

Grande Valse Brillante, op. 18
by Frédéric Chopin (1810- 1849)
Orchestrated by Igor Stravinsky

Duration: Approximately 5 minutes

First Performance: June 2, 1909 in Paris

These are the first ESO performances of the work

Among the offerings in the spectacular opening season in Paris of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* was the ballet *Les Sylphides*, first presented in June of 1909. Created by the legendary choreographer Michel Fokine, the ballet was actually a revival and expansion of Fokine's earlier ballet *Chopiniana*, which had been presented in Russia during the 1890's. The music was of course that of Chopin, most of it orchestrated by Alexander Glazunov, himself a highly distinguished composer. For the revised version, impresario Diaghilev commissioned Glazunov to add more of Chopin's music and also commissioned several other composers to re-orchestrate various additional Chopin works. Among these composers was a young, unknown Russian composer still in his twenties named Igor Stravinsky. Diaghilev had heard some of the young composer's music in Russia and been duly impressed. As a student of Rimsky-Korsakov, who was one of the greatest masters of the art of orchestration (he wrote a textbook on the subject that is still of interest), Stravinsky was in Diaghilev's mind presumably up to the task of creating his own orchestration of Chopin.

Les Sylphides was a great success, featuring such noted dancers as Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, and Vaslav Nijinsky. The ballet has no plot as such but simply sets a mood created primarily by sylphs, those mysterious spirits of the air usually garbed in white. Incidentally, *Les Sylphides* should not be confused with *La Sylphide*, the ballet created in Denmark in the 1830's which was the prototype for such *ballets blancs*, featuring various fairies and spirits dressed in white.

The *Grande Valse Brillante* was the first of Chopin's many waltzes to be published (1834), and is a familiar part of the piano repertoire. The waltz fad that had swept through Europe at the end of the 18th century continued unabated throughout the 19th century, much to the horror of cultural conservatives who were scandalized that men and women were actually embracing one another while dancing in public. Chopin's achievement was to turn this popular phenomenon into high art. Many of his waltzes should perhaps come with the admonition that dancing to them should not be done at home but should be left to professionals. These elegant, beautifully ornate works filled with fantasy were not meant to be waltzed in the ordinary sense but were instead highly stylized versions of the dance.

Igor Stravinsky's arrangement is of course intended for dancing of a high order. His task was to transform Chopin's magical piano writing into orchestral terms, something that he does skillfully. Like most waltzes of the period, this one consists of a series of

different waltz themes, in this case a total of seven, in varying moods. To mention just two examples of Stravinsky's orchestration, in the second section which contains a spritely tune consisting of fast repeated notes requiring a facile piano technique, Stravinsky breaks up the passage into several sections, passing the line around the woodwind section from one instrument to another. The repeated notes are thus executed by fast tonguing in the oboe, clarinet, and flute. Later, in a section which changes the mood to a quietly tender passage, Stravinsky features a solo violin in an expressive mood. Throughout the waltz the listener can easily imagine a bevy of otherworldly sylphs elegantly dancing to this brilliantly glittering music, a glitter that, as one commentator has pointed out, is perhaps more characteristic of the Parisian version of the dance than the more sentimental Viennese incarnation.

* * *

Cello Concerto
by Mason Bates (1977-)

Duration: Approximately 25 minutes

First Performance: December 11, 2014 in Seattle, WA

These are the first ESO performances of the work

Although he is now barely past the age of forty, Mason Bates has already, in a remarkably short time, established himself as one of the most often performed among living composers. Given the vast amount of breast-beating about the future of classical music these days, we do well to remind ourselves that there actually *are* living composers of so-called serious music and doubters would do well to ponder Gustav Mahler's famous pronouncement that "the young are always right." That insight is holding true as Bates and other members of his generation continue to breathe fresh air into the world of symphonic music.

Impeccably credentialed in traditional studies, Bates holds degrees in composition from the Juilliard School as well as the University of California at Berkeley, having studied with such distinguished composers as John Corigliano, David Del Tredici, Samuel Adler, and Edmund Campion. The other side of his musical personality is that of DJ of electronic dance music, a career which he has pursued in clubs throughout the country and which has led to the founding of Mercury Soul, a project that presents classical music with electronic DJ sets in concert halls with orchestras as well as in clubs. After having served for several years as composer-in-residence of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, he was named composer-in-residence at the Kennedy Center in Washington and recently received an extension of his contract through the 2019-2020 season.

As has been the case with many concertos over the years, Mason Bates' Cello Concerto was written with a specific performer in mind. The composer's friendship with today's soloist, Joshua Roman, extends back for some years, including opportunities to perform together. The idea of writing a concerto for his friend came to fruition with a joint commission from the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra with funding from the Johnstone

Fund for New Music. The work received its world premiere on 11 December 2014 with Joshua Roman as soloist with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra under the baton of the Lithuanian conductor Mirga Gražinytė – Tyla.

