

The music

Gabriel Fauré Erik Satie	Piano Trio in D minor op120 Le Piège de Méduse; Je te veux; Prière pour le salut de mon âme
Oscar Bettison	Still Life, Slow Fall (Festival Commission)

INTERVAL

Claude Debussy	La Mer, arranged for piano trio by Sally Beamish
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Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) Piano Trio in D minor op120 (1923)

1 Allegro, ma non troppo ~ 2 Andantino ~ 3 Allegro vivo

The idea of composing a piano trio was first suggested to **Fauré** by his publisher Jacques Durand, the original idea being to write it for clarinet, cello and piano. He soon settled, however, on having a violin as the top part. Progress was slow. Fauré wrote to his wife: ‘I can’t work for long stretches of time. My worst problem is perpetual tiredness.’ Despite his increasing frailty, there’s no hint of fatigue in this work, perhaps because Fauré took his time. The slow movement was the first to be completed, and the outer movements of the trio were finished by February 1923. The first performance was given on 12 May 1923 in a programme that also included Franck’s *String Quartet* and Fauré’s own *La Bonne Chanson*. But Fauré himself was too ill to attend, though he did get to a performance by the Cortot/Thibaud/Casals Trio six weeks later.

The opening of the **first movement** *Allegro, ma non troppo* starts as it means to proceed – a flowing tune from the cello, taken up by the violin and soon modified by the piano to advance the argument. Conventional development is hard to find as melodies are subtly varied and exchanged between the three instruments, all very much equals in this work. Several peaks of intensity change the tone but the overall mood of somewhat wistful serenity is never forgotten.

The elegant restraint of the **second movement** *Andantino* disguises the quiet yearnings of a composer in old age. Robert Orledge wrote that this ‘long slow movement must surely rank among Fauré’s most inspired’ and its seemingly effortless combination of flowing melody and solemn piano chords is profoundly moving. There’s undoubtedly a tinge of sadness but, at the same time, an acceptance that this is how things must be.

The *Allegro vivo* **finale** begins with fierce bowing from the strings but the piano then breaks in with lively playfulness. After the thoughtfulness of the previous two movements, this one is markedly up-tempo and infused with vigour and vitality. The work’s brought to an end in a mood of joyful celebration.

Erik Satie (1866-1925) *Le Piège de Méduse* (1913) arr. John White (2018)

1 Quadrille ~ 2 Valse ~ 3 Pas vite ~ 4 Mazurka ~
5 Un peu vif ~ 6 Polka ~ 7 Quadrille

Satie wrote the surrealist play *Le Piège de Méduse* in early 1913 and the music for the mechanical monkey’s part – originally just for solo piano – a few months later. At its first private performance that year, Satie apparently slid pieces of paper under the strings to create a more mechanical sound, making it perhