

Chamber Music Society - October 13, 2019
Trio con Brio Copenhagen
Soo-Jin Hong, violin
Soo-Kyung Hong, cello
Jens Elvekjaer, piano

Phantasmagoria (2006-2007) for violin, cello and piano

Bent Sørensen (b. 1958)

- I. Molto energico
- II. Misterioso e dolce
- III. Dolcissimo
- IV. Misterioso e meccanico
- V.

Bent Sørensen is a Dane, who, having decided to become a composer in his early 20s, studied with Denmark's two leading composer-teachers of that time: Ib Nørholm at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen and Per Nørgård at the Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus. Among other honors and awards, his early violin concerto, *Sterbende Gärten* (Dying Gardens), won the Music Prize of the Nordic Music Council (1992-93) and his triple concerto for piano trio, *L'isola della città* (2016), won the Grawemeyer Music Prize in 2018.

Early in the composer's career, having listened to a piece by the young Sørensen, the Norwegian composer Arne Nordheim said spontaneously, "It reminds me of something I've never heard." And the writer and Danish composer, Karl Aage Rasmussen continues,

It is not easy to imagine a more strangely to-the-point description of the ambiguous, almost paradoxical expressive idiom of this unique composer, who is without doubt the leading Danish composer of his generation . . . The moment something becomes tangible and recognizable, it dissolves, becomes obscured, or disappears. But this ghost-like indistinctness is nevertheless the work of an experienced illusionist. Perhaps Sørensen's most singular talent is his ability to give voice to this indistinctness, to render it distinct and clear. Often he places very simple musical material inside an ingenious musical "hall of mirrors" in which echoes, and echoes of echoes, spread like ripples in water; the quiet, smudged contours, perceived through falling rain or misted windows, are always drawn in minute, calligraphic detail.

With this description, one can easily imagine that the title of the work is composed out in sound; with a good deal of invention Sørensen adapts technical devices and activates the listeners' imagination.

The opening movement is the most extensive of the five; one could almost say that movements two-through-four evolve from, or are set in motion by the first one, while the last movement--that notably has no heading or characterization--is a rather pale, a deflecting and illusive reflection of some of what *might* have gone before. While there is a good deal of interaction between all three instruments, the strings are generally treated in relation to each other, with the piano functioning as a counterpart.

The work is replete unusual techniques, particularly for the stringed instruments. In the first movement, a kind of urgent "tattoo" of a falling minor third is, initially, explored generously in all three instruments--nothing unusual, actually--but the last segment calls extensively for tremolos in all three instruments. While a common technique for violin, tremolos are rather unusual for the piano, as you will hear, for the effect is very different. Throughout mutes are required, but in the first movement in addition to the traditional mute, which softens the tone, Sørensen asks the violin--and later the cello--to use the "Tonwolf" (or the so-called practice mute) which deadens the tone almost completely.

It somehow seems appropriate to let Karl Aage Rasmussen have the last word. He writes:

Sørensen's music is not recycled; in no way does it rely on the yellowing pages of history for its musical nourishment. His musical language is undeniably of the present day, both aesthetically and technically. The music does, however, appear to be pervaded with memories, the wisdom of experience and old dreams, and of the inevitability of transitoriness and parting. It is a flickering, glittering world where things seem to disappear at the slightest touch.

Trio pour violon, violoncelle et piano

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Modéré

Pantoum: Assez vif

Passacaille: Très large

Final: Animé

Composed in 1914 and premiered in 1915, Ravel's Trio balances technical demands with musical ones in four highly distinctive movements. It is a large work in which contrasting moments abound. Limpid classicism, broad themes, delicate lightening-quick figures, slow-moving chorales serve the composer's creative imagination. Though often associated with the development of neo-classicism because of his opposition to overt sentimentality, many of Ravel's works are richly expressive. On the other hand, even the most exotic of them, like *Shéhérazade* and *Rapsodie espagnole*, are marked by clarity and understatement. One of his biographers stressed his desire to remain independent of artistic manifestos and creeds. Preferring to use complex triadic harmonies enriched by free dissonance, he avoided both the ambiguity of the impressionists and the outward display of "sentiment." This music breathes with an exploration of color and contrasting articulations, which are resources and a challenge in this instrumental combination. Ravel's cool poise, notwithstanding, this work has a wonderfully romantic quality about it.

