



Programme Notes

Dramatic Skies 2: Cumulus

Grieg: *Andante Con Moto*

Schifrin: *Hommage a Ravel*

McLeod: *Clouds*

Taylor: *burlesques mécaniques*

Smetana: *Piano Trio in G minor*

Edvard Grieg (NOR; 1843 – 1907): *Andante Con Moto in C minor*, c. 10'

This meditative little movement is as far as Grieg ever got with writing a piano trio. He'd recently finished *Peer Gynt*, the incidental music for Ibsen which had been such a triumph, but also exhausting, and was having a song and chamber music year to recover. He'd just finished his famous string quartet and was no doubt intending to repeat the success in a larger work with piano. But he put it away, and it was subsequently completely forgotten ... until 30 years later, when Grieg's great friend and colleague Julius Röntgen was going through his papers after Grieg died. His eyes lit up, naturally, and he waxed lyrical about his discovery in a letter to Grieg's widow Nina:

"It is a beautiful piece ... What solemnity it conveys! He can't get enough of that single theme, that ... develops its full power so beautifully... The piece can very well stand by itself and does not at all give the impression of being a fragment, as it constitutes a perfect entity in itself."

Unfortunately, in one of music history's great ironies, Röntgen then proceeded to do nothing, evidently on the grounds that the movement probably was only a fragment, and the work was completely forgotten again. (Röntgen's reluctance to publish the piece is surprising, as he had no scruples about supplying, from his own pen, the two missing movements of Grieg's second string quartet of 1891.)

The trio movement thus remained buried and unpublished until 1978, a full century after it was written. And it has been popular ever since! There is no doubt that Röntgen's first instincts were right; regardless of the composer's original intentions, this is a gem from the hand of a master. With his usual deceptive simplicity, Grieg develops a single theme in a sandwich of moods: melancholic on the outside, passionate in the middle.

Lalo Schifrin (ARG; b. 1932): *Hommage a Ravel*, c. 29'

Introduction

Tango

Elegie

Finale

“It’s a very unique city [Buenos Aires]. We absorb everything. Myself, I absorb like a sponge the music of other cultures, besides classical.”

Lalo Schifrin has to have the most eclectic range of influences of any composer alive. He’s the famous Hollywood composer, composer of the Dirty Harry series and Mission Impossible, with an Oscar and five Grammys and a star on the Hollywood walk of fame.

He’s a jazz legend who started out with Dizzy Gillespie. He’s a tango king who played with Piazzolla. He’s a conductor, an arranger, a music director. He’s the king of the Buenos Aires dance orchestra scene, master of every Latin rhythm you can name.

And he’s also a classical pianist who starts every single day with a Bach prelude. Schifrin’s mother was a pianist; his father was a violinist in Erich Kleiber’s orchestra at the Teatró Colon, concerts he always attended from when he was a child. He began learning piano alongside young Daniel Barenboim (the Barenboims were family friends): he won a scholarship to the Paris Conservatoire to study with Messiaen; he learnt the repertoire, writing his thesis on African influences in western classical music. This is where he discovered Stravinsky and Bartók and Schoenberg (and presumably, Ravel). This is also where he discovered jazz. He led a double life: good classical piano student by day, playing jazz piano with Chet Baker and co at the weekends. Thelonius Monk changed his life. When he returned to Argentina he began uniting all these influences with his Latin heritage and the rest is Hollywood history. But he never lost his love for pure classical. He’s always maintained that Brahms or Gounod are just as important an influence as anything else, and he’s written a surprising amount for purely classical forces – chamber music, ballets, even symphonies, even when he was in the midst of the Dizzy Gillespie Quintet.

So who better to write a tribute to another great musical magpie, Maurice Ravel. Ravel adored jazz. His favourite memories from the USA were not packed concert halls listening to his music but late nights smoking and drinking with George Gershwin in the jazz clubs of Harlem. He loved exotic instruments. He loved rhythm. He was a master of texture – nowhere more so than in his own Piano Trio in A minor. He loved painting a scene. Schifrin knew all this, and he’d been a frequent visitor back to Paris: but it wasn’t until he actually visited Ravel’s grave, out at the cimetière Levallois, that he was suddenly deeply moved and decided to write a tribute. It’s not an imitation of Ravel: it’s more Schifrin’s own impression of the things Ravel loved – African rhythms, interesting textures, Middle-Eastern scales, with the elegie representing his experience at the graveside at its heart. Of all the Ravel

tributes, and there are many, you get the feeling that this is the one that Ravel himself would prefer.

Jenny McLeod (NZ; b. 1941): *Clouds*, c. 7' (new commission)

cumulus?

not so much
white fluffy puffy
as here there
high bright low
wild, raggedy
dense, dark, hymnic
calmo, agitato
with a bit of cirro-
cumulo-nimbo-stratus
thrown in
 more like
McLeody sort of clouds ...

