



## Program II: Musique Fantastique

Saturday, August 10, 2024

### Guillaume Connesson (b. 1970): Sextet (1998)

An eclectic composer of broad inspiration, Guillaume Connesson is very much a product of the French conservatory system, and his music has won a number of important French prizes. He teaches orchestration at the Conservatoire National de Région d'Aubervilliers and directs the Chorus of the Universities of Paris, in addition to serving as composer in association with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. His early works often drew upon pop elements, and film music has also been an important influence.

“Composed for my friends Eric Le Sage and Paul Meyer for a New Year concert, this sextet was written with festivities and entertainment in mind. The first movement, ‘Dynamic,’ is a series of variations, which multiply the rhythmic processes inherited from minimalist American music. The central ‘Nocturnal’ section is a soft and painful confidence sung by the clarinet amid a harmonic backdrop of strings and piano. Finally, ‘Festivities’ creates a sense of joy and excitement (with an allusion to Schubert’s ‘Trout’ quintet). The score ends with a ‘cadential’ joke.”

—Guillaume Connesson

### Francis Poulenc (1899-1963): Sonata for Oboe and Piano (1962)

Francis Jean Marcel Poulenc was born into a well-to-do Parisian family, and music formed a part of daily life. As a young composer, Poulenc coupled tongue-in-cheek irony with classical elegance and an impressive mastery of technique. As such, he was a natural member of “Les Six,” the group christened and supported by the poet Jean Cocteau. Later in his life, the loss of some close friends, coupled with a pilgrimage to the Black Madonna of Rocamadour, led Poulenc to rediscover his Catholic faith and resulted in compositions of a more somber, austere tone.

Composed in 1962, Poulenc’s Oboe Sonata, the last of his three woodwind sonatas, is inscribed to the memory of Serge Prokofiev. Poulenc himself would not live to see the piece to fruition, as the work was published posthumously.

The opening *Elégie*, slow and expressive, captures a sense of melancholy and reflection. The central Scherzo is lively and playful. Pointed rhythms are balanced with more lyrical motifs, showcasing the oboe's agility and the piano's rhythmic support. A slower and more lyrical middle section rises to a climax in the piano part, gradually receding before the toccata-like Scherzo resumes without respite up to a brusque ending. The final movement, *Déploration*, returns to a more somber tone, musing on a chorale-like theme and ending on a poignant note.

### **Claude Debussy (1862-1918) Arr. Nate Farrington: *Beau Soir* (1880/2024)**

Claude Debussy is one of the best-known of all French composers. A child prodigy, he entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten, where he studied composition, piano, and organ. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884. Debussy achieved success with his orchestral work *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, after poetry by Stéphane Mallarmé, in 1894. A great musical innovator, Debussy created an individual compositional voice, which drew upon modality, whole-tone, pentatonic and octatonic scales, parallel chords, unprepared modulations and formal experimentation.

“Beau soir” (“Beautiful Evening”) is set to a poem by Paul Bourget, which paints the picture of a beautiful evening where the rivers are turned rose-colored by the sunset and the wheat fields are moved by a warm breeze. Debussy uses a gently flowing triplet rhythm in the accompaniment, which contrasts the duplets that drive the light melody. The instruments and voice partner to create the sensation of peace that one might feel in the evening in nature, fitting the post-Romantic style. As any evening fades, however, so does the mood of the piece, and the song modulates from E Major to F-sharp Major. The piece reaches its climax when the melody reaches a high F-sharp, paired with the word “beau,” about two-thirds through the piece, before entering its modulated conclusion.

### **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Piano Quartet No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 15 (1876-1879)**

Gabriel Fauré is a pivotal figure in French music. He was a pupil and lifelong friend of Saint-Saëns, and in turn himself became an influential teacher, holding prominent posts including directorship of the Paris Conservatory. Fauré's pupils included Maurice Ravel and Nadia Boulanger, who taught everyone from Copland and Bernstein to Astor Piazzola and Burt Bacharach. Through Boulanger, Fauré's precepts have been disseminated to hundreds, if not thousands, of contemporary musicians.

With the exception of his popular Requiem, Fauré is best remembered today for secular compositions: an immense body of piano music, over sixty songs, and many chamber works. He scored an early success with the Piano Quartet in C Minor, Op. 15. Composed between 1876 and 1879, the work expresses a renewed dedication to classicism—a style deemed largely at odds with the prevailing tastes for Germanic (read, Wagnerian) excess. Fauré's quartet was first performed at a meeting of the Société

Nationale de Musique, a collective that Fauré helped form in 1871 to promote a specifically “French” style of music.

From the start of the piece, the appeal is transparent: a unison theme in the strings above a gentle piano accompaniment, and the action builds with control and clarity. The second movement, a Scherzo, is fleet and capricious. Beneath the buoyant mood lurk subtle rhythmic complexities and a deft sense for counterpoint. The doleful Adagio, which begins in the home key of C Major, quickly turns rapturous with a move to A-flat Major. The Finale is large and thematically rich; dotted rhythms help unify parts of the movement, recalling the quartet’s previous material. (Fauré replaced the original finale with material written more than a decade after the premiere—1883, to be exact.)