

## Romantic Marimba – March 21 & 22, 2020

### ***Chaconnes***

Hannah Lash  
b. 1981

American composer Hannah Lash had fantasies of becoming a composer since early childhood. Beginning at the age of three with the violin, she added piano a few years later. But influenced by her aunt, a professional harpist, Lash's real passion turned to that instrument. Her roster of musical genres ranges from solo harp to opera, although most of her works are orchestral. She describes her music as carefully structured with a sense of forward propulsion, yet easily accessible to the listener. She received degrees from the Eastman School of Music, Harvard University, the Cleveland Institute of Music and Yale University. She is currently on the faculty of the Yale School of Music.

Lash composed *Chaconnes* for string orchestra in 2016 for the Interlochen Arts Academy Orchestra. The piece, however, is not a chaconne, or passacaglia, in the strict sense of the Baroque term. Instead of a series of variations over a continually repeating bass line, Lash works with three major musical ideas (hence her use of the plural in the title). In an interview with Interlochen Public Radio, she described the three themes as "characters" interacting with each other, and as free variations plus a coda.

### **Concerto for Marimba and String Orchestra**

Emmanuel Séjourné  
b.1961

"It is pleasurable to compose for instruments that have virtually no past in comparison to the piano," writes French composer and percussionist Emmanuel Séjourné. Indeed, the classical music world has only relatively recently accepted the many voices of the percussion section into the glamorous world of the solo concerto. This percussive revolution was spearheaded in the late twentieth century by virtuoso percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who so enthralled audiences that she was able to commission dozens of new works, as well as inspire young performing stars and composers.

Among them was Séjourné, who studied the conventional piano and violin repertory at the National Conservatory of Strasbourg. At age 16, he discovered the world of percussion through the *Percussions de Strasbourg* ensemble, which inspired him to specialize in the so-called "mallet instruments," vibraphone and marimba. He is currently head of percussion at the Strasbourg Conservatory.

Séjourné's early compositions were nearly all for theater, TV and radio. In the 1990s he undertook a series of works for percussion instruments with full orchestra and chamber

ensembles, including the Concerto for Marimba and String Orchestra in 2005, commissioned by Romanian marimba soloist Bogdan Bacanu.

The Concerto is in two movements, the first movement reflecting Bacanu's love for the romanticism and lyricism in Rachmaninov: "...slow, solemn, with long lyrical solo passages...at a point exuberant, then again melancholic." Although Séjourné assigns the romantic legato melodies to the strings, sometimes accompanied by the marimba, the soloist performs two long cadenzas, both more languid than showy.

The composer saves the virtuoso voice of the marimba for the finale, with jazz, rock and flamenco influences. The gentler middle section of the movement, allows the soloist to freely improvise.

***Danse sacree et Danse profane***  
**For Harp and String Orchestra**

Claude Debussy  
1862-1918

In 1903, the French piano firm of Pleyel commissioned Claude Debussy to write a composition for its new invention, the chromatic harp – an instrument without pedals but with two rows of strings slanted across each other offering the full chromatic scale. The composition was to serve as an examination piece for the Brussels Conservatoire, and was one of the few pieces written specifically for this instrument, which enjoyed only a short vogue.

By that time, Debussy had become a *cause célèbre* with the new "impressionistic" style of his opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*, which premiered in 1902. From then on, it was common to talk of "Debussyism;" the musical and literary forces of the time kept up a fevered debate over the intrinsic and aesthetic merit of his music.

The theme of *Danse sacrée* comes from a short piano piece by the Portuguese composer Francisco de Lacerda (1869-1934), while the *Danse profane* has no specific source. The title of the work contains what the French call a "false friend;" *profane* does not mean "profane," but rather "secular." There is no contrast here between a somber religious procession and a pagan rite. Both dances are dignified, even subdued, suggesting the image of mature priestesses and demure virgins. If we ignore Debussy's title, in order to focus on the music alone, the two *Danses* fit together in the same way as a free-flowing Baroque prelude to its more rhythmic partner.

**Serenade for Strings in E major, Op. 22**

Antonín Dvořák  
1841-1904

In 1875 Dvořák met and became a disciple of Brahms. Vienna's famous curmudgeon music critic, Eduard Hanslick, also encouraged the composer from the provinces and gave him prominent billing in his reviews. Brahms and Hanslick also supported him when he entered and won the competition for the Austrian State Prize in music for young, poor and talented musicians (Dvořák won the competition twice more.) The committee report stated that

“...the applicant, who has never yet been able to acquire a piano of his own, deserves a grant to ease his strained circumstances and free him from anxiety in his creative work.”

Dvořák sensed condescension in the support and encouragement of the Austrian musical establishment and was resentful at being forced by economic necessity to accept government stipends. He nevertheless responded to this encouragement with a creative outpouring that included, among others, the *Serenade for Strings*. Like Smetana, Dvořák freely incorporated folk elements into his music, utilizing characteristic peasant rhythms and melodic motives although seldom actually quoting entire folk melodies.

The nineteenth-century serenade, true to its eighteenth-century origins, is less intense than a formal symphony, but this one sits on the fence between the two genres. Three of the five movements are expanded ABA structures, including the first, which one would have expected to be in sonata allegro form. Nevertheless, the *Serenade* does contain elements characteristic of more formal symphonic practices of the period: a slow movement that contrasts with the other four and a Scherzo middle movement. The Finale quotes the main theme of the opening movement, a unifying device common in many more weighty symphonies and chamber works of the period.

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