

COLORADO COLLEGE



Summer
Music
festival

Program Notes
by
Michael Grace

FESTIVAL ARTISTS CONCERT

Thursday, June 18, 2026

7:00 PM

Packard Hall

Sonata for trumpet, horn and trombone

Allegro moderato: Grazioso

Andante: Très lent

Rondeau: Anime

Francis Poulenc
(1899-1963)

Francis Poulenc is often considered the mentor of a group of French composers who brought about some major changes in the directions of French music after World War I. The group was known as *Les Six* ("The Six," so named as an analogy with "The Mighty Five" Russian nationalist composers of the 19th century). The celebrated French writer, Jean Cocteau, summarized the ideas of this group: "Their music was to be direct in its approach, light in spirit and free from all the pretensions of the concert hall." In other words, it was to be eminently listener friendly (to borrow modern computer jargon) and, more often than not, fun. Poulenc embodied these ideas of Cocteau in his music perhaps more directly than any of the other composers *Les Six*.

In general, his music is quite conservative. His harmonies are more tonal than his French forbears, especially Debussy; his melodies are always clear in their direction and innately lyrical; and, often, his music sounds close to more popular idioms that were prevalent in Parisian music halls in the 1920's and 30's. As Poulenc himself wrote: "You will find sobriety and dolor in French music just as in German or Russian. But the French have a keener sense of proportion. We realize that somberness and good humor are not mutually exclusive. Our composers, too, write profound music, but when they do, it is leavened with that lightness of spirit without which life would be unendurable."

The Sonata for trumpet, horn and trombone is a youthful work, originally composed in 1922 when Poulenc was twenty-three years old, and revised in 1945. Already at this young age he is having fun with his music and thumbing his nose at his more serious and pretentious French contemporaries. The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, is in four brief sections. It opens with a sprightly trumpet melody which is delightfully simple and unpretentious. It soon moves to a slower and nearly melancholy section, first for trumpet

solo then horn. The third section, introduced by an extended crescendo, returns to a fast tempo and begins with a solo for the horn. Finally, the original trumpet solo returns to end the movement.

The second movement, *Andante*, opens with a languid melody for solo trumpet. The other two instruments provide Poulenc's characteristic accompaniment with little piquant dissonances to spice up the sound. Occasionally, as the movement progresses, the other two instruments, particularly the horn, get solo episodes. The mood remains languid throughout.

The diminutive finale, which Poulenc labeled *Rondeau*, consists of multiple statements of a rather amusing theme. It opens in a major key, then unexpectedly shifts to minor, and then back to major. In fact, much of the movement plays on this difference between the major and minor modes. In some statements of the melody, Poulenc resorts to fugal writing (imitations between the instruments). In others, he inserts some rather outrageous-sounding dissonances, but none that go beyond the boundaries of fun. The movement is a humorous conclusion to this totally enjoyable work.

Cinq Pièces en trio

Allegro vivo

Andantino

Allegro assai

Andante

Allegro quasi marziale

Jacques Ibert
(1890-1962)

Jacques Ibert was a quintessentially French musician, and a noble compatriot to Ravel, Milhaud, Poulenc, and others in the first half of the 20th century. As a student he was very successful and eventually was awarded the coveted position of director of the Académie de France in Rome where he worked from 1937 until 1960, just two years before his death. He heard and came to know the works of many composers of his time, and developed a great facility of style in his own compositions. One of his qualities which is so distinctive is that he eschewed any particular style or "ism," such as impressionism, expressionism, Wagnerianism, etc., and wrote in whatever manner he felt like at the moment. In every case, the style of a given piece seems to be generated by the subject, background, or circumstances of the work at hand. When asked to sum up his own compositional approach, he said, "I want to be free—independent of the prejudices which arbitrarily divide the defenders of a certain tradition and the partisans of a certain avant garde." He added, "All systems are valid, provided that one derives music from them."

Ibert wrote in most genres, including opera, symphonic works of varying types and chamber music. No matter what genre he wrote, however, another French quality was always present—his music is always elegant, tasteful, and, for the most part, charming. His five trios for oboe, clarinet and bassoon heard on this program show both his stylistic diversity, as well as his sense of refined taste. The five movements are, first of all, short. They range in length from just under one minute to just over two! They shift regularly between fast and slow, and each one presents a different character. For example, the very short first movement, *Allegro vivo*, develops a single bright and rhythmic idea by passing it from instrument to instrument, while the fourth, *Andante*, is a languid and somewhat melancholy melody offered up first by the oboe and later taken by the other instruments. The closing *Allegro quasi marziale* is a very light and jolly march, a fitting conclusion for this tasteful collection of musical morsels.

Trio for flute, bassoon and piano

Chick Corea
(1941-2021)

Armando Anthony Corea, best known as “Chick,” was a celebrated composer and pianist who had a reputation in jazz, jazz-fusion, post-bop, avant-garde jazz, Latin jazz, classical, and progressive rock. One wonders if there was anything in music he didn’t do! And yet he proved himself outstanding in the many faces of his diverse career. It is particularly stimulating to hear his music morph from one style to another in the course of a single composition. The duo we are about to hear is mostly composed but occasionally improvisational. The audience is encouraged to have fun trying to distinguish the two styles.

Cast in one single movement, the work starts off in a rhythmically free section introduced by the flute and then answered successively by the bassoon and piano. This sounds like relatively modernistic classical music. Shortly, however, it shifts to a jazzy melodic section that almost makes the audience want to tap its collective foot. The contrast between these two sections is most pleasing. The original recording of this work in 1968 featured the composer as pianist, so modern musicians can hear just how Corea wished to blend his improvisation with the composed score.

