

## Chamber Music

### Fall Fest 2023 Concert 3

#### Program Notes

##### **Igor Stravinsky: Suite from L'Histoire du Soldat**

World War I, as well as the Russian Revolution, left Igor Stravinsky in a dire situation in 1919, stranded in Lausanne, Switzerland. He was in a precarious financial situation, as many of Stravinsky's sources of income were either cut off or strained during this period. With the help of his friend Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, Stravinsky created a small Neo-Classical performance troupe that was able to travel and put on performances in a variety of different venues. The first piece written for the troupe was *L'Histoire du Soldat*, a piece that is "narrated, performed, and danced." The premise of this work was based on Alexander Afanasiev's collection of Russian folk tales depicting the story of a soldier who is swindled by the Devil.

The original piece is made up of an instrumental septet (clarinet, bassoon, cornet, trombone, percussion, violin, and double bass) in addition to a narrator, two actors, and a dancer. However, due to the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1919, the troupe was unable to stage their first performance of *L'Histoire du Soldat* in its original format. Because of this, Stravinsky arranged the work into this suite for clarinet, violin, and piano, consisting of five movements from the original work. Werner Reinhard, a philanthropist, amateur clarinetist, and friend of Stravinsky's, funded and played in the premier of the piece in 1919.

##### **Beth Wiemann: Two Poems by Robyn Schiff**

Named as a best book of the year by the *New Yorker* and the *Chicago Tribune*, Robyn Schiff's collection of poems, *A Woman of Property*, depicts feminist angst, a woman's displacement within society, and the prevalence of artificiality. The texts explore the tendency for women to feel lost in personal relationships, and their constant struggle to find meaning and recognition in society. Two of these poems became the basis for Beth Wiemann's composition for soprano, clarinet, and piano.

In *Dyed Carnations*, Schiff focuses her lens on artificiality, and the corruption of the natural in order to favor longevity. This creates false standards of beauty and a sense of hollowness.

Wiemann's vocal settings present rhythmic and intervallic challenges to the performers; this work requires precision, despite the flowing clarinet and piano parts. The piano line also contains a complex combination of rhythms and demanding intervallic leaps within a phrase. That said, where this work truly shines is in her brilliant clarinet writing—a clarinetist herself, Wiemann's clarinet lines are idiomatic, and her understanding of extended technique is used to complement the piece.

## **Dyed Carnations**

Text by Robyn Schiff (2016)

There's blue, and then there's blue.  
A number, not a hue, this blue  
is not the undertone of any one  
but there it is, primary.  
I held the bouquet  
in shock and cut the stems at a deadly angle.  
I opened the toxic sachet of flower food  
with my canine and rinsed my mouth.  
I used to wash my hands and daydream.  
I dreamed of myself and washed  
my hands of everything. Easy math.  
Now I can't get their procedure  
at the florist off my mind.  
The white flowers arrived! They overnighted  
in a chemical bath  
and now they have a fake laugh  
that catches like a match  
that starts the kind of kitchen fire  
that is fanned by water.  
They won't even look at me.  
Happy Anniversary.

## **Marc Eychenne: Cantilène et Danse**

Born in Algiers in 1933, Marc Eychenne is a violinist and composer with an impressive catalog of work: as a composer, he is well versed in both large scale and smaller works (as seen by his Mass, concertante works for violin and saxophone, as well as chamber music like his Saxophone Sonata). As a performer, he received accolades such the Grand Prix in Algiers, and opportunities to perform with the French Broadcasting Service.

Perhaps his most famous work, *Cantilène et Danse* was composed in 1961, and dedicated to saxophonist Marcel Perrin. Its premiere was publicly broadcasted in Algiers on November 25, 1961, featuring Eychenne on violin, the dedicated and pianist Maurice Chancelade. For its premiere in Paris, Eychenne and Chancelade were joined by Georges Gourdet of the Marcel Mule Saxophone Quartet.