In the first movement one is immediately struck by pristine sensibility of the opening theme heard first in the piano: a repetitive phrase with mostly triadic chords in the right hand, and a bare accompaniment in the left hand. Practically unmatched as a composer for the piano, Ravel captures an unforgettable bell-like color in the instrument, and sustains its weightless quality with an odd meter that floats on a metric pattern of five eighth-note beats followed by three. With an elongation on the 2nd count of each group (try counting: 1-2-3-4-5, 1-2-3 and repeating it) the division into 5 + 3 provides a wonderful rhythmic lilt that easily complements the marvelous harmonic rhythm and melodic lyricism. In working out ideas in this first movement of his monumental work, the composer draws on all the resources of the instruments; tremolos, harmonics and florid virtuoso passages require consummate musicianship and exquisite technique. Still, it is true here, as in all of Ravel's music, that virtuosity only serves the musical purpose. The second theme, a slow diatonic tune, provides short calm moments that bring a measure or two of contrast into the whirl of ideas belonging to the first one.

In the second movement Ravel develops an idea modeled on a Malaysian poetic form called "Pantoum," which was introduced to French literary circles in the nineteenth century and adopted by a number of poets, notably, by Victor Hugo in his *Orientales*. Four-line stanzas are arranged in a pattern in which the second and fourth lines of the first one are repeated as the first and third lines in the next stanza. To complete the cycle, the second and fourth lines of the first stanza are repeated in the last one. Ravel transfers this idea to his work by alternating a rapid scherzo that chatters away in eighth-notes in a 3/4 meter, with an expressive chorale that moves in a stately succession of half and whole notes in a 4/2 meter. The ideas are traded off; one section in one style is followed by another in the alternative one. Then, following a definitive exposition of these ideas, he combines them, as contrasting as they are, into a whole. First, the strings play one theme in one meter and the piano in the other, then he completes the

section by reversing these roles. Unlike the poem in which the lines have to follow each other down the page, Ravel uses the unique potential of musical expression, and simultaneously renders two apparently opposed musical ideas.

The third movement, a *Passacaille* with its stately motion and theme, conveys an image of an elegant, old-fashioned Spanish Don. Ravel is unconcerned with formality in his treatment of the form, and once he has introduced the broad, eight-measure line in all the instruments—first low in the bass of the piano, then in the cello and finally in the violin—he invents a continuation by exploring its character and mood. Waves of eighth-notes in measured 3/4 time, eventually climb out of the lower ranges, and as resonant chords eventually give way to tender, more delicate ones, the warmth dissipates. Finally, only delicate high pitches are left, momentarily suspended, until the last pale statements of the tune are played in the reverse order of the opening: violin, cello and finally the piano.

Before the last tones of the tune subside completely, the next movement begins and the atmosphere sparkles. Animated arpeggios of harmonics in the violin and a double tremolo in the cello's highest register set the stage in 5/4 (felt as 3+2) for the entry of the piano's exposition of the opening segment of the sonata form's first theme. When it comes, the second theme brings a contrasting idea in 7/4 (or, 4+3). Beginning low in the piano and accompanied by intense tremolos in both strings, the idea builds quickly, is lifted by a crescendo and returns to the high register of the first part of the theme. Making the most of the propulsive character of asymmetrical measures, the composer plays off these two ideas against each other. Then having achieved a climax, he changes the key and brings a new idea: rich, stentorian chords in the piano keep company with high, *fortissimo* trills with both strings. In the development section that follows it is these chords that suddenly ring out with an unmistakable "call to arms," a startling reminder that the Trio was composed at a time of national crisis. The coda that completes the work is quite grand, requiring great skill from the performers to satisfy the final challenge of the composer's creative imagination in a work that is, quintessentially, one of his finest efforts.

