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Concordia Chamber Players

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info@concordiaplayers.org
Telephone: 215-816-0227
concordiaplayers.org

cover art by Joseph Crilley
Concordia Chamber Players
Sunday - October 23, 2016

Program
Michelle Djokic, Artistic Director

String Trio in G major
Ernest J. Moeran (1894-1950)
Allegretto giovale
Adagio
Molto vivace – Lento sostenuto
Molto vivace
Andante grazioso

Sonata No. 3
for cello and piano
Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)
Poco andante – Moderato
Andante
Allegro, ma non presto

Quartet for Violin, Viola, Cello and Piano
William Walton (1902-1983)
Allegramente
Allegro scherzando
Andante tranquillo
Allegro molto

ARTISTS
Susan Langlas Grace – piano
Daniel Phillips – violin
Toby Appel – viola
Michelle Djokic – cello

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— Concordia Chamber Players

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It is fortuitous that he was writing specifically about the String Trio to be heard in this concert. He tells us directly what was on his mind. He wanted to get away from the big, lush, nearly Wagnerian harmonies of his famous English predecessor, Frederic Delius, and turn to a new, more personal style. And this new interest in a kind of musical intricacy is evident in the String Trio. But before further comment on the musical style of the work, it is noteworthy that his close friend Warlock had taken his own life just before Moeran composed the work, or perhaps just after he had begun, and this undoubtedly had something to do with the frequent tragic-sounding passages in the music.

The first movement, Allegretto giovale (sort of fast and jovial), lives up to the composer’s defining tempo and expression description. It opens in an unusual meter of 7/8 that makes it just a bit difficult to count, or tap your feet to, but it always sounds cheerful. There are also fun passages where the instruments pass little, fast motives from one to another in a charming kind of dialogue. However, toward the middle there is a dark section that unfolds over a repeated line in the cello. The latter part of the movement returns to the more jovial character. We have to wonder if this little dark passage is a first reminder of the death of his close friend.

The second movement, Adagio, is full of emotion - a particularly remorseful kind. It has the aura of a dirge for a lost friend. At times the emotions surge in powerful crescendos that intensify the feelings. Occasional loud solo passages emerge in each instrument giving the expression a still more personal quality.

The third movement, Molto vivace – Lento sostenuto, begins with a fast and exciting fugue in which each instrument, beginning with the viola, presents the melody in sequence. Given its place in the composition, it might be considered a scherzo, the typical form for a fast 3rd movement. But the music doesn't resemble the often joke-like nature of a scherzo. Instead, it has an aggressive propulsion enhanced by rhythmic pizzicatos and tremolos, with only brief moments of scherzo-like fun. At the end, there is an expressive slow passage that leads directly to the last movement.  

Marked first, Andante grazioso, the fourth movement provides a gracious return to the feeling of the first movement. About half way through the movement, however, the music bursts forth into a Presto which reminds the listener of a wild Irish dance – the jig. The music proceeds in little sections, each one of which builds intensity, speed and fun. It feels like Moeran is thinking of Ireland, his beloved birth country.

Ernest John Moeran (1894-1950) lived at a time when there was considerable activity in English music. He was younger than his musical ancestors Ralph Vaughan Williams, Edward Elgar, Frederick Delius, the same age as Peter Warlock, but older than Benjamin Britten. So he was certainly aware of the English musical heritage around him. One important element of his career, however, was that his father was Irish and he always felt a close affinity for that country. In fact, he lived much of his life there and was ultimately buried in Irish soil.

His closest musical affiliation was with composer Peter Warlock, a pen name for Philip Heseltine (1894-1930) born in the same year as Moeran. For three years (1925-1928) they lived in the same town, Eynsford, where they were both known for their drinking and ribald behavior. Moeran was said never to have completely recovered, and the unhealthy lifestyle led to Warlock’s ultimate suicide. During this time Moeran wrote practically no music. Moreover, he had a serious automobile accident in 1929 which led to a long, bed-ridden recovery. It was during this convalescence that he began to reconstruct his career as a composer. An often-quoted letter to Warlock the year the latter died reveals to us what he was thinking about his new return to composing:

