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Claflin Hill Notes ~ November 4, 2023

The three works on the first half of the program, while composed during different musical eras, are similar in approach in that each germinates from a simple statement of a musical idea.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) composed his *Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor*, BWV 582 for organ "con pedale" (with pedal). Most scholars have dated the work to have been composed sometime between 1706 and 1713, early in his career which, at that time, included church positions in Arnstadt (1703-1707), Mulhausen (1707-1708) and Weimar (1708-1717). The form of the first part of the work is a set of continuous theme & variations over an eight-measure ground bass. This is followed without pause by a three-voice fugue, with subjects taken directly from the two halves of the ground bass.

The work has been transcribed many times for orchestra, most notably by Ottorino Respighi, Eugene Ormandy and Leopold Stokowski as well as for concert band, by Donald Hunsberger. The great cellist Pablo Casals (1876-1973) considered Bach, whose entire output was created during music's Baroque era, to be a Romantic composer. On hearing this work, one can understand why.

The German arch-romantic **Richard Wagner** (1813-1883) had already begun his famous operatic quadrilogy, the *Ring Cycle*, when he completed *Tristan und Isolde* in 1859. The source of the latter stems from a medieval Celtic legend. Alison Eldridge of *Encyclopedia Brittanica* has provided a summary:

The young Tristan ventures to Ireland to ask the hand of the princess Isolde for his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, and, having slain a dragon that is devastating the country, succeeds in his mission. On the homeward journey Tristan and Isolde, by misadventure, drink the love potion prepared by the queen for her daughter and King Mark. Henceforward, the two are bound to each other by an imperishable love that dares all dangers and makes light of hardships but does not destroy their loyalty to the king.

The greater part of the romance is occupied by plot and counterplot....The lovers flee into the forest of Morrois and remain there until one day Mark discovers them asleep with a naked sword between them. Soon afterward they make peace with Mark, and Tristan agrees to restore Isolde to Mark and leave the country. Coming to Brittany, Tristan marries Isolde of the White Hands, daughter of the duke, "for her name and her beauty," but makes her his wife only in name. Wounded by a poisoned weapon, he sends for the other Isolde, who alone can

heal him. His jealous wife, who has discovered his secret, seeing the ship approach on which Isolde is hastening to her lover's aid, tells him that it carries a black sail. Tristan, turning his face to the wall, dies, and Isolde, arriving too late to save her love, yields up her life in a final embrace. A miracle follows their deaths: two trees grow out of their graves and intertwine their branches so that they cannot be parted by any means.

Wagner's *Prelude to Tristan und Isolde* begins at a deliberate pace in 6/8 time, and immediately stretches the bounds of traditional harmony. The first chord, known as the "Tristan" chord, leads to another dissonant chord and so on, finally resolving at the end of the opera. The Prelude is often considered to be a landmark in the history of Western music. After hearing the first act of the opera in 1887 Claude Debussy, heard on the second half of tonight's program, said that it was "decidedly the finest thing I know."

Joseph-Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) has often been classified with Debussy as a French Impressionist, yet he used ideas from so many styles (including jazz and neo-classicism), that to pigeon-hole his musical output into one particular style would be a great disservice to him. Ravel did not consider himself to be an impressionist. He was born in the Basque town of Ciboure, France, near Biarritz, not far from the Spanish border. From 1889 to 1905 he studied at the Paris Conservatoire, making several ill-fated attempts to win the Prix de Rome composition prize. In the years following, Ravel become famous for a number of works (*Pavane pour une infante défunte, Rapsodie espagnole, Ma mère l'Oye*) and, not necessarily to his liking, became a sought-after teacher. Ralph Vaughan Williams studied with him in 1907-1908, but later, when George Gershwin asked to study with him, Ravel said that he (Ravel) should be studying with Gershwin!

A late work, *Boléro* (1928) was composed as a commission from the Russian ballerina Ida Lvovna Rubinstein. Ravel said that the work was "one long, very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, and there is practically no invention except the plan and the manner of the execution. The themes are altogether impersonal." It initially scored mixed reviews. Esteemed Boston critic Philip Hale wrote that is was "the clever trick of a super-refined composer. The trick is amazingly well-performed, but it is only a trick." Ravel himself grew to loathe the work and commented to fellow composer Artur Honegger, ""I've written only one masterpiece – *Boléro*. Unfortunately there's no music in it." Time has proven otherwise.