As if the work is not original enough as is, it is noteworthy that he wanted the pianist to use occasional “extended” techniques by playing the piano in an unusual way. Specifically, he should mute the strings with one hand while depressing the keys with the other. The combination of this muted sound creates a striking timbre when combined with the flute and cello playing in a more conventional manner. This was one of Corea’s earliest compositions and shows his youthful innovation.

***Kicho* for bass and piano**

Astor Piazzolla
(1921-1992)

Astor Piazzolla was the preeminent Argentine musician during much of the 20th century. Best known for his tangos, he expanded on the traditional dance with its alluring melodies and rhythms creating the “nuevo tango,” incorporating elements from jazz and classical music into this traditional Argentine music. In addition, he was also a “modernist” composer creating works that were boldly innovative with unusual melodies, rhythms, and dissonances to which the listener must become sympathetic. While *Kicho* for bass and piano may sound disjointed at first hearing, by the end most listeners begin to feel comfortable with this uniquely innovative music.

This work was composed in honor of a great bass player and friend of Piazzolla, Enrique “Kicho” Díaz, a foundational member of Piazzolla’s many ensembles. It is a manifestation of “nuevo tango” with its seemingly modernistic incorporation of a great variety of styles. Written for string bass and either solo piano or string ensemble, it gives each participant moments of solo work that seem to stretch the limits of the instruments. It opens with an extended solo for the bass which alternates between fast passages and more lyrical ones, followed by an equally diverse balancing solo for the piano. Eventually, the two instruments work more and more together to create a wonderful panoply of colors and styles. One realizes quickly that it is intended for the concert hall more than the typical tango dance hall. It is full of very complex tango rhythms and profound emotional depth.

This work is not often performed. Enjoy this rare manifestation of string bass playing.

After Richard Dehmel's poem *Verklärte Nacht* from *Weib und Welt (Woman and World)*

Schoenberg composed *Verklärte Nacht*, or *Transfigured Night*, in 1899. It was one of his earliest works which he proposed for public performance by the *Tonkünstlerverein*, a performance society in Vienna at the time. It is, in effect, a symphonic poem for string sextet. It deals with the composer's musical expression of the meanings and feelings in a literary poem. The poem in question is by Richard Dehmel (it is appended to this commentary). In brief, it opens with two lovers walking at night through the woods. The woman apprehensively tells her companion that the baby she is carrying was conceived in a furtive and tragic union with a stranger. He responds with magnanimity, confirms their powerful love for one another, and says that through their love the child can be transfigured and made their own. They then wander on through the nocturnal woods.

In the grand romantic tradition, Schoenberg's music is very expressive of the poetry. It opens in a minor key, and presents melodies which first reflect the cold moonlit night and then become more agitated to reflect the woman's despair. The moment at which the man responds is unmistakable. The music suddenly opens into a major key and the melodies become more expansive and broad expressing his magnanimity and unbridled love for her. The brightness of the moon which illuminates "splendor. . . on everything around" is also heard in the music at this time. Eventually the music reaches an ecstatic climax, leading one to think of the power of their love transfiguring the child into one of their own. A quiet denouement suggests the two lovers wandering peacefully off into the bright night.

In the year it was composed, *Verklärte Nacht* was proposed for a performance at the *Tonkünstlerverein*. The jury turned it down with the comment that "it sounds as if someone had smeared the score of [Wagner's] *Tristan und Isolde* while it was still wet!" This was certainly an unfortunate misjudgment, for the general musical character of *Verklärte Nacht* shows that Schoenberg had mastered the musical styles of Wagner and Brahms. In fact, he openly wrote about how the work is Wagnerian in the flowing harmonies and repeated motifs above them, and Brahmsian in its structures and technique of developing variation (as he calls it). It also shows, however, that Schoenberg has a personal and emotional connection to the subject of the poem, and it is this personal feeling which generates the music. All the urgency and sublimity of late German romanticism is absorbed in Schoenberg's personal musical expression.

UPCOMING SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVAL EVENTS

www.coloradocollege.edu/musicfestival

Music at Midday

June 19, 12:15 p.m. - Packard Hall, free

Fellow Concerto Readings

June 20, 2 p.m. - Celeste Theatre, free

Faculty/Fellow Concert

June 21, 4 p.m. - First Congregational Church, free



Transfigured Night

Two people are walking through a bare, cold wood;
The moon keeps pace with them and draws their gaze.
The moon moves along above tall oak trees,
there is no wisp of cloud to obscure the radiance
to which the black, jagged tips reach up.
A woman's voice speaks:

"I am carrying a child, and not by you.
I am walking here with you in a state of sin.
I have offended grievously against myself.
I despaired of all happiness,
and yet I still felt a grievous longing
for life's fullness, for a mother's joys
and duties and so I sinned,
and so I yielded, shuddering, my sex
to the embrace of a stranger,
and even thought myself blessed.
Now life has taken its revenge,
and I have met you, met you."

She walks on, stumbling.
She looks up; the moon keeps pace.
Her dark gaze drowns in light.
A man's voice speaks:

"Do not let the child you have conceived
be a burden on our soul.
Look, how brightly the universe shines!
Splendor falls on everything around,
you are voyaging with me on a cold sea,
but there is the glow of an inner warmth
from you in me, from me in you.
That warmth will transfigure the stranger's child,
and you will bear it for me, begot by me.
You have transfused me with splendor,
you have made a child of me."

He puts an arm about her strong hips.
Their breath embraces in the air.
Two people walk on through the high, bright night.

~Richard Dehmel

