Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

“Nuages” and “Fêtes” from Nocturnes for Orchestra (1897-1899)
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

The origin of Debussy’s Nocturnes is cloudy. It is possible that he may have conceived the three movements of the work, and perhaps made some sketches, as early as 1892, when he was considering a tour to the United States proposed by one Prince Poniatowski. He informed the Prince that a piece called “‘Trois Scènes au Crépuscule’ (‘Three Scenes at Twilight’), [was] almost finished, that is to say that the orchestration is entirely laid out and it is simply a question of writing out the score.” This work, if it ever came into existence, seems to have completely disappeared, though it is rumored that a fragment has been locked away in private hands for years. The inspiration for this music was a set of ten poems (published in 1890) by Henri de Régnier, a symbolist poet and close associate of Mallarmé. (It was Régnier who approached Mallarmé with Debussy’s request to base a work on his Prélude à l’apres-midi d’un faune.) Régnier’s verses, collectively titled Poèmes anciens et romanesques, are, according to Edward Lockspeiser’s study of Debussy, “the product of an imaginary theatre of the mind in which action is sacrificed to poetic associations.” The images evoked are dream-like and ritualistic and were well suited to Debussy’s ideal of a music “made up of colors and rhythms ... [rather than] something that can be poured into a tight and traditional form.” Debussy’s “Scenes at Twilight” have apparently faded into darkness, though they were the earliest evidence of the thoughts that eventually became the Nocturnes.

On December 29, 1893, the Ysaÿe Quartet introduced Debussy’s String Quartet in G minor in Paris. The Belgian musician Eugene Ysaÿe was one of the great violinists of the time, and Debussy was impressed with his abilities and flattered by his interest in the young composer’s music. In September 1894 Debussy wrote to Ysaÿe offering him a three-movement piece for solo violin and orchestra, recast from the earlier “Scenes at Twilight,” which was “an experiment with the different shades that can be obtained from one color — like a study in gray in painting.” Debussy specified that “the orchestration of the first movement is for strings, the second for flutes, four horns, three trumpets and two harps, while the third combines both these groupings.” Debussy was also busy at the time with the composition of Pelléas et Mélisande, and it was two years before he was again able to approach Ysaÿe, imploring him to accept the concerted piece for his exclusive performance. Though the work for Ysaÿe never reached final form, Debussy remained interested in such a composition, and was still considering a “Poème” for solo violin and orchestra as late as 1914.

The final shaping of the Nocturnes began in 1897. The influences of Régnier’s symbolist poetry and the orchestral sonority of the music intended for Ysaÿe melded with yet another one, recorded by Léon Vallas in his biography of the composer: “One day, in stormy weather, as Debussy was crossing the Pont de la Concorde in Paris with his friend Paul Poujad, he told him that on a similar kind of day the idea of the symphonic work Nuages ['Clouds'] had occurred to him: he had visualized those very thunder-clouds swept along by a stormy wind; a boat passing, with its horn sounding. These two impressions are recalled in the languorous succession of chords and by the short chromatic theme on the English horn.” Debussy went on to explain to Poujad that Fêtes ("Festivals") had been inspired by a recollection of merry-making in the Bois de Boulogne, with noisy crowds watching the drum and bugle corps of the Garde Nationale pass in parade. The finale (Sirènes — "Sirens"), which includes women’s chorus though they sing without text, derives from L’Homme et la Sirène by Henri de Régnier, a symbolist poet and close associate of Mallarmé. The title of the entire cycle — Nocturnes — and the idea for its tone-color painting may have been taken from the work of James McNeill Whistler, the American-born artist who lived in Paris and London for most of his life and whose best-known work, a portrait of his mother, was formally entitled by him Arrangement in Gray and Black, No. 1. All of these streams — poetic, visual, sensual, sonorous — flowed into the three Nocturnes.

Debussy worked for two years finishing the Nocturnes. On September 16, 1898 he wrote to the publisher Georges Hartmann that these three orchestral pieces were giving him more trouble than all the five acts of Pelléas. He wanted to follow the sensation created in 1894 by his Prélude à l’apres-midi d’un faune with an equally stunning orchestral work, but one that would also fulfill his grand, avant-garde view...
of the art. “I love music passionately, and because I love it I try to free it from the barren traditions that stifle it,” he proclaimed. “It is a free art, gushing forth — an open-air art, an art boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky, the sea! It must never be shut in and become an academic art.” Even after Hartmann published the work in 1899, Debussy continued to refine his vision by touching up the orchestration in his personal copy of the score for years thereafter. These changes were incorporated into the definitive version of the work issued in 1930.

The first two of the Nocturnes were given in Paris at the Lamoureux concert of December 9, 1900. Though they were unanimously hailed in the press, the critics were hard put to offer much technical explanation of this music in such an unprecedented style. Pierre de Bréville’s comments for the Mercure de France were typical: “It is pure music, conceived beyond the limits of reality, in the world of dreams, among the ever-moving architecture that God builds with mists, the marvelous creations of the impalpable realms.” Later writers have continued trying to describe this ineffable music. Among the most pointed observation is Olin Downes’ summation that “Debussy was supremely the artist capable of selecting the instant of pure beauty and transfixing it on his tonal canvas for eternity.”

Debussy himself caught the delicate blending of reality and imagination in the poetic description of his Nocturnes that he provided for the work’s first complete performance, on October 27, 1901:

“The title Nocturnes is intended to have here a more general and, more particularly, a more decorative meaning. It is not meant to designate the usual form of a nocturne, but rather all the impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests.

“Clouds: the unchanging aspect of the sky and the slow and solemn march of clouds fading away in gray tones slightly tinged with white.

