breathtaking poetry ends this song, as the cricket falls silent.

The ironic detachment returns with *Le cygne* (the swan). The beautiful bird is depicted with Ravel’s most romantic gestures; oscillating arpeggiated figures and luscious harmonic turns. We are transported to a world where swans feed only on the reflections of clouds, a fantasy as exquisite as it is ridiculous. The narrator gets caught up in this vision even to the point of melodrama, until reality intervenes at the conclusion. *Le martin-pêcheur* (the king-fisher), the fourth song, is a change of tone. Instead of depicting the actions of an animal, it captures “a rare emotion,” the wonder and awe of being in the proximity of a wild creature. Ravel attempts to recreate this very special feeling through daring extremes of tempo (*on ne peut plus lent* – “it cannot be slower”) and dynamics (*ppp*).

The final animal is *La pintade* (the guinea-hen). The depiction of this barnyard creature is pure comedy – the violent pecking and flurry of motion conveyed with rapid repeated notes and staccato sequences. Our narrator, progressively more present throughout the five songs, is here as much a victim of the stubborn stupid fowl as its portrayer. (PD)

Menuet Antique (1895)

Maurice Ravel's charming *Menuet Antique* was written in the year 1895 as a solo piano piece. Ravel orchestrated the work in 1929, only a year after his most famous piece, *Bolero*, was written. The arrangement we are performing was done by the 20th-century French composer Gustave Samazeuilh.

The minuet, or *menuet*, first appeared as a dance in France during the reign of Louis XIV and became a popular social dance. Later in the Baroque era the minuet would become an obligatory movement in suites and partitas for solo instruments, by which time music composed in dance types were no longer necessarily meant for dancing. Orchestral suites of the later Baroque would comprise several dance movements and this practice continued into the Classical era. The classical symphony would come to have only one movement, often the third, based on a dance - the minuet. Beethoven would keep the meter and form of the minuet in his symphonies, but labeled them "scherzo." Classically the form of the minuet or scherzo would be ABA often with a contrasting texture in the B section, which would be called a "trio." Ravel can be categorized as a "neoclassicist", using Baroque and Classical forms and types as models for some of his greatest works, including his piano concerti and the wonderful *Tombeau de Couperin*.

Menuet Antique retains the meter and form of the classical minuet. The piece starts with an alarming offbeat figure, which gives way to a ravishingly lovely descending sequence, followed by a sweeping upward scale in the bass and then the solo part. After this rousing beginning, the A section settles into a jocular question and answer section based on the opening measures, and finishes the way it started with the last upward scale coming to rest in the tonic key of f minor. The trio, or B section, is contrasted by its texture and key (the parallel major), being much more lyrical and calm. Here there are only hints of the offbeat figure which starts the piece and dominates the A section. The trio closes serenely and the final A section is a literal repetition of first, the only difference being the final cadence which is in F Major. As a whole this minuet is as engaging and satisfying a piece as you'll ever hear. **(RS)**

Les nuits d'été, op. 7 (1841/1856)

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) is lauded as a great opera composer, but he wrote very few songs. *Les nuits d'été* is the sole song cycle in his oeuvre; yet the composer's great gift for drama and literary interpretation lifts these six songs to the pinnacle of the *mélodie* genre. The six songs of *Les nuits d'été* were originally composed in 1841 for voice and piano; the cycle was later arranged for orchestra in 1856. Several songs were published in different keys, and Berlioz may have intended a variety of voices to perform the cycle. Despite the fact that the piano versions predate the orchestrations, almost all modern performances of the cycle are done with orchestra; Berlioz' tremendous gift for orchestration and use of instrumental color is on brilliant display throughout the work.

The poet Pierre-Jules-Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was a close friend of Berlioz. The six poems in the set originate in a collection entitled *La Comédie de la Mort*, published in 1838. In this work, death is a persistent theme. The cycle does not tell a story or speak from single narrator's voice; rather, each of the six songs creates a vivid scene that

evokes passions of joy, desire, grief, or longing, often mediated by images of death or contact beyond the grave. The title “Summer Nights” was Berlioz’ invention, inspired perhaps by Shakespeare’s play.

The first song, *Villanelle*, is a light-hearted paean to spring. Two lovers joyously greet the blossoming of nature and renew their vows during a morning gathering strawberries. The crisp rhythm of the verse is echoed by a chirping accompaniment, and Berlioz adds subtle harmonic variations to each verse that add richness and surprise to the unfolding texture.

In the second song, *La spectre de la rose*, we begin to encounter Gautier’s penchant for the macabre. The poem is narrated by the spirit of a withered corsage, which expired in ecstasy on the bosom of a young girl at a ball. Imbued with both sensuality and self-conscious parody, the flower’s ghost expounds upon the enviable fate of such a death. Berlioz’ music weaves a fantastic and ultra-Romantic cloak around the poem, soaring to paradisiacal heights and ending with a mock-solemn epitaph.

Sur les lagunes, the third song, brings heartbreak. A boatman, bereft of his beloved, laments her death while he pursues his work. Profound suffering supplants the light irony of the previous movement, while the surging of the sea permeates the musical texture. Eloquent cries of despair erupt in the repeated refrain “Ah, without love, to go out to sea!”

While the next song, *Absence*, also deals with separation, grief is less prominent than longing. The opening refrain – “Return, return, my beloved!” – repeated three times, is set with a stunning radiance, balanced between despair and hope. In between, two recitative-like passages etch the frustration and urgency of the lover as he measures the distance between himself and his beloved.

The fifth song, *Au cimetière*, plunges us fully into the supernatural. Cemeteries fascinated Gautier, and in this poem he creates a disturbing, alluring vision of a spirit haunting a tomb by night. The poem, largely in the second person, obscures the identity of the speaker. (Is it the poet? The phantom?) Berlioz’ response is extraordinary. Instructing the singer to sing ‘a quart de voix’ [quarter-voice], he achieves a tone that is almost unbearably delicate, intimate, and mysterious. The melodic writing hovers between chant and lyricism, occasionally keening with a plaintive half-step figure. The hypnotic climax occurs when the apparition whispers “tu reviendras” [“you will come back”] – and the narrator at last breaks forth, declaring “jamais plus” – nevermore.

The exuberant final song, *L’île inconnue*, is built on an elaborate metaphor: a ship built of magical elements that stands waiting to bear the narrator and his beloved on an enchanted journey – but whence? The surging of wind and waves oscillates throughout the song, and the exotic ship and proposed destinations evoke many colorful detours. At last the beloved declares her preference: to the shore of faithful love! Unfortunately, we learn, this spot is barely ever visited. Joyous, playful, and passionate, the invitation hangs in the air at the conclusion of the cycle. (PD)