The concerto is in the usual three movement, fast-slow-fast layout characteristic of concertos, and is scored for an orchestra of normal size except for its large percussion section. In addition to several different types of drums and cymbals are a number of keyboard instruments including vibraphone, glockenspiel, marimba, celesta, and piano, as well as the kalimba, a kind of “thumb piano” of West African origin. The standard piano, incidentally, has two high notes prepared to produce wooden clicks rather than pitches.

As might be guessed from that description of the percussion section, rhythmic effects play an important part in the work. Whether they be jazz, pop, or so-called techno rhythms, they serve as an effective underpinning to the classically beautiful lyricism of the solo cello. The opening movement illustrates the point as we hear the soloist singing plaintively, often in its high register, over restless rhythms in the orchestra. Especially prominent are the rhythms of the kalimba and the prepared piano clicks.

The slow movement serves as the emotional center of gravity of the work, featuring a beautifully expressive lyricism throughout. Here the soloist interacts with the orchestra in various ways, including a duet with the principal cellist.

The exciting finale begins with something like a swing feeling, and it is in this movement that “rhythmic energy wins the day,” as the composer says in his own program notes. In an extended passage the soloist uses a guitar pick, sounding almost like a punk-rock bassist. The composer again explains: “This is, after all, the same fellow who played arrangements of Led Zeppelin at Town Hall, so I had to send him out with a bang.”

* * *

Clair de Lune

by Claude Debussy (1862 -1918)

Orchestrated by Lucien Cailliet (1891-1985)

Duration: Approximately 5 minutes

These are the first ESO performances of the work

The ever popular *Clair de Lune* may be known to the general public simply as a brief and beguiling mood piece, but it is actually the third movement of a longer four movement piano suite entitled *Suite bergamasque*, which Debussy wrote around the year 1890 when he was in his late twenties. As it happened, the suite was not published until 1905. By then, Debussy had become widely known as a path-breaking composer and, hoping to capitalize on his fame, his publisher urged him to publish the early work, even though Debussy was reluctant to release music written in his earlier, more conservative

style. The publisher's instincts proved to be right and, after some revisions, the work was published, becoming a huge commercial success. As sometimes happens, it was just one portion of the work that particularly caught the attention of the public and *Clair de Lune* soon took on a life of its own as probably the most widely known piece that Debussy ever wrote. In the heyday of the piano culture in the first half of the twentieth century when a piano was a sign of middle class respectability and aspiration to culture, the dreamy sounds of this music were heard in many a parlour. (Those were the days when well-brought-up young ladies played the piano instead of soccer.) Later, it would make its way into the playlists of Muzak, a venue much despised by musicians but certainly guaranteed to popularize a piece of "classical" music. It has also done duty in many films, including such relatively recent examples as *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), and *Atonement* (2007).

Although such wide spread popularity almost inevitably causes suspicion among the *cognoscenti* (the familiar "can it be really good if it's so popular?" syndrome), the fact remains that *Clair de Lune* is not merely elevator music. It is an exquisitely wrought small masterpiece, one of those little musical miracles that could only be produced by a composer of genius. Debussy is, of course, classified as an Impressionist composer, a term borrowed from painters such as Monet and Renoir, but it's important to note that he disliked the label and that he was equally influenced by the Symbolist poets such as Mallarmé and Verlaine, who used words for their musical effects and as suggestive symbols of reality. Verlaine's influence is very much in evidence in *Clair de Lune*, for that is the title of one of his poems which Debussy had already set for voice and piano. The poem refers to "the still moonlight, sad and lovely" (*calme clair de lune triste et beau*) as well as to "charming masks and bergamasques" (*charmant masques et bergamasques*). The latter was a reference to the popular *Commedia del arte* improvised theater that developed during the Renaissance, featuring stock characters such as the wily, joking servant Harlequin and the sad clown Pierrot who wore masks marking them as human types. According to legend, Harlequin came from the northern Italian town of Bergamo, which was also the home of the heavy-footed peasant dance known as the bergamasque.

Debussy had first called the third movement of the suite *Promenade sentimentale* but then changed the name to match the title of the poem. Though it is not an explicit reference, it is not far-fetched to imagine that the composer had Pierrot in mind, who has often been associated with moon light. (One example is the familiar 18th century French folk song *Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot*.) To the Symbolist poets, Pierrot had come to represent the melancholy artist who lives on the edge of society, befriended only by the moon above.

By applying the term "bergamasque" to the entire suite, Debussy was evoking an earlier golden age of French keyboard music. If the other three movements of the suite are in a kind of retro, faux-Baroque style, *Clair de Lune* presents a sensuously dreamy contrast in the new Impressionist style. One of the most important features of this style is its rich harmonies, complex chords containing four, five, or six different notes that would become, just a few years later, the harmonic language of jazz. Such chords had been used earlier but Debussy would use them much more freely, breaking all traditional rules. When confronted by a professor who asked him by what authority he dared to use such sounds, Debussy famously answered: "My own pleasure." *Clair de Lune* and other

Impressionist masterpieces have justly earned their popularity as countless listeners have shared the composer's pleasure.