“I have started a String Trio and if I can keep it up I hope the purgative effect of this kind of writing may prove permanently salutary...It is an excellent discipline in trying to break away from the mush of Delius-like chords...Perhaps some good has come of being abed and unable to keep running to the keyboard for every bar.”
Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 3

Bohuslav Martinů

(1890-1959)

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) was born in a small town in Bohemia and entered the Prague Conservatory in his teens. The musical discipline of that venerable institution did not suit the young man, however, and after several expulsions he decided to leave Czechoslovakia altogether and seek the more appealing atmosphere of Paris where he began studying with Albert Roussel in 1923. But life was not easy for a struggling Bohemian composer in Paris, and when he was blacklisted by the Nazis in 1940, he was forced to leave his adopted city. He wound up in the United States during World War II. He always hoped to return to Czechoslovakia and eventually an invitation came in 1946. His political opposition to the Communist regime prevented him from going, however, and he was forced to stay in Europe and the United States for the rest of his career. He never did see again his homeland for which he so longed.

In spite of his physical separation from his homeland, he remained, along with Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, and Leoš Janáček, one of the composers most identified with Czech nationalism. And while one would think that a cello sonata would less likely show trappings of nationalism and be modeled more after the Western European works by Beethoven and Brahms, distinct vestiges of his native music can be heard from time to time.

Martinů wrote three sonatas for cello and piano which demarcate various phases of his career. The first was completed in Paris in 1939, just before he was forced to leave his first adopted country. The second was completed in 1942 written for a Czech cellist he met and befriended in New York. The third was completed in 1952 and was dedicated to a fellow expatriate, a Dutch cellist named Hans Kindler. Of the three, the third is the most performed.

The first movement, Poco andante, opens with the solo piano which is soon joined by the cello. Throughout, Martinů has written music that is idiomatically natural to each instrument. This is possibly why the work is the cello sonata most preferred by musicians. But in spite of each instrument sounding natural, they often enter into dialogue, or conversation, on the same motives. Some of these are jagged little melodies, some are rushing repeated notes. And the melodies themselves are often multi-metric, meaning that they seem to change meters frequently. This is typical of Bohemian folk and dance music.

The second movement, Andante, opens with an unexpected pizzicato melody in the cello that soon morphs into a languid lyrical style. However this grows to a greater intensity and speed that seems to transcend the Andante tempo marking at the beginning. Toward the middle of the movement there is a more lyrical extended melody played very legato in the cello against colorful broken chords in the piano.

The third movement, Allegro, ma non presto, has a charming rhythmic drive that is reminiscent of ethnic dancing in Bohemia. Often, one senses a series of sections that each have a discrete character and that often have an accelerating rush to the cadence typical of Slavic dance music. However, several commentators have noted that there is also something distinctly reminiscent of the music Martinů might have heard in the United States where he had been for nearly 12 years.

The artist is always searching for the meaning of life, his own and that of mankind, searching for truth. A system of uncertainty has entered our daily life. The pressures of mechanization and uniformity to which it is subject call for protest and the artist has only one means of expressing this, by music.

— Bohuslav Martinů
William Walton (1902-1983) brings us back to England to close the concert, but his chronological juxtaposition with Ernest Moeran whose music opened the program is interesting. Walton was born eight years after Moeran, but his Piano Quartet was written in 1918-1919, twelve years before Moeran’s String Trio heard earlier. To make the long story short, Walton started his work as a 17-year-old prodigy and musical star of the Choir School at Christ Church Oxford, while Moeran started his work when he was 38 and recovering from alcoholism and a serious automobile accident.

Walton, although not a child prodigy in the league of Mozart or Mendelssohn, was extraordinarily gifted at an early age. There are undocumented anecdotes about him singing Handel anthems before he could speak. Without adding to the rumor mill, we can judge for ourselves if the composition of a 17-year-old composer are about to hear bears testimony to his extraordinary youthful talent.

The Piano Quartet was undertaken by the young composer in part to show gratitude for the financial support he was receiving from Christ Church College at Oxford and to recognize his new mentor there, the organist Hugh Allen. And curiously, at about that same time an extraordinary and wealthy family, the three Sitwell siblings, were looking in England for a youthful artistic genius they could patronize both financially and culturally. They heard young Walton play his Piano Quartet on the piano alone and, although unsure about his abilities as a pianist, knew immediately that he had a great creative talent as a composer. So the family collectively took William under their wings, both materially and culturally. He lived with them for well over a decade; they paid for composition and conducting lessons; and they introduced him to luminaries of the day including Igor Stravinsky, George Gershwin, Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and the great conductor Ernest Ansermet. In Walton’s words, “I went for a few weeks and stayed about fifteen years.” And with their support, the Piano Quartet was premiered in Liverpool in 1924, six years after he began the work. Its success has been noteworthy, all the more so as the first serious composition of an 17-year-old boy.

The opening melody of the first movement, Allegro molto, is heard in the violin with a drone-like accompaniment in the cello. But this theme, often assumed to sound like an English pastoral melody, emerges into a full blown rhapsodic statement for all the instruments, and it remains the central melody of the movement. Listeners who are familiar with some of the great composers of the past may recognize elements of German romanticism, French impressionism and earlier English composers such as Edward Elgar, but this is to be expected for a young composer who is, to some extent, learning by imitating and absorbing the accomplishments of his great ancestors. What is remarkable is how deft he is, at the age of 17, already integrating these disparate styles into his own cohesive musical language.

The second movement, Allegro scherzando, is a brilliant and sparkling dance that evinces energy and fun from beginning to end. And the fun is enhanced by a clever fugue introduced by some big chords in the piano barely a minute into the movement. The fugue is begun by the cello which is then imitated by the upper strings. Often considered the most serious and intellectual musical procedure, the fugue is here treated to fit the jovial atmosphere of the movement by our adventurous young Walton.

The third movement, Andante tranquillo, is remarkably lyrical for our mostly exuberant young fellow. At the opening, the strings play with mutes and the piano provides a rich harmonic field of sophisticated chords and harmonic progressions. In the middle section a long-breathed melody in the viola, reminiscent of the main melody of the first movement, is accompanied by murky chords in the piano and stunning celestial harmonics in the violin. This entire movement provides the only period of repose in comparison to the youthful exuberance of the other three movements. And this is stunningly echoed by the beautiful musical denouement that closes the movement.

The closing Allegro molto breaks the mood of the third movement with a startling burst of energy. It opens with the unmistakable syncopated rhythmic drive of Stravinsky’s Russian music so popular in Paris at the time, and goes on to many different styles including a broad lyricism that sounds a bit like Ravel and even passages that remind us of American jazz. And about halfway through, there is a terrific fugue in homage to Bach that fits the jazzy style of the music at that moment. As we have heard throughout this quartet, the young composer is so well-versed in so many different styles of music that it is remarkable how he seems to draw them all in under one cohesive style of his own.

This wonderful quartet is not heard enough in chamber music concerts. It is a gem.
Michelle Djokic
Artistic Director

Cellist Michelle Djokic is Founder and Artistic Director of the Concordia Chamber Players. Since its inception in 1995 this series has brought together the brightest talents of the chamber music world in thoughtful and adventurous programming with their performances broadcast regularly on WWFM in Princeton, NJ. Concordia Chamber Players commissioned “Obrigado”, Quintet for mandolin and string quartet by young Brazilian superstar, Clarice Assad, which received its world premier in the spring of 2011 with Mike Marshall on the mandolin. Michelle joined pianist, John Novacek at the 2011 Festival Mozaic for the world premier of Novacek’s “Singular Piece” for cello and piano commissioned by the Seattle Commissioning Project. Her recording with Quartet San Francisco entitled “QSF Plays Brubeck” earned a 2010 Grammy Nomination in Best Classical Crossover. In 2007 she became a member of the New Century Chamber Orchestra with whom she released the highly acclaimed recording “Together” in 2009. Upon moving to Northern California from the East Coast in 2005 Michelle served as Assistant Principal Cellist of the San Francisco Symphony for two seasons.

Her greatest passion is chamber music collaborations with her colleagues around the world and sharing in the development of young musicians. Michelle’s 2013-2014 concert season includes collaborations with Brooklyn Chamber Music Society, Festicamara in Medellin, Colombia, Ensemble Matheus of France, Princeton Festival, Mainly Mozart, Music in the Vineyards and the Mozaic Festival.