The work is scored for a very large orchestra, with many of the winds featured as soloists: piccolo, 2 flutes (one doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes

(one doubling on *oboe d'amore*), *cor anglais*, 2 clarinets (one doubles on E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, 2 saxophones (sopranino and soprano doubling tenor), 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass tuba, 3 timpani, 4 additional percussionists: 2 snare drums, bass drum, pair of cymbals, tam-tam, celesta and harp and strings

The second half of tonight's program features two of the best-known works of French Impressionistic composer **Claude Achille Debussy** (1862-1918). He grew up relatively poor; his father was an unsuccessful merchant and his mother a seamstress. The family's lack of financial means, however, did not prevent his musical talent from surfacing and at the age of ten he was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire, where he stayed for eleven years. While there, he was considered to be a rebel—and indeed he was. In the decades that followed, starting with his piano work *Clair de Lune* (1890), Debussy became the proponent of an altogether different style, Impressionism. Features of this style are (1) the importance of timbre (color) over logical development, (2) an expansion of harmony, often incorporating whole-tone and pentatonic scales, shifting of parallel chords, etc. that sometimes creates tonal ambiguity, and (3) a lightness of approach that often hints at rather than states—tutti brass are used only at climaxes.

The symphonic poem, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*) (1892) was inspired by the poem of the same name by Stéphane Mallarmé. The music, as Debussy put it, "evokes successive scenes in which the longings and desire of the Faun pass in the heat of the afternoon." Premiered on December 23, 1894 by the National Society of Music, Paris, under the conducting of Gustave Doret, the work was considered shocking by some and abhorred by others. One critic even complained "the faun must have had a very bad afternoon." Today it is considered to be a turning point in the history of musical composition. The work is deftly scored for three flutes, two oboes, *cor anglais*, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two harps, antique cymbals, and strings.

La mer, trois esquisses symphoniques pour orchestre (The sea, three symphonic sketches for orchestra), known simply as La Mer is an absolute masterpiece. Composed between 1903 and 1905, the piece was premiered at a Lamoureux concert in Paris, October 15, 1905 under the baton of Camille Chevillard. The work is in three movements:

- I. "De l'aube à midi sur la mer" très lent animez peu à peu
- II. "Jeux de vagues" allegro (dans un rythme très souple) animé

"Dialogue du vent et de la mer" – animé et tumultueux – cédez très légèrement

[English translation:]

- I. "From dawn to noon on the sea" or "From dawn to midday on the sea" *very slow animate little by little*
- II. "Play of the waves" allegro (with a very versatile rhythm) animated

"Dialogue of the wind and the sea" – animated and tumultuous, ease up very slightly

Debussy's subtitle, "three symphonic sketches," indicates that he did not want the work to be known as a symphony, and yet it could be considered a three-movement one, with the second movement a scherzo and the third, with its hauntingly beautiful theme, resembling a sonata form with coda.

Debussy loved the sea. He commented in 1906 at Le Puy near Dieppe, "Here I am again with my old friend the sea, always innumerable and beautiful. It is truly the only thing in nature that puts you in your place." And in 1911 he wrote from the resort town of Houlgate, on the English Channel: "Here life and the sea continue—the first to contradict our native savagery, the second to accomplish its sonorous going and coming, which cradles the melancholy of those who are deceived by the beach."

La Mer is scored for a large orchestra: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 French horns, 3 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam tam, glockenspiel, 2 harps and strings.

Jon Ceander Mitchell





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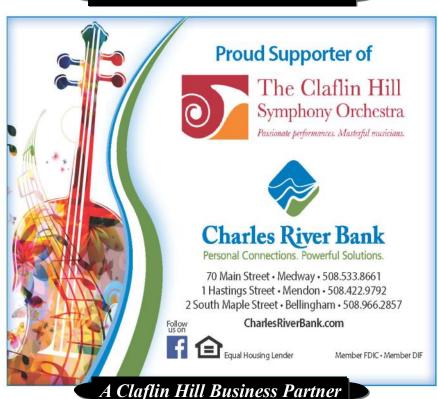
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- Borodin String Quartet No. 2
- Bohemian Rhapsody
- Mozart Quartet No. 22
- Bad Guy by Billie Eilish as arranged by the Vitamin String Quartet
- Ravel String Quartet in F

The Claffin Hill Chamber Series launches another season by presenting the Blackstone Valley String Quartet – whose members are all from the CHSO – as they present a program featuring string quartets from Mozart to Modern Pop Covers. The string quartet – long considered to be the premier ensemble genre in chamber music – has made a big comeback in popular culture in recent years with many quartets performing covers of current popular music. Along with a couple of BVQ favorite pop covers, the program will feature great string quartet repertoire from Ravel, Borodin and Mozart. A refreshing take on a venerable form!



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Rock of Ages,

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Kicking off our 24th Season!

I remember the very first Claflin Hill Symphony concert.

