



French Masters

“Music,” wrote Debussy, “must be as boundless as the wind, the sky, the sea.” With music drawn from three centuries, this weekend’s program explores just that sort of eclecticism. From Saint-Saëns to Debussy to Scriabin to Pintscher, there’s something here for everyone.

MATTHIAS PINTSCHER

Born 29 January 1971; Marl, Germany

towards Osiris

Composed: 2005

First performance: 16 March 2006; Berlin, Germany

Last MSO performance: MSO premiere

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (2nd and 3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, Bass clarinet (doubling contrabass clarinet), 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bongo drums, temple blocks, suspended cymbals, tam tam, xylophone, crotale, tom tom, wood block, claves, guiro, wind chimes, maracas, flexatone, glockenspiel, Thai gong, triangle, sandpaper blocks, marimba, chimes, bell plate, snare drum, bass drum), 2 harps, celeste, piano, strings

Approximate duration: 8 minutes

towards Osiris was premiered by the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle. The composer has provided the following program notes:

During the initial stages of conceiving an orchestral work which would eventually bear the title *towards Osiris*, I came across a work of Joseph Beuys from the 1970s that shows individual objects (sewing patterns on cardboard, originally created for his work *Felt Suit*) that were distributed in a free rhythmic sequence and mounted on a blank canvas on which nothing had been painted. This work, which made such an impression, was called by Beuys *Osiris*, and it inspired me to delve into the *Osiris* myth and its meaning through the centuries.

Osiris, the God of Fertility, was the son of Nut (the Goddess of the Sky) and Geb (the God of the Earth); the destiny that led to his death stood at the center of my investigations. After being murdered by his brother, *Osiris* remained in the Realm of the Dead, where he served as a judge in the afterlife. In Egyptian mythology, every person’s death is closely bound up with the destiny of *Osiris*. I was especially touched by the figure of *Isis*, *Osiris*’ loving sister and spouse, who, after her husband was dismembered by his raging brother (*Set*, the God of Combat), was able to reassemble him through the power of her love, and prevented further decay of his reconstructed body, resuscitating him with her wings. Prior to that, she had searched desperately and ceaselessly along the banks of the Nile for the remains

of her beloved. This suggested to me a formal structure based upon various stages of fragmentation and reanimation: the initial state of completeness, the decomposition into separate pieces, and their reassembly and metamorphosis — a genuine musical process.

towards Osiris is to be understood as a self-standing orchestral study; it represents the first material composed of what would later be developed into a larger orchestral work (titled *Osiris*), which would be premiered in 2008 in Chicago (with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) under the direction of Pierre Boulez. The work played here therefore stands as a piece “on the way” — toward a stage of broader context, which *Osiris*, as one of the most complex figures in Egyptian mythology, allows us to grasp in musical form.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born 22 August 1862; Sainte-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died 25 March 1918; Paris, France

La Mer

Composed: 1903-05

First performance: 15 October 1905

Last MSO performance: March 2016; Jun Märkl, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, tam tam, triangle), 2 harps, strings

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

Claude Debussy was captivated by the sea. In a 1903 letter to fellow composer André Messager (1853-1929), he wrote, “You may not know that I was destined for a sailor’s life. It was only quite by chance that fate led me in another direction... But I have an endless store of memories [of the sea], and to my mind, they are worth more than reality, whose beauty often deadens thought.”

The Mediterranean was the sea Debussy recalled from trips to Cannes as a child and subsequent travels to Italy. It served as the inspiration for his set of three “symphonic sketches,” *La mer*. Neither a “normal” symphony nor a complete disavowal of the form, it nevertheless is a brilliant opus in the orchestral repertoire. (The Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter named it one of his top three favorites, along with Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* and Wagner’s *Ring* cycle.) These pieces are not programmatic in a traditional sense. That is, they don’t tell story that follows a normal time line — though Debussy’s friend Eric Satie wryly quipped that, in “From Dawn to Noon on the Sea,” he “particularly liked the bit at a quarter to eleven.” In this work, “the story” is all about color, texture, and nuance.

In the opening segment, as the morning progresses, listen for the sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle, changes in lighting and atmosphere. In “Play of the Waves,” notice the shimmering surface of the water, feel the rocking of the waves and unexpected shifts of the current. In “Dialog of the Wind and the Sea,” there’s a storm a-coming. The orchestra swells in great washes of sound as air and water collide. Ultimately, though, the sun breaks through the clouds. Calm is restored.

Recommended recording: Bernard Haitink, Concertgebouw Orchestra (Philips) 

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Born 9 October 1835; Paris, France

Died 16 December 1921; Algiers, Algeria

Concerto No. 5 in F major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 103 "Egyptian"

Composed: 1896

First performance: 6 May 1896; Paris, France

Last MSO performance: May 2009; Pietari Inkinan, conductor;
Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (tam tam), harp, strings

Approximate duration: 29 minutes

Like Mozart and Mendelssohn, Camille Saint-Saëns was a child prodigy. In 1846, at age ten, he made his debut in a concert that included piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. As an encore, he offered to play any one of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas — from memory. Wedded to this remarkable precocity was an insatiable intellectual curiosity that shaped and informed his entire life. An inveterate traveler, his journeys took him to such diverse locales as Egypt, Algeria, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Uruguay, Scandinavia, England, Russia, the Canary Islands, and America.

