

Music@Menlo *LIVE*

5 Maps and Legends

Music@Menlo's eighth season, *Maps and Legends*, explored a wide compass of times, places, and universal phenomena. The season's offerings ranged from programs that celebrated a nation's identity to music composed in response to the changing of the seasons and the trauma of war. The 2010 edition of Music@Menlo *LIVE* chronicles this fascinating journey, preserving for listeners the exceptional performances that made *Maps and Legends* such a memorable experience.

Disc 5 transports listeners to Paris of the 1920s: "La Ville-Lumière," a cauldron of modern ideas stirred by the Western world's visionary artists and thinkers—a time that marked the intersection of Fauré's nineteenth-century elegance, Ravel's Impressionist stylings, and the emerging avant-garde, epitomized by Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, and American expatriates Aaron Copland, George Antheil, and George Gershwin. The integration of classical and popular American styles pioneered by Gershwin's *An American in Paris* continues today in the music of William Bolcom, whose cabaret songs round out this disc's eclectic offerings.

DARIUS MILHAUD (1892–1974): *La création du monde*, op. 81 (1923)

Milhaud's jazz ballet *La création du monde* is based on an African folk legend about the creation of the world. Following the mysterious and quietly seductive overture, the ballet launches into *The Chaos before Creation*, a swanky jazz fugue. Milhaud sets the scene depicting the creation of man and woman to a cakewalk, an early African American folk dance thought to have originated with nineteenth-century slaves, as a parody of the white



Jorja Fleezanis, violin, and Alessio Bax, piano

slave owners' stiff, high-society dances. The final movement features a series of semi-improvisatory jazz figurations in the piano set against playful interjections from the strings, mimicking a jazz band's rhythm section. After reprising some of its earlier tunes, the ballet ends with a sweet, bluesy cadence.

Milhaud originally scored *La création* for a large ensemble of woodwinds, brass instruments, strings, piano, and percussion; the wind section includes a prominent alto saxophone part. This recording features Milhaud's own chamber arrangement of *La création du monde* for piano quintet.

AARON COPLAND (1900–1990): *Movement for String Quartet* (ca. 1923)

Aaron Copland, the so-called Dean of American Music, fashioned a distinctly American voice by drawing on elements of numerous popular American styles, but he integrated these elements with what he absorbed from his European counterparts. Throughout his career, Copland's European influences would retain an audible presence in his music. He

composed his youthful Movement for String Quartet while studying in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. The music combines the modernism of Stravinsky with the textural clarity of Fauré. After a slow, dissonant introduction played on muted strings, the gloves come off for the piece's angular middle section. The music subsequently returns to the languid tempo of the introduction, but now palpably disquieted. An unexpectedly tranquil cadence in D-flat major completes the work's exquisite strangeness.

GEORGE ANTHEIL (1900–1959): Violin Sonata no. 2 (1923)

Antheil described his Violin Sonata no. 2 as: “a composite composition somewhat relative to the Picasso 1918 cubist period in which Picasso assembled into one picture such banal commonplaces as café tables, mandolines, bits of actual newspaper, etc. The piano is treated percussively and is a many-teethed and pointed instrument against the, in this case, banal violin. The spirit of the music represents one phase of America—cubistic Tin Pan Alley. The thematic material is both original and from sentimental tunes long since become ridiculous. The whole goes into a final duet between bass drum and violin, in which the piano is abandoned, having gradually worked up to the percussive state where it finds its most complete expression in the drum rather than upon the keys.”

GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845–1924): Barcarolle no. 13 in C Major, op. 116 (1921)

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937): Berceuse sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré (1922)

The 1920s saw Gabriel Fauré, French music's refined elder statesman, in his final years. Such works as the Opus 116 Barcarolle by this time reflected the old-world elegance and sophistication of a bygone era. Meanwhile, in the wake of Claude Debussy's death, Fauré's student Maurice Ravel had emerged as France's leading voice.

Ravel composed the *Berceuse sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré*, a poignant tribute to his teacher, in 1922. Substituting pitches for letters with no corresponding notes, Ravel fashioned the *Berceuse's* opening melody on Fauré's name:

G A B R I E L F A U R E
G A B D B E E F A G D E

FRANCIS POULENC (1899–1963): Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon, op. 32 (1922)

The lighthearted cleverness of Poulenc's Opus 32 Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon demonstrates Poulenc's assessment of the French musical ideal:

You will find sobriety and dolor in French music just as in German and Russian. But the French have a keener sense of proportion. We realize that somberness and good humor are not mutually exclusive. Our composers, too, write profound music, but when they do, it is leavened with that lightness of spirit without which life would be unendurable.

WILLIAM BOLCOM (b. 1938): “Amor,” “Blue,” “Song of Black Max (as Told by the de Kooning Boys)”

William Bolcom's pedigree includes studies with Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen; early in his career, he produced rigorous serial music in the tradition of Schoenberg. But in the 1960s, Bolcom turned towards more popular musical styles and became a key figure in the revival of ragtime music. His language since then has explored the space in between serious and popular music. With his wife, the mezzo-soprano Joan Morris, Bolcom has been a prominent advocate of American popular song, especially cabaret and other early-twentieth-century styles.

Bolcom's *Cabaret Songs* are the fruit of two defining partnerships in the composer's creative life: that with his wife, for whom the songs were composed, and another with the poet and librettist Arnold Weinstein, whose texts they set. In his preface to the four-volume publication of *Cabaret Songs*, Weinstein writes:

William Bolcom the composer studied with Roethke the poet, and before that, his feet barely hitting the pedals, Bill had played for the vaudeville shows passing through Seattle with such songs in the repertory as “Best Damn Thing Am Lamb Lamb Lamb.” Milhaud found Bill and brought him back alive to highbrow music, though he never lost his lowbrow soul (neither did Milhaud). Operas later, we wrote these songs as a cabaret in themselves, no production “values”

to worry about. The scene is the piano, the cast is the singer, in this case Joan Morris...Nobody defines better than she this elusive form of theater-poetry-lieder-poptavernacular prayer called cabaret song.

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898–1937): *An American in Paris* (1928)

An American in Paris is a musical portrait of the French capital in the 1920s as seen by a visitor. For the premiere performance at Carnegie Hall, Gershwin brought a set of four taxi horns from Paris to New York to faithfully evoke the Parisian cityscape. This recording features *An American in Paris* in Gershwin's own two-piano version.

Gershwin provided the following program note for the work's premiere:

This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I've yet attempted. The opening part will be developed in typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and Les Six (Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc, Tailleferre), though the themes are all original. My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere...

The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simpler than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax followed by a coda, in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impressions of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.

—Patrick Castillo



About Music@Menlo

Music@Menlo is an internationally acclaimed three-week summer festival and institute that combines world-class chamber music performances, extensive audience engagement with artists, intensive training for preprofessional musicians, and efforts to enhance and broaden the chamber music community of the San Francisco Bay Area. An immersive and engaging experience centered around a distinctive array of programming, Music@Menlo enriches its core concert programs with numerous opportunities for in-depth learning to intensify audiences' enjoyment and understanding of the music and provide meaningful ways for aficionados and newcomers of all ages to explore classical chamber music.