Michelle made her debut as soloist with Philadelphia Orchestra at the age of 12 and made her Carnegie Hall debut as soloist with the New Jersey Symphony in 1985. She was awarded the coveted People’s Prize in the 1981 International Casals Competition and the Prince Bernard Award for Excellence at the Scheveningen International Cello Competition in addition to capturing first prize in numerous young artist competitions in the US.

Michelle received her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music Degrees from The Juilliard School as a student of Leonard Rose and Channing Robbins.

Daniel Phillips

Violinist Daniel Phillips enjoys a versatile career as an established chamber musician, solo artist, and teacher. A graduate of Juilliard, his major teachers were Ivan Galamian, Sally Thomas, Nathan Milstein, Sandor Vegh and George Neikrug. He is a founding member of the 29-year-old Orion String Quartet, which is in resi-
Toby Appel has appeared in recital and concerto performances throughout North and South America, Europe, and the Far East. He has been a member of such renowned ensembles as TASHI, and the Lenox and Audubon Quartets. Mr. Appel has been a guest artist with the Vermeer, Manhattan, and Alexander Quartets, as well as a frequent guest with the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society and with jazz artists Chick Corea and Gary Burton. Festival performances include those with Mostly Mozart, Santa Fe, Angel Fire, Bravo! Vail Valley, Chamber Music Northwest, and Marlboro Music Festival as well as festivals in England, France, Korea, Germany, Italy, Finland, Colombia, and Greece. In 1975, Mr. Appel was featured in a CBS television special performing works commissioned by him for three violas, all played by Toby Appel. In 1980, Mr. Appel was the winner of Young Concert Artists International.

Toby Appel entered the Curtis Institute at age thirteen under the guidance of Max Aronoff. He is currently on the viola and chamber music faculties at the Juilliard School in New York City. Other teaching has included professorships at the State University of New York, Carnegie Mellon University, and The Yale School of Music. He has toured for the United States State Department and performed at the United Nations and at the White House. Mr. Appel is a frequent commentator for National Public Radio's Performance Today.

Susan Grace

Grammy nominated pianist, Susan Grace has performed solo and chamber recitals, and has appeared as soloist with orchestras in the United States, Europe, the former Soviet Union, Korea, India and China. She has also performed in the Aspekt Festival in Salzburg, St Paul Chamber Orchestra’s new-music series Engine 408, Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., the Grand Teton Festival,
Ms. Grace has recorded for Bridge Records, the Belgium National Radio, WFMT in Chicago, the Society of Composers, Wilson Audio, Klavier International and Klavier Music Productions. Her latest recording on the Bridge label of Stefan Wolpe’s violin and piano music was listed in the London Sunday Times as one of the top ten Contemporary recordings of 2015. She was nominated for a Grammy in 2005 in the Best Small Ensemble Performance category.

Ms. Grace is Associate Chair, Artist-in-Residence and Senior Lecturer in Music at Colorado College. She is also music director of the renowned Colorado College Summer Music Festival, now in its 32nd season. She has been awarded the Christine Johnson Professorship of Music beginning in the fall of 2014. In June 2014, Mayor Steve Bach and the city of Colorado Springs presented Ms. Grace with the Spirit of the Springs award for her work with the Colorado College Summer Music Festival. She is a Steinway Artist.

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photos courteous of Audrey Froggatt
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String Quartet in G minor, Opus 10   Claude Debussy
String Quintet in Eb Major, Opus 97, “ American” Antonio Dvorak

Francisco Fullana & Jessica Lee - violin,
Mark Holloway & Sharon Wei - viola, Michelle Djokic - cello

April 23, 2017
Meditation and Processional for viola and piano       Ernest Bloch
Piano Quartet in C minor                   Johannes Brahms
Piano Trio in G minor, Opus 15             Bedrich Smetana

John Novacek - piano, Carmit Zori - violin,
Dimitri Murrath - viola, Michelle Djokic - cello

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Performance by Brown-Urioste-Canellakis Trio

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Beethoven: Concerto for Violin, Cello, Piano and Orchestra
Brown-Urioste-Canellakis Trio, soloists
Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3 in C Major (Organ)

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