This work, scored for violin, saxophone, and piano, offers the three instruments many opportunities to engage in dialogue. There are two major sections: the *Cantilène*, with its poetic atmosphere, particularly

appeals to the ensemble's melodic and expressive capabilities, where the *Danse*, with its quick pace and mixed meters, requires robust technique and an unshakable rhythm. Eychenne, aware of the challenges posed by this instrumentation, indicates well-balanced dynamics and colors so that the main line comes through the texture.

### **Zenobia Powell Perry: The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh**

Zenobia Powell Perry was an American composer, civil rights activist, and was a professor at historically black colleges, such as University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and Central State University. She composed in a tonal style that biographer Jeannie Gayle Pool describes as "influenced by black American and Native American folklore, music, language and poetry... deeply rooted in singing traditions." Pool also describes Perry's musical voice as the "clear, individual voice of a woman who lived a life of substance and breadth."

*The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* is a cycle of six short songs set for the soprano, flute, and piano. The original text — *The Hidden Words*, is a prose-verse holy book written in Baghdad around 1857 by Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The book contains 71 verses in Arabic and 82 verses in Persian. Bahá'u'lláh describes *The Hidden Words* as a distillation of the spiritual guidance contained in the successive Revelations of God. This text is celebrated as Bahá'u'lláh's greatest work discussing ethics.

The premiere of this cycle took place in 1977 in Carnegie Hall, sung by Zenobia Perry's daughter, Janis-Rozena Peri. According to The New York Times, Zenobia Perry's setting of the text is "a clean, straightforward and conservative style for soprano, flute and piano, making inventive and graceful use of this combination."

### **The Hidden Words**

Text by Bahá'u'lláh, translated by Shoghi Effendi

#### **Persian Verse 14**

O friends! Abandon not the everlasting beauty for a beauty that must die, and set not your affections on this mortal world of dust.

#### **Persian Verse 44**

O Companion of my throne! Hear no evil, and see no evil, abase not thyself, neither sigh and weep. Speak no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee, and magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed. Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that, free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom forevermore.

## **Amy Marcy Beach: Piano Quintet in F-sharp minor, Op. 67**

Amy Beach was one of the most acclaimed American composers of her era, and a trailblazing female composer. Beach grew up in New England, a prodigious pianist who gave her concert debut at the young age of sixteen. In her mid-twenties she rose to prominence as a composer as well — her *Symphony in E minor*, Op. 32, (known as the “Gaelic Symphony”) was the first symphony composed and published by a female American composer. It was debuted in 1896 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

This piano quintet premiered in Boston’s Potter Hall in February 1908, shortly after its composition, with Beach herself as the pianist. The work is often claimed to have been inspired by Brahms’ *Piano Quintet in F minor*, which Beach had performed just prior to the composition of her quintet. That said, her individual voice shines through, and has widely become regarded as an impressive contribution to the piano quintet genre.

The opening *Allegro moderato* begins with a unison drone from the upper strings, as the piano bustles beneath. The main theme breaks out in the strings and is developed and shaped over the course of the whole movement, from fiery bursts to gentle sighs. It is a balance of united forces and contrasting battles while covering a wide emotional range.

The middle *Adagio espressivo* is a gorgeous landscape of sounds, pulling the best of each instrument’s color and melting them together. It is in the key of D-flat major, taking us far away from the F-sharp minor of the first movement and providing a dramatically different mood and tone. Despite its soft, muted color, this movement burns with tremendous emotional intensity.

The final movement, *Allegro agitato* desperately explodes out of the gate, with incredible force and forward motion. It has driving melodies, and yet an underlying architecture and balance of color that always support the phrase. The opening of the first movement makes its return and brings the piece full circle as it winds down into a surprise presto, that blazes into a final restatement of that familiar opening melody.

***All notes written by the student ensembles, with light editing by the Chamber Music Department.***