

Music@Menlo *LIVE*

6 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 6 features performances from the festival season's "Spanish Inspirations" program. Chamber music masterpieces by the foremost French composers of the early twentieth century, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, betray the influence of their Spanish counterparts. The hypnotic second movement of Debussy's String Quartet evokes the sound of Spanish guitars, while Ravel's Piano Trio recalls the folk dances of the composer's own Basque ancestry. Joaquín Turina's *La oración del torero* offers an example of Spain's finest chamber music during this time.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937): Piano Trio (1914)

Maurice Ravel spent the summer of 1913 near his birthplace in the Basque region of France. Throughout his life, the composer felt a special affinity for this side of his heritage (his mother was Basque), and his fondness for Spanish folk music and dance is frequently evident in his music, most famously in the 1928 ballet *Boléro*.

Ravel had pondered a piano trio for some time before setting to work on realizing the idea that summer; he remarked to the composer and pianist Maurice Delage, "My trio



Jupiter String Quartet

is finished. I only need the themes for it." His beloved Basque country provided the setting Ravel needed to get started, and he worked feverishly to complete it the following spring. Amidst the psychological turmoil of impending war, he wrote, "I think that at any moment I shall go mad or lose my mind. I have never worked so hard, with such insane heroic rage."

The Basque setting of the Piano Trio's genesis infiltrates its musical content. The peculiar rhythm that begins the *Modéré* derives from the *zortziko*, a Basque folk dance characterized by its quintuple meter, in which the second and fourth beats are dotted. Ravel adopts the hypnotic lilt of this dance form for the trio's first theme.

The second movement further exemplifies the influence of other cultures on Ravel's music. He labeled the movement *Pantoum*, after the *pantun*, a Malayan verse form. Ravel biographer Arbie Orenstein writes, "Ravel apparently wished to associate the movement's rhythmic subtleties with those found in the Malayan pantun. Thus...one may note the spiritual imprint of the exotic rhythms heard at the 1889 International Exposition." Scholar Michael Tilmouth calls Ravel's pantoum "[an] ingenious synthesis of a musical equivalent of the verse form with that of the traditional scherzo and trio."

The third movement is a passacaglia, a form based on the constant repetition and variation of a central musical idea. The contemplative melody of Ravel's passacaglia appears first in the piano's lowest register and is subsequently taken up by the cello and violin. The texture of the music grows increasingly rich: the climactic point of the score requires three staves for the piano part.

The gravity of the passacaglia is offset by the shimmering brilliance of the finale. The music's uneven rhythmic gait, set alternately in 5/4 and 7/4 meter, again evokes Basque folk music.

JOAQUÍN TURINA (1882–1949): *La oración del torero* (1925)

La oración del torero (*The Bullfighter's Prayer*), a single-movement work composed for lute quartet in 1925, quickly became and remains one of Joaquín Turina's most popular works; its immediate success led Turina to rescore it for string quartet and, later, for string orchestra. Though his music generally demonstrates a facility with Spanish folk-dance rhythms, the hot-blooded *Oración* more audibly betrays Turina's early experience with *zarzuela*, a Spanish musical theater genre. The quartet's palette of evocative instrumental effects (including shimmering *tremolandos* redolent of Debussy) and long-breathed arioso melodies in each voice leave a compelling impression of dramatic narrative.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918): *String Quartet in g minor, op. 10* (1893)

Claude Debussy is universally recognized as one of the most influential musical voices of the twentieth century. To the ears of many music lovers, his landmark work of 1894, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*), represents the beginning of a new era in music. The composer and conductor Pierre Boulez wrote that, with this work, "The art of music began to beat with a new pulse." In 1971, the eighty-eight-year-old Igor Stravinsky surmised, "Debussy is in all senses the century's first musician."

Debussy's unique approach to harmony, rhythm, and orchestration was driven as much by a conscious resistance to the prevailing German musical language of Richard Wagner as it was by the instinctive desire to express himself in an original way. This approach yielded a distinctly French musical voice, as distinguishable by its color and inflection from the German idiom as the spoken languages are different. This musical language, cultivated by Debussy, became known as Impressionism, a term borrowed from the visual arts and, specifically, the work of Claude Monet. As applied to the music of Debussy (and his younger contemporary Maurice Ravel), the term describes a rich palette of harmonic colors and instrumental timbres.

While he is known for having cultivated a distinctly French style, the Frenchness of Debussy's music is only one aspect of his compositional language. Like Ravel, Debussy had insatiably open ears and absorbed a broad spectrum of musical styles, from American jazz to Indonesian gamelan (which Debussy and Ravel both discovered at the 1889 World's Fair in Paris). This penchant for a variety of musical cultures included a visceral draw to the music of Spain.

The *String Quartet in g minor, op. 10*, dates from early 1893, one year prior to the completion of *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. Both works signal the onset of the composer's early maturity. The quartet mystified listeners at its premiere: the work's unfamiliar tonal effects and liquid form represented a striking departure from the stalwart quartet canon of Beethoven and Brahms. The French Symbolist poet Stéphane

Mallarmé once identified Symbolism's ethos as follows: "To evoke in a deliberate shadow the unmentioned object by allusive words." That mindset finds its musical analog in Debussy's quartet, whose surface character reflects the composer's sympathy with the Symbolist writers.

The exotic flair of Spanish folk music likewise marks the piece, as in the opening theme, which serves as a germinal motive for the entire work.

I. Animé et très décidé, mm. 1-2



Betraying a characteristically French preoccupation with orderliness (or, equally so, demonstrating a handle on the motivic development of Beethoven and Brahms), Debussy derives the scherzo's prefatory measures from this gesture.

II. Assez vif et bien rythmé, mm. 3-4



This motive serves as an insistent ostinato beneath a tart pizzicato theme, while strummed chords evoke the sound of flamenco guitars. The sweet *Andantino* makes frequent references to the motive, from which likewise emanates the languid introduction to the final movement. Throughout the remainder of the finale, Debussy continues to recall and transform the germinal motive. By the quartet's conclusion, its initial utterance has guided the listener through a kaleidoscopic journey, and it arrives at the work's final cadence considerably changed.

—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.