PROGRAM NOTES

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LILI BOULANGER
(PARIS, 1893–MÉZY, 1918)
Deux Morceaux (1908-1914)

French composer Lili Boulanger was born into a musical family that resided in the 9th arrondissement in Paris during the Belle Époque period. The neighborhood was home to many famous composers, including Lili’s own father, Ernest Boulanger. The couple had four daughters, two of whom survived into adulthood: Nadia Boulanger and Lili Boulanger. They were both encouraged to pursue musical training at the Paris Conservatory and vie for the Prix de Rome. Although some selection committee members were opposed to the idea of women embarking on careers as composers, they acknowledged the Boulanger sisters’ creative gifts: Nadia placed second in the 1908 competition, and Lili became the first woman to win the Prix de Rome in 1913. Unfortunately, after contracting bronchial pneumonia as a toddler, Lili suffered from poor health for the duration of her short life and succumbed to intestinal tuberculosis in 1918. In contrast, Nadia Boulanger died in 1979, aged 92, and is now regarded as one of the twentieth century’s great pedagogues of counterpoint and harmony whose pupils included her sister, Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, and Quincy Jones.

The French sonorities and Impressionistic textures of Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy, which were greatly admired by the Boulanger sisters, inform Boulanger’s harmonic coloration in Deux Morceaux. The first piece, “Nocturne,” (1908, revised 1911) is a quintessential night song in the tradition of Frédéric Chopin. The flowing piano accompaniment supports a soaring violin melody. Boulanger composed the second piece, “Cortège,” a victorious march, in 1914 while enjoying her sojourn in Rome after her historic triumph.
MAURICE RAVEL
(CIBOURE, BASSES-PYRÉNÉES, 1875–PARIS, 1937)
Sonata No. 2 in G major for Violin and Piano (1923-27)

Despite being heralded as France’s leading composer after Claude Debussy’s death in 1918, the 1920s were a difficult time for Maurice Ravel. Ravel’s beloved mother died suddenly in 1917, and his service as a medical transporter during World War I also impinged on his outlook, as he was profoundly saddened by the death of numerous comrades. Ravel spent much of the 1920s in isolation in Montfort-l’Amaury, 50 kilometers outside of Paris, and enjoyed successful concert tours to England and the United States. As signaled by the Sonata’s second movement’s “Blues” title, Ravel incorporated jazz into his stylistic vocabulary in the 1920s after hearing it, often performed by American musicians, in Paris nightclubs. He first traveled to the United States in 1928, where he met with George Gershwin several times and visited jazz clubs in Harlem.

Perhaps underscoring his innovations as a modernist in this work, Ravel states that he creates a rift between violin and piano, which he views as “essentially incompatible instruments.” He goes on to add that, “Far from balancing their contrasts, the Sonata reveals their incompatibility.”

Immediately the first movement introduces unusual textures and timbres, beginning with the unharmonized piano introduction, followed by a bitonal clash (two different keys played simultaneously) between the right and left hand. The meter is often obscured with ties over the bar lines, and an unpredictable rhythmic flow presides as the violin and piano are frequently situated on different temporal planes and rarely arrive at interlocking rhythmic patterns. The violin, with pizzicato articulation, introduces the blues progression at the beginning of the second movement while the piano enters with a brief syncopated rhythmic flourish derived from ragtime. The timbral effects mimicking brass growls and banjo on the piano and violin, as well as soulful vocal blues, are quite remarkable. Ravel was at the time interested in capturing the incessant sound of automated manufacturing and “industrial progress,” as exemplified in Boléro, and he concludes the sonata with “Perpetuum mobile” (perpetual motion), a highly virtuosic feat for the violinist who plays consistent sixteenth notes, with a variety of bowings, for nearly two hundred measures.