Piano Trio in A Minor, Op. 50

Peter Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

- I Pezzo elegiaco. Moderato assai
- II A. Tema con Variazioni. Andante con moto.
B. Variazione Finale e Coda. Allegro risoluto e con fuoco.

Tchaikovsky composed this trio to memorialize the pianist Nikolai Rubenstein (1831-1881) and dedicated it "To the Memory of a Great Artist." In this work's significant piano part Tchaikovsky expressed his regard for his friend and champion—in spite of having expressed his dislike for the instrumental combination in a letter to his patroness, Mme von Meck. To her he had confided that he could not "endure" the sound of the smooth strings together with the percussive piano. Nevertheless, he overcame his resistance and composed a work that makes demands on all sides: both performers and audiences need to come to grips with a lengthy and demanding work to reap the reward it can bring.

The first movement is long (more than 18 minutes) and as indicated, sets an elegaic mood, as the instruments play a folk-like melody comprised of four-measure phrases. Predictably, it's in the minor mode and takes advantage of the falling augmented second for affect as it traces its first cadence, but then turns more positive, even uplifting, in the second phrase. In the transition a second theme in E Major initiates a change of tempo to *Allegro giusto*; this, in turn, becomes developmental with reappearing bits of the melody in new, often robust guises. The original tune returns, modified by a change of tempo and a new accompaniment until a coda brings the strings together in harmony. Here they repeat, unchanging, a four-measure melody while the right hand of the piano plays a greatly simplified version of the original tune in octaves over a tonic pedal point. Conclusion comes with an exchange of roles in the plain cadence at the very end.

The two parts of the second movement taken together are even longer than the first. The first part comprises a theme and eleven variations: several quite short, several somewhat longer, and four between two and three minutes long. They are extremely varied and the focus is less on a technique of variation than on contrast. The twenty-measure theme in the major dominant mode, has an unusual shape: one six-bar phrase repeated, a contrasting phrase of four measures and a return to a shortened version of the original tune. A distinctive feature is the slight lilt provided by the short-long (accented) rhythmic figure that appears in the second bar of the two-bar phrases.

The variations run a gamut of styles and musical types, and several of them are so much more easily associated with the composer than with the dedicatée of the work that the listener begins to quite forget that the work is a memorial. To mention several: one sounds like a music box (piano high in the treble, strings droning all the while), there is a waltz and a terrific three-part fugue, complete with expositions, sequences, a pedal point and a sweeping, contrary-motion chromatic scale in the piano. The particularly fetching variation that follows the fugue sounds like an “aeolian harp.” In 9/8 and marked *Andante flebile ma non tanto* (“plaintive and mournful, but not too much”), the whole takes place over a dominant pedal point. The piano, always *pp*, plays nothing but rising and falling unchanging arpeggios followed by chords, and the strings, muted and *lamentoso*, play their contemplative lines. One can just hear the rustling strings of the aeolian harp secreted somewhere in a chink in a wall as the tune floats unbidden through the air. Not surprisingly the atmosphere is quickly dispersed by the brilliant mazurka variation that follows.

The second part of the variations comprises the finale and coda, and the composer works himself into quite a grand frenzy; the music leaps into high gear with flashing scales, dotted rhythms and indulges in a bit of adventurous harmonic motion before settling down, *fff*, *Andante con moto*, into a stirring rendition of the initial tune from the first movement. Here the piano has huge gestures, giant chords and sweeping contrary-motion arpeggios that surge under the strings playing octave unisons *fff*. Finally the moment comes when, energy spent, the strings progressively tone down the range, dynamics and tempo to a near standstill. Then, as if a distant memory or recall, comes the funeral march with the final rendering of the opening phrases of the first tune in the strings, *piangendo*.

Program Notes by Dr. Jean Christensen.

The pre-concert presentation will be given by Dr. Jean Christensen, Professor Emerita, of the School of Music. Dr Christensen, specialized in modern music, specifically Arnold Schoenberg, and contemporary music, specifically the Danish composer, Per Nørgård, and jazz. She also produced the World Music Series, concerts devoted to musical traditions that were not taught at the School of Music, with native musicians from India, Native American traditions, Korea, and so on. Currently she is mostly a climate activist and a gardener.