“Festivals: vibrating, dancing rhythm, with sudden flashes of light. There is also the episode of a procession (a dazzling, fantastic vision) passing through the festive scene and becoming blended with it; but the background remains persistently the same: the festival with its blending of music and luminous dust participating in the universal rhythm of things.

Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G minor (1938)
Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

The appearance of Francis Poulenc’s Organ Concerto in 1938 produced mild surprise among the followers of his music. Since first winning public attention at the age of eighteen with his Rapsodie nègre, Poulenc had been primarily known for works of wit, insouciance and elegance. The French critic Henri Collet made an excellent choice when he included Poulenc among Les Six, the group of six young composers who sought (each in his own very distinct manner) to rid French music of Teutonic heaviness, syrupy Romanticism and wispy Impressionism in favor of clarity, athleticism and emotional reserve. Until the late 1930s, Poulenc’s chamber music, songs, ballets, concertos and piano pieces (these last just right, advised Anatole France, for “the intimate conversations at five o’clock”) were brilliant, refined, even impudent. The Organ Concerto revealed a previously unknown facet of Poulenc’s musical personality, one that his friend the American composer Ned Rorem described as “deeply devout and uncontrollably sensual.”

Poulenc’s depth of feeling was grounded in the Catholicism of his youth, but with which, he admitted, “from 1920 to 1935 I was very little concerned.” In 1936 he underwent a rejuvenation of his religious belief brought about by the death of his colleague Pierre-Octave Ferroud in an automobile accident. Deeply shaken, Poulenc wrote, “The atrocious extinction of this musician so full of vigor left me stupefied. Pondering on the fragility of our human frame, the life of the spirit attracted me anew.” His renewed interest in the faith led to a wonderful series of musical works which reflect a more noble vision than do those of the preceding years: the Gloria, the Sonata for Two Pianos, many sacred vocal pieces, the cathartic opera The Dialogues of the Carmelites and the Organ Concerto.

Since Poulenc came of age during the First World War, and missed the opportunity for extensive formal training as a composer because of his service in the military, his music is more a natural expression, without allegiance to any particular school or compositional system, than a studied one. “My rules are instinctive,” he once said. “I am not concerned with [technical] principles and I am proud of that; I have no system of writing (for me ‘system’ means ‘tricks’); and as for inspiration, it is so mysterious that it is wiser not to try to explain it.” Poulenc’s intuitive art was largely based on his superb sense of melody, which, he freely admitted, was heavily influenced by that incomparable writer of songs, Franz Schubert.
The Organ Concerto is cast in a single movement comprising seven sections differentiated by tempo and texture, a formal concept derived from the Baroque keyboard fantasia. The sections are alternately slow, with chordal scoring, and fast, with a dynamic, *moto perpetuo* quality. To bring unity to the structure, there are thematic relationships among the various formal parts, most notably a great peal from the solo organ, reminiscent of Sebastian Bach’s Organ Fantasia in G minor (the “Great,” BWV 542), which occurs in both the first and last sections. The scoring is a piece of expert craftsmanship, with the timpani reinforcing and delineating the bass line, while the strings are combined with the careful registrations of the organ to produce sonorities that are, by turn, brilliant and hymnal.

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78, “Organ” (1886)
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

“There goes the French Beethoven,” declared Charles Gounod to a friend as he pointed out Camille Saint-Saëns at the Paris premiere of the “Organ” Symphony. This was high praise, indeed, and not without foundation. Though the depths of feeling that Beethoven plumbed were never accessible to Saint-Saëns, both musicians largely devoted their lives to the great abstract forms of instrumental music — symphony, concerto, sonata — that are the most difficult to compose and the most rewarding to accomplish. This was no mean feat for Saint-Saëns.

The Paris in which Saint-Saëns grew up, studied and lived was enamored of the vacuous stage works of Meyerbeer, Offenbach and a host of lesser lights in which little attention was given to artistic merit, only to convention and entertainment. Berlioz tried to break this stranglehold of mediocrity, and earned for himself a reputation as an eccentric, albeit a talented one, whose works were thought unperformable, and probably best left to the pedantic Germans anyway. Saint-Saëns, with his love of Palestrina, Rameau, Beethoven, Liszt and, above all, Mozart, also determined not to be enticed into the *Opéra Comique* but to follow his calling toward a more noble art. To this end, he established with some like-minded colleagues the *Société Nationale de Musique* in 1871 to perform the serious concert works of French composers. The venture was a success, and did much to give a renewed sense of artistic purpose to the best Gallic musicians.

Saint-Saëns produced a great deal of music to promote the ideals of the *Société Nationale de Musique*, including ten concertos and various smaller works for solo instruments and orchestra, four tone poems, two orchestral suites and five symphonies, the second and third of which were unpublished for decades and discounted in the usual numbering of these works. The last of the symphonies, the No. 3 in C minor, is his masterwork in the genre. Saint-Saëns placed much importance on this composition. He pondered it for a long time, and realized it with great care, unusual for this artist, who said of himself that he composed music “as an apple tree produces apples,” that is, naturally and without visible effort. “I have given in this Symphony,” he confessed, “everything that I could give.”

Of the work’s construction, Saint-Saëns wrote, “This Symphony is divided into two parts, though it includes practically the traditional four movements. The first, checked in development, serves as an introduction to the *Adagio*. In the same manner, the scherzo is connected with the finale.” Saint-Saëns clarified the division of the two parts by using the organ only in the second half of each: dark and rich in Part I, noble and uplifting in Part II. The entire work is unified by transformations of the main theme, heard in the strings at the beginning after a brief and mysterious introduction. In his “Organ” Symphony, Saint-Saëns combined the techniques of thematic transformation, elision of movements and richness of orchestration with a clarity of thought and grandeur of vision to create one of the masterpieces of French symphonic music.

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