



Celebrity Series of Boston

Friday, November 16, 2018 at 8pm

NEC's Jordan Hall

Gil Shaham violin

Akira Eguchi piano

Notes on the program

Jean-Marie Leclair (1697-1764)

Violin Sonata in D Major, Opus 9, no. 3 (before 1743)

Drawing on his background in ballet and all the elegant dance music created in his homeland, Jean-Marie Leclair fashioned himself into the first French violinist-composer to rival the dominant Italians of the era. He crystallized his supple approach to technique and form in four books of violin sonatas published between 1723 and 1743, with aspects of Corelli's seminal Italian sonatas melded into the French dance suite as perfected by Lully.

Leading up to the publication of his fourth volume of sonatas, Leclair spent part of each year in the Netherlands with Princess Anne, the daughter of England's King George II and a talented harpsichord player who had studied with Handel in London. Leclair dedicated his Opus 9 sonatas to the princess, including this Sonata in D Major. The slow-fast-slow-fast layout of the movements reflects Corelli's standard practice, but French details abound in the composition, starting with the stately trills in the first movement and continuing in the dancing triple meter of the second. The dance styles behind the third and fourth movements are named explicitly in the score, with a mournful *Sarabande* leading to a *Tambourin* that evokes the festive sound of fife and drums.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Five Melodies, Op. 35bis (1925)

Prokofiev, like so many other Russian artists and intellectuals, left his homeland in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. With World War I raging to the west, he traveled east through Siberia, Tokyo, and Honolulu before entering the United States in San Francisco, where he was briefly suspected of being a spy. He struggled to restart his career in New York, but he did have some luck in Chicago, where he secured a commission with the Chicago Opera Association.

In 1920, while waiting for *The Love for Three Oranges* to move forward in Chicago, Prokofiev took a side trip to California for a concert tour. He wrote the bulk of his Five Songs Without Words during those travels, crafting the melodies for a fellow Ukrainian

expatriate, soprano Nina Koshetz. He was not fully satisfied with the vocal rendering of the music, but a violinist friend, Pawel Kochanski, convinced Prokofiev to recast the melodic line for the violin.

Imbued with the lyrical quality of the human voice, the Five Melodies make sparing and effective use of violin-specific colors, such as the mute that darkens the tone from the start of the *Andante* first movement. Double-stops, plucked chords and shifts into different octaves enrich the melodies without ever distracting from the purity of these vocal adaptations.

Scott Wheeler (b.1952)

The Singing Turk (Violin Sonata No. 2) [2017]

Scott Wheeler has distinguished himself as an opera composer of uncommon lyricism and insight, leading to commissions from the Metropolitan Opera and the Washington National Opera. Along with many songs and assorted vocal works, Wheeler has composed extensively for American and European orchestras, and his diverse body of chamber music earned him the high honor of the Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Wheeler provided the following program note for his second violin sonata, The Singing Turk.

Larry Wolff's book *The Singing Turk*, published in the fall of 2016, is that rare work by a non-musician that provides a new perspective on music. Larry is a European historian and the sort of opera buff who knows far more about opera than do most musicians. *The Singing Turk* examines the popularity of Turkish characters in more than 100 European operas written and performed between the 1680s and the 1820s. Wolff's book shows how the shifting nature of the threat of the Ottoman Empire caused telling shifts in the way these Singing Turks were portrayed in the European operatic theatre. The book doesn't belabor either the similarities or the differences with today's relations between Europe and the Muslim lands to the east, but it's certainly timely.

As a composer, I read this book in part as a window into music I didn't know, even with composers with whom I was familiar. I found the music of these operas so enchanting that I decided to feature one Singing Turk in each movement of my violin sonata, and to borrow Larry's title for the work as a whole. The result is certainly far from the genre of the "operatic paraphrase," like the still popular *Carmen Fantasy* of Sarasate, but it has passages of that sort of simple pleasure. While the borrowings don't guide the sonata, which has its own structure, the earlier music forms a subterranean vein that colors each movement in varying degrees.

The first movement, "Sù la sponda," draws on Handel's 1724 opera *Tamerlano*. The noble Turkish ruler Bajazet is imprisoned by the title character Tamerlane (also known historically as Timur). As he prepares to commit suicide, Bajazet sings to his beloved daughter, "On the banks of Lethe, wait for me there." This movement of my sonata adopts some of the character's tragic nobility; his aria is quoted most clearly at the end of the first half.

The second movement draws on the aria of Roxelana, from the 1761 *The Three Sultanas*, by librettist Charles Simon Favart and composer Paul-César Gibert. This aria was famously sung by Favart's wife Marie, who accompanied herself on the harp. In the opera, Roxelana sings to the "invincible" warrior Suleiman the Magnificent to "defend yourself, if possible / From becoming the slave of two beautiful eyes." The movement begins as a passacaglia, which then alternates with variations on the tender melody from the opera.

My third Singing Turk is the handsome prince Selim from Rossini's comic opera *Il Turco in Italia*, in which Selim falls in love with the Italian Fiorilla. She flirtatiously sings, "In Italy certainly one doesn't make love like that." Selim responds, "In Turkey certainly one doesn't make love like that." Rossini's music makes it clear that they make love in exactly the same way. My musical response is to create a *moto perpetuo* for the violin, from which Rossini's deliciously joyful duet emerges with increasing clarity and giddy violinistic virtuosity.

The Singing Turk was commissioned and premiered by Sharan Leventhal, my gifted friend and admired musical interpreter.

Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962)

Praeludium and Allegro (in the style of Pugnani) (1910)

A violin virtuoso of the highest order, Austria's Fritz Kreisler was also a mischievous and chameleon-like composer, often attributing his works to long-dead or fictitious forebears. He initially credited his *Praeludium and Allegro* from 1910 to the Italian composer Gaetano Pugnani (1731-1798), and on its surface the two-part structure, with an arpeggiated prelude connecting to a fast conclusion, might seem credible as a product of the late Baroque era. On closer inspection, certain harmonies and formal departures point to Kreisler's own suave style rooted in his upbringing among the musical riches of Vienna, and he eventually acknowledged his authorship.

César Franck (1822-1890)

Violin Sonata in A Major (1886)

César Franck is best known for three late pieces of chamber music: the Piano Quintet (1879), Violin Sonata (1886) and String Quartet (1890). In his lifetime, he was highly regarded for his organ improvisations, which could be heard at the Basilica of Saint Clotilde in Paris for more than 30 years. He was also a beloved teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, attracting a clique of young supporters that included Chausson, d'Indy, and Duparc. Franck's influence extended to the string quartets of Debussy and Ravel, providing a foundation for all the glorious chamber music that emerged from 20th-century France.

The Violin Sonata in A Major, composed for fellow Belgian Eugène Ysaÿe, opens with an understated *Allegretto ben moderato* movement, setting a relaxed and tuneful atmosphere for the work. In the fast movement that follows, the piano introduction demonstrates the demanding nature of a part that is no mere background accompaniment. Franck's piano writing matched his own virtuosity as a performer, aided by his exceptionally large hands that most other pianists have to manage without.

In the slow third movement, a free recitative leads into a dramatic Fantasy. Bookending the first movement, the Sonata returns to a modest pace for the finale, marked *Allegretto poco mosso*. The musical technique of canon (in which one voice follows the other at a fixed distance, as in "Row, row, row your boat") and the use of modal church harmonies bring out the music's reverent and nostalgic qualities.