Jenny McLeod has studied in Aotearoa and abroad under the mentorship of Page, Farquhar, Lilburn, Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, and Messiaen. Early in her career she "discovered" Richard Taylor's translation of the Māori creation poetry which was the inspiration for her work *Earth and Sky* upon returning to NZ. The work made a significant contribution to the nation's burgeoning bi-culturalism, and established Jenny McLeod at the rising star of New Zealand music. In 1971 she was appointed Professor of Music at Victoria University, the youngest, and first female, to be awarded the position. Her career has been a remarkable procession of extraordinary changes of direction, moving with ease between different musical worlds - "serious" music, popular music, music for the church, and for Māori communities.

Poem by Jenny McLeod. Commissioned by NZTrio with funding from Creative New Zealand.

INTERVAL

Alex Taylor (NZ; b. 1988): *burlesques mécaniques* - c. 12'

Alex Taylor has been commissioned and performed by numerous prominent artists and ensembles in his native New Zealand and abroad. As well as composing, Alex is a multi-instrumentalist, poet, critic and music educator. A multiple award recipient and 1st class honours Masters graduate of Auckland University, he is currently a PhD student at the University of California, San Diego.

His compositional work often explores interactions between seemingly disparate materials, especially between ideas of the 'canon' and the avant-

garde. His output includes works for orchestra, chamber music, songs, opera, music for theatre, and three concerti, for flute, bassoon and horn.

He writes: “*burlesques mécaniques* is a collection of grotesque miniatures whose characters are not people or animals but dances. These dances have been mechanised, electrified, and often obscured by their own rhythmic impulse. Old forms are given new identities, freed from the confines of metric stability and the expectation that they be "danceable". The essentially mechanical, artificial aspect of music (and of art in general?) is embodied in the piano, here a brittle, seedy protagonist whose string limbs hover and flail about it. Conflicting rhythms dominate the surface, oscillating between insistent repetition and mad, angular flourishes. The generally jerky, muscular rhythmic material is periodically frozen throughout the work, most strikingly in the ninth movement (chain). Here a string of rich, impressionistic chords briefly reveals an alternative, interior world which is then rudely dismissed in an almost haphazard finale.”

burlesques mécaniques was commissioned by NZTrio in 2012 with funding from Creative New Zealand.

Bedřich Smetana (1824 – 1884): *Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 15, c. 29'*

I Moderato assai

II Allegro, ma non agitato. Alternativo I. Andante - Alternativo II. Maestoso

III Finale. Presto.

In memory of our eldest child Bedřiška, whose rare musical talent gave us such delight; too early snatched from us by death at the age of 4½ years.

On September 6, 1855, the Smetanas' eldest daughter Bedřiška died of scarlet fever. The eldest of four young daughters, she was the most musical, already a fine little pianist at the age of only four. She was the apple of his eye – his little “Fritzi”. He was devastated. And Fritzi's death was not even the beginning. Her younger sister Gabriela had already succumbed the previous year; little two-week-old Kateřina followed in short order; the next one – again a daughter – lasted only eight months. Then his wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His childhood sweetheart, only 28 years old, she had just four more years to live. Of all the four daughters they had in their first years of marriage only one made it to adulthood, in what was a horrible reprise of Smetana's own childhood – ten of his siblings died before the age of two. But Fritzi was the worst. He wrote in his diary, “Nothing can replace Fritzi, the angel whom death has stolen from us”, and immediately set about writing this trio.

It's one of only two autobiographical works by this intensely private man, the other being the string quartet that depicted the tinnitus and deafness that plagued him in old age. This is all about his grief, introduced by the solo violin down on the G string, as if weeping. That passion is exhausted: a lovely yearning melody comes in the cello, in exquisite counterpoint, briefly injecting

shafts of sunlight; it's thought (though Smetana never left a detailed programme) that this was Bedřicha's favourite tune. There's also a beautiful Chopinesque piano moment before the cello theme ends in thundering octaves in the piano. The second movement is a ghostly scherzo with two trios (or 'alternativos'), first lush then stately, perhaps a vision of the woman Bedřicha would have grown into? And the finale is a nervous tarantella, taken almost note for note from his earlier piano sonata, two against three time as if trying to shake off the grief. The cello introduces another theme, achingly beautiful, never quite fully developed and collapsing into a funeral march towards the end, punctuated by the tolling of bells. It's Smetana's first great achievement, although it flopped before the audience – 'the critics hated it, the audience was unresponsive'. The only person who liked it was Franz Liszt, his old friend and encourager. He was 'profoundly moved' and arranged performance elsewhere in Europe the following year.

Programme notes by Charlotte Wilson.