



Celebrity Series of Boston

Friday, October 12, 2018 at 8pm
NEC's Jordan Hall

Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

Notes on the Program

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

Serenata in vano, for winds and strings, FS.68 (1914)

“It’s an odd little work . . . more curious than amusing or beautiful,” were the most probing thoughts offered by the Danish press after the earliest performances of Nielsen’s *Serenata in vano*. But the Danish composer’s ‘odd little work,’ first heard in Copenhagen’s Odd Fellows Mansion (Palaeet) after a preparatory two-week tour through regional Denmark in 1915, has remained Nielsen’s most popular chamber work, together with a more ambitious wind quintet. It’s a whimsical, humorous piece in the time-honored tradition of the nocturnal serenade in pursuit of love—here, clearly, in vain (*in vano*). Its ‘odd’ instrumentation came about in May 1914, after the bass player of a group of orchestral musicians asked his composer-friend for a companion piece to the Beethoven Septet for a short tour. Nielsen, recently turned freelance composer after 25 years as orchestral violinist and conductor, obliged within a week, with a short single-movement serenade which he described as “a humorous trifle.” The first of its three clearly defined sections introduces a folk-like theme with a few modal twists, which encourages both winds and strings to short, showy rhapsodies, as though warming-up for a serenade to come. This comes in the form of slower, expressive night-music, ranging from the languorous to the ardent, representing Nielsen at his lyrical finest. But their efforts are in vain. Mission unaccomplished, the band shrug their shoulders and, in the composer’s words, “shuffle off home to the strains of a little final march, which they play for their own amusement.” The short serenade reveals Nielsen’s characteristic blend of down-to-earth straightforwardness and sophisticated understanding of the character of each instrument.

Jean Françaix (1912-1997)

Octet for winds and strings ‘À huit’ (1972)

French composer Jean Françaix wrote his first piece at age six and the fluency remained with him to the end of his life at age 85. His avowed life motto as a composer was ‘to give pleasure’ (writing *‘musique pour faire plaisir’*) and this he did in more than 200 works. They range through five operas, 13 ballets, 30 concerto-type works for an impressive variety of instruments, three symphonies, and volumes of chamber, solo and vocal music. During the World War II, his colleague Francis Poulenc, expressed his appreciation of Françaix’s music for leaving a distinctively French fingerprint on an elegant neoclassicism. It was an idiom that was to remain with him for the rest of his life. “Between my earlier and more recent years,” Françaix said in his legendary self-deprecating manner, “I have gained in experience, but the foundation of my way of thinking has always remained the same. If it’s only fools who don’t change, then I must be a fool, because I don’t change.”

The Octet, written in 1972 when he was 60, is dedicated to the Octuor de Paris and composed “to the revered memory of Franz Schubert”—whose Octet of 1824 gives Françaix the instrumentation he uses, if not the number of movements (six, as opposed to the French composer’s four). It opens in a restrained, appealingly wistful vein with a short, four-measure theme which the clarinet, echoed by bassoon, continues to extend, in a lazy Sunday-afternoon sort of way. The strings soon stir from their slumber, taking a more active role in the dialogue, pushing it towards a mock fanfare, as though to announce something important to come. But the clarinet has other ideas, cheekily riffing on the opening theme in a quintessentially Françaix sort of way, egging on the violin to compete. The horn offers a variant, which everyone explores until the bassoon puts its stamp on the cheeky theme. Violin and clarinet amiably continue to see where the theme will take them, until memories of the opening theme help the movement unwind to a calm close.

The tempo changes to triple time for the *Scherzo*. The starting point of its deft, gratefully written progression can be traced back to that cheeky first movement theme whose first few notes appear throughout, with the frequency of tourists climbing the Eiffel Tower, only, in Françaix, they don't overstay their welcome and crowd out the place. The central trio section's texture is a joy, with chattering winds over a smooth-as-silk string trio melody, supported by a bass line pizzicato. In the slow movement, a brief introduction and coda frame three variations on a sentimental theme. It derives from the wistful melody which opened the Octet. It's heard initially on radiant, muted strings, then from the fluidly moving wind trio and, finally, from everyone together, with the sonorous strings now accompanied by the most delicate of wind arabesques. In the finale, Françaix pays his clearest homage to Schubert (and to the commissioning Vienna Octet, who gave the first performance November 7, 1972) by taking that most Viennese of dances, the waltz, and through subtle and ingenious orchestration, dressing it in the most elegant French attire.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Octet in F Major, for winds and strings, D.803 (1824)

When Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the portly Viennese violinist whom Beethoven called 'Falstaff,' brought together eight musicians to give the première of Schubert's Octet, he chose much the same group who had given the première of the Beethoven Septet almost a quarter century earlier. The clarinetist, however, was now Ferdinand, Count Troyer, who is reported to have commissioned the Octet from Schubert with the stipulation that it closely resemble Beethoven's Septet—that composer's most popular work during his lifetime. Both works are in the serenade/divertimento tradition, with six rather than four movements, and both exude a feeling of well-being and relaxation. Schubert maintains a similar key relationship from one movement to the next to those in the Beethoven. Like Beethoven, he includes both scherzo and minuet (though reversed in order) and chooses a theme and variations as the fourth movement. He also follows Beethoven's lead by including a slow introduction to both first and last movements. Schubert does, however, add a second violin to Beethoven's single violin, completing the string quartet foundation to his mixed ensemble of strings and winds.

Schubert took the month of February 1824 to fulfill the commission, delivering a work designed to appeal to both listeners and players, but which, despite its outward resemblance to the Beethoven Septet, still speaks with an individual voice. Imitation here is, indeed, the sincerest form of flattery. (Schubert worshipped Beethoven and—like Schuppanzigh—was to be a pallbearer at his funeral in 1827). Both works open with an 18-measure *Adagio* introduction to the first movement. Schubert builds anticipation for what is to follow and adds unity by incorporating a short, dotted figure in both sections. Indeed, the dotted rhythm continues to bring a feeling of unity throughout each of the movements of the Octet. The luxuriant, seamless melody that opens the slow movement is given to the clarinet: the modulations that ensue could only have come from Schubert's pen. An exuberant scherzo follows, rustic and unbuttoned, maybe even a little prophetic of Bruckner. The melody of the variation movement that Schubert provides next is shared by both violin and clarinet and is drawn from a love duet from his comic opera *Die Freunde von Salamanka* (The Friends from Salamanca). Schubert here provides seven variations to Beethoven's five. A graceful minuet then leads to the somber, mysterious introduction to the finale. This culminates in a vigorous march-like theme which is given a thorough working through. It's a fitting conclusion to a piece that is conceived on a symphonic scale yet which maintains the cheerful grace of a true piece of chamber music played among friends.

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