Lucien Cailliet's arrangement of *Clair de Lune* is one of many available versions. Cailliet was a French-American composer, arranger, conductor, and clarinetist who served for many years as the staff arranger of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

* * *

Suite from *The Firebird* (1919 version)
by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Duration: Approximately 23 minutes

First Performance (complete ballet): June 25, 1910 in Paris

Last ESO Performance: April, 2008; Grant Cooper, conductor

The debut season of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in Paris in the spring and summer of 1909 already alluded to above created a sensation. Even the most blasé Parisians were enchanted by the brilliant talent imported from supposedly barbaric Russia. The only criticism that seemed at all valid was directed toward the music, which one critic called *salades russes*, a Russian salad of various excerpts taken from ballet, opera, and symphony scores.

Despite the success of the first season, Diaghilev's infallible theatrical instinct told him that something was missing. As rich and polished as Russian ballet had become, its roots were actually deep in French ballet, and the offerings that had been presented were very much in the tradition of French Romanticism. What was needed was a genuinely original Russian ballet, something exotic, oriental, and perhaps a bit on the primitive side to astonish sophisticated Parisian audiences. The answer was found soon enough as a new ballet based on the Russian folk legend of the Firebird was planned. Diaghilev then began his search for a composer who could produce an original modernist score, worthy of the efforts of choreographer Mikhail Fokine and designer Léon Bakst, both names now enshrined in ballet history. The search began with figures such as Nikolai Tcherepnin, who was a kind of staff composer for the troupe, as well as a composer named Anatol Liadov. A much told story that is now considered apocryphal concerns the famously indolent Liadov, who, when asked how the new score was progressing, supposedly replied: "Fine. I've even bought some manuscript paper." (There now seems to be no evidence that Liadov ever accepted the commission.)

Finally, Diaghilev, who was certainly one of the greatest talent scouts of modern times, decided to take a chance on the same unknown 28 year old composer from St. Petersburg mentioned above, who had already proven his ability to orchestrate. Despite the fact that he was in his own word "alarmed" that he would have a deadline only a few

months away, Igor Stravinsky accepted the commission and, working at a much faster pace than usual, finished the score in time for the premiere in June of 1910. The rest is, as the saying goes, history, and thus began the spectacular career that would change forever the course of twentieth century music and dance. As dance historian Jennifer Homans has put it, “*The Firebird* was the first self-consciously ‘Russian’ ballet and it was created for export to the West.”

In the years that followed, Stravinsky would of course soon move beyond the lush post-romanticism of *The Firebird*, creating other very Russian ballets and in the process become “Mr. Modernsky,” the quintessential exponent of a new musical language. Although he would later refer disparagingly to *The Firebird* as “that great audience lollipop,” it would remain his most popular work, and the one most closely associated with him in the public mind. (He was supposedly once introduced as “that famous composer Mr. Fireburg.”)

Briefly put, the story of the ballet is as follows:

Prince Ivan meets thirteen princesses who are held captive by the ogre Kastchei and immediately falls in love with one of them. When he tries to enter Kastchei’s castle the prince is taken captive. With the help of the magical Firebird, Ivan destroys Kastchei and liberates the princesses. He marries his beloved amid general rejoicing.

Stravinsky narrates the tale by means of a brilliantly orchestrated score that would no doubt have made his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov proud. The work is very much in the tradition of late Romantic Russian coloristic writing, showing influences not only from Rimsky-Korsakov, but also Scriabin and Glazunov. Besides the influence of his orchestration, Stravinsky borrows a narrative technique from one of Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas. For the supernatural elements of the work (Kastchei and the Firebird) he uses music based on the chromatic scale, i.e., the scale consisting of all twelve of the white and black notes of the piano. On the other hand, the human elements of the story (Ivan and the princesses) are represented by a simpler so-called diatonic style that uses the eight notes of a scale played on white notes alone, such as the major or minor scales. Incidentally, two of those diatonic melodies are actual Russian folk melodies cheerfully stolen by the composer, although, as his assistant Robert Craft has said, he was loath to discuss the matter.

Despite its debt to the Russian tradition, and despite the fact that Stravinsky would quickly move on to ever more radical experiments, it should be said that for its time *The Firebird* was in the vanguard of modernism. It is an astonishing achievement for a composer not yet thirty years old whose earlier work had been essentially academic, and a striking example of the way a composer of genius can absorb the past, and having made it his own, transform it into something new. As Robert Craft has written of *The Firebird*, “In a single stroke the young composer had exhausted his teacher’s world and given birth to a new one.”

Finally, the musicologically inclined may be interested to know that at various times Stravinsky arranged three different suites from the complete ballet music for *The Firebird*. Being an astute businessman, he often made alternate versions not so much for aesthetic reasons as to increase his royalties. (The Russian revolution had left him

without the legal protection of copyrights for some of his most popular works.) The 1919 version heard today has become the most often played, and has the practical advantage of scoring for a smaller orchestra than that used in the full ballet.

* * *