From our 21st-century perspective, we see Saint-Saëns as a Romantic neo-Classicalist who embodied certain traditional French characteristics: neat proportions, clarity, refined expression, and elegant melodies. His distinctive harmonic language is simple and direct, but with many divergences and variations bestowing stateliness and charm upon the music. As an orchestrator, he relied on harmonic means rather than purely instrumental effects to attain his sense of color. And though he contributed to every genre of his day, including opera, his most accomplished works are those that adhere to the models of the Viennese composers: sonatas, chamber music, symphonies, and concertos.

Saint-Saëns composed his final piano concerto in 1896, to perform on a concert at Salle Pleyel that celebrated his debut there 50 years prior — the one detailed above. It bears the appellation "Egyptian" for a couple of reasons. First, the composer completed his Op. 103 while in Luxor, on one of his habitual winter sojourns to Egypt. Secondly, it shows the influence of Javanese, Spanish, and Middle-Eastern music — making it one of his most exotic scores. It is set in the traditional three movements, fast-slow-fast.

Sustained woodwind chords and plucked strings open the 3/4-time *Allegro animato*, and the pianist soon plays a gently lilting theme that is taken up by the woodwinds and violins. Winds and horns then introduce a pulsing chordal motif as the pianist plays colorful roudades. The meltingly beautiful second theme is cast in D minor. The development section makes ample use of the opening theme and, in the recapitulation, the D minor theme is heard in F major. The *Andante* is by far the most "Eastern" sounding of the three movements. Here, Saint-Saëns employed non-traditional scales and modal inflections and explained that one of its themes — first sounded by in the pianist's left hand, then played by the violins — is "a Nubian love song I heard sung by the boatmen on the Nile when I was going downstream in a *dahabieh*." Another striking touch is the manner in which voices certain passages are voiced: the pianist plays a melody *mezzo forte* in the left hand while the right hand doubles it *pianissimo* a twelfth and an eighteenth above. The *Finale* is said to represent a sea voyage and, indeed, in its rumbling opening measures — courtesy of timpani and low bass chords in the piano — we hear the vessel's propellers starting up. It isn't long before we're skittering over the waves with the wind in our hair. The entire movement is a *moto perpetuo* tour de force for the soloist, one that delighted both the audience and critics at its first performance — and continues to do so even today.

Recommended recording: Jean-Yves Thibaudet; Charles Dutoit, L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (Decca) 

ALEXANDER Scriabin

Born 6 January 1872; Moscow, Russia
 Died 27 April 1915; Moscow, Russia

The Poem of Ecstasy, Op. 54 [Symphony No. 4]

Composed: 1905-08

First performance: 10 December 1908; New York, New York

Last MSO performance: January 1987; Zdenek Macal, conductor

Instrumentation: 3 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 5 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbal, bass drum, tam tam, glockenspiel, chime in C), 2 harps, celeste, organ, strings

Approximate duration: 22 minutes

The Russian composer Alexander Scriabin studied at the Moscow Conservatory, where Sergei Rachmaninoff was a fellow classmate. Like his better-known colleague, he was a concert pianist. Unlike Rachmaninoff, however, he was diminutive in stature: his smallish hands could barely stretch an octave on the keyboard.

His was an interesting personality. Having been raised by his aunt, his grandmother, and his great aunt — all of whom waited on him hand and foot — Scriabin was effete in his mannerisms. By all reports, he was conceited, egomaniacal, and possessed a Messiah complex. He dabbled in Nietzschean superman philosophy, but later renounced it for Madame Blavatsky's theosophy. He filled notebooks with rambling philosophical musings and with a lengthy poem called *Poema extaza*, which provided the inspiration for his Piano Sonata No. 5 (1907) and for the work on today's program.

Of Scriabin's 74 published works, all but seven are for solo piano. He was always something of a miniaturist, favoring Chopin-like preludes and mazurkas, but he also composed ten sonatas, the last six of which are set in a single movement. Like his Polish-born model, Scriabin's harmonic language was innovative, extending the boundaries of dissonance and key into new, unexplored realms — through melodic clashes, unresolved added-tone chords, modulations to remote keys, and excursions into modality or extreme chromaticism. His later works eschewed key signatures altogether, employing accidentals throughout.

Though Scriabin sometimes referred to *The Poem of Ecstasy* as his fourth symphony, it — like the last six piano sonatas — was conceived as a single movement. The piece shows the influence of sonata form, but nevertheless relies more on its highly chromatic, Wagner-influenced harmonies and on its dense orchestral textures than on a traditional thematic structure. It calls for a huge orchestra and displays his great skill, often overlooked, as an orchestrator. In it, writes musicologist Hugh MacDonald, "he brought to life the fluttering, volatile figures that permeate his piano textures, as well as catching the sensuous flavor of lush, complex harmony." *The Poem of Ecstasy* had its premiere in New York City in 1908. (Two years earlier, Scriabin had appeared there in a series of piano recitals.) For the first Russian performance, in 1909, the composer approved the following note for the program book:

The *Poem of Ecstasy* is the Joy of Liberated Action. The Cosmos, i.e., Spirit, is Eternal Creation without External Motivation, a Divine Play of Worlds. The Creative Spirit, i.e., the Universe at Play, is not conscious of the Absoluteness of its creativeness, having subordinated itself to a Finality and made creativity a means toward an end. The stronger the pulse beat of life and the more rapid the precipitation of rhythms, the more clearly the awareness comes to the Spirit that it is consubstantial with creativity itself. When the Spirit has attained the supreme culmination of its activity and has been torn away from the embraces of teleology and relativity, when it has exhausted completely its substance and its liberated active energy, the Time of Ecstasy shall arrive.

Recommended recording: Neeme Järvi, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Chandos) 🎧