Sunday evening. May 7, 2000.

It was warm. Unseasonably warm.

I had been taking bass clarinet lessons from Paul at the Indian Hill School of Music–just a half mile from my house in Littleton.

Every Wednesday afternoon, I would put together my horn and play while Paul offered his suggestions so that the sounds I made were more like music than noise.

Week after week, I showed up and so did he.

I had started lessons in January of 1999. A year and a half in, Paul mentioned a foundation that he had created— The Claflin Hill Music Performance Foundation, Inc. a nonprofit, that raised money to support summer concerts.

I had been to one of those concerts at Milford Town Park. The Milford Concert Band played while kids paraded around and parents sat in lawn chairs or on blankets enjoying a free night of music.

Then, sometime during the third semester of lessons, Paul talked about an opportunity to launch a symphony orchestra. The Worcester State College Chorus was going to perform Carmina Burana.

'Cool!' I thought, having NO idea what that was.

Paul may have hummed the opening notes, and I probably responded, "Oh, I do know that."

That's how it's been these past 24 years. Paul programs pieces and I get to know them. My musical knowledge expands. Often pairing familiar pieces with lesser known works, I have become more versed in symphonic music.

I don't usually remember the names of the symphonies or operas or even their composers, but having experienced these master works played live by the musicians that I have come to know and love colors my life in ways that are hard to measure but fill me with appreciation and gratitude.

If you're reading this, you, too, value this talented group of musicians and the nonprofit that makes each concert possible. Please join me in supporting The Claflin Hill Symphony Orchestra.

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Presents

"Season 2023-24 – Our Twenty Fourth Year"
"Idyllic Dreamscapes!"

Saturday, November 4, 2023 7:30 PM Milford Town Hall

PROGRAM

Passacaglia and Fugue in c minor Johann Sebastian Bach Symphonic transcription by Leopold Stokowski

Prelude to "Tristan und Isolde" Richard Wagner
Concert version arranged by the composer
Bolero Maurice Ravel

INTERMISSION

Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faun Claude Debussy (Afternoon of a faun)

Phyllis Aronson, CHSO Principal Flute

La Mer (The Sea)

Debussy

- I. De l'aube a midi sur la mer (From Dawn to noon on the sea)
- II. Jeux de vagues (Play of the waves)
- III. Dialogue du vent et de la mer (Dialogue of the wind and the sea)



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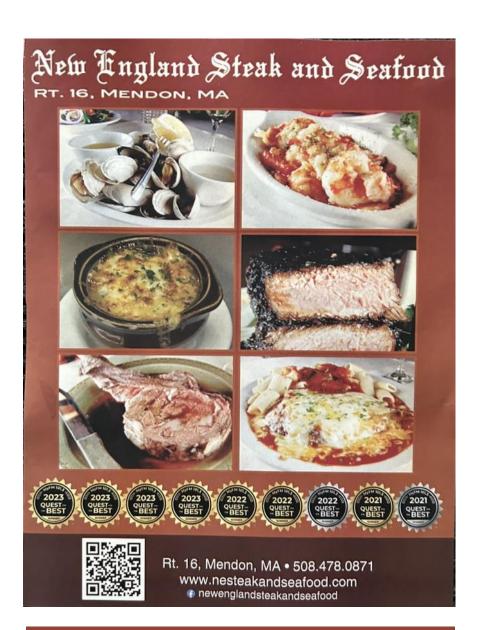
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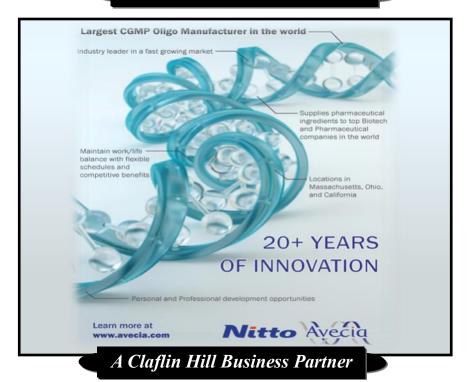


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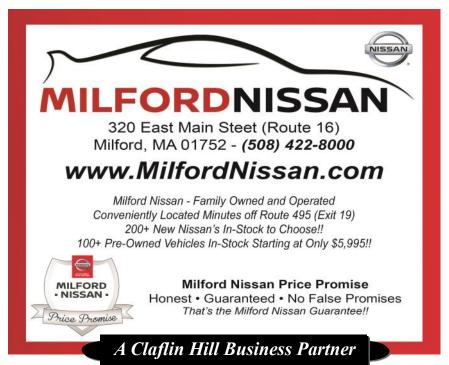


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