FLORENCE PRICE
(LITTLE ROCK, 1887–CHICAGO, 1953)
Fantasies Nos. 1 and 2 for Violin and Piano (1933 and 1940)
Florence Price grew up in Little Rock, received her early musical training from her mother, and later studied composition, piano pedagogy, and organ at the New England Conservatory, where she earned her degree. She moved to Atlanta in 1910 to head the music department at Clark College, and resettled in Little Rock in 1912 to marry a successful attorney and start a family. After witnessing an escalation of racial hostility and violence against blacks in Little Rock, the Price family moved to Chicago in 1927. However, Price’s excitement at making a name for herself as a composer in a vibrant cultural center was clouded by the trauma of separating from an abusive spouse, whom she divorced in 1931, and shortly after married Pusey Arnett. Rae Linda Brown’s excellent biography of Price, *The Heart of a Woman* (2020), investigates the way her career was hindered by racial prejudice and gender inequality. Despite gaining accolades and recognition in her lifetime, Price was not offered a salaried academic position in Chicago. Much of her compositional output was rediscovered by Brown and has only recently been published.

In 1933, Price relished her first major success as a composer in Chicago and composed several excellent pieces, including Fantasy No. 1 for Violin and Piano. Like many of Price’s works, The Fantasy No. 1 displays a unique melding of her African American heritage with European Romantic forms and harmony. The subtitle of Fantasy No. 2, composed in 1940, reveals that it is “based on a folk melody,” which an autograph score specifies as the spiritual “I’m Workin’ on My Buildin’.” Price later included a choral arrangement of the melody in *Two Traditional Negro Spirituals* (1949), indicating that the song was sung to her by “Malinda Carter, a former slave who was the grandmother of one of Price’s friends in Chicago, concert singer Fannie Carter Woods.

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**
(BONN, 1770–VIENNA, 1827)

**Sonata No. 9 in A major for Violin and Piano, Op. 47, “Bridgetower”** (1802-03)

On 24 May 1803, Beethoven premiered his ninth sonata for violin and piano in Vienna with George Polgreen Bridgetower, a London-based violin virtuoso, and one of the first musicians of African descent to concertize throughout Europe. Bridgetower had arrived in Vienna just a few weeks earlier, and upon hearing his impressive technique and artistry, Beethoven quickly composed a work, primarily so that he could collaborate with him. In order to speed the process, Beethoven incorporated a previously composed movement into the piece: the third movement of the Op. 47
sonata was originally composed as the finale for Beethoven’s first violin sonata, Op. 30. Not surprisingly, Beethoven’s emphasis on musical cohesion is paramount and musical ideas presented in the first and second movements are generated from the third.

Subsequently, Beethoven and Bridgetower had a falling out, which resulted in Beethoven’s rededication of the work to Rodolphe Kreutzer. When published in 1805, Kreutzer found the piece puzzling, perhaps due to the subtitle (“Sonata, written in the concertante style, almost as if a concerto”), and never performed it. As Laura Tunbridge notes in _Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces_, Beethoven “was attempting to transform a genre that might be characterized as introvert into an extrovert one,” possibly eager to experiment because he was in the midst of composing several concertos: the 3rd and 4th Piano Concertos, the Violin Concerto and the Triple Concerto.

The “Bridgetower’s” opening movement is rife with symphonic qualities that endow the work with grandeur, never before heard to this extent in a violin sonata. These include a pensive introduction that precedes the Presto sonata form, the dramatic fermatas placed at the end of the first presentations of the theme, and the turbulent _sförzandi_ accents. Similar to one of Beethoven’s upcoming works, his Third Symphony, “Eroica” (op. 55), the length of the first movement of the Bridgetower was also unprecedented. The second movement, an Andante variation set, provides a lyrical respite, releasing the tension and moving to the key of F major. The previously composed finale, the only tarantella to appear in Beethoven’s major works, was modified to commence with a bang on the piano, a loud chord added by Beethoven right before the score was set to be engraved. This alerts listeners to the tarantella’s traditional harmonic scheme: oscillation between a major key and its parallel minor key, which he also utilized in the first movement. The Italian dance in 6/8 meter is a festive celebration of courtship, featuring repeated notes in the melody and percussion accompaniment by castanets and tambourines, but it was often confused with a similarly-named dance, the tarantula, which was performed as a cure for a spider bite. In any case, Beethoven’s point of departure is the dance’s frenzied energy, but unexpected interruptions arise, like a brief chorale with block chords, which he also includes in the first movement to retrospectively bind the movements together. Another truly innovative tactic—enabling listeners to create memories, and then later in the work conjure them up from the past—that Beethoven further refined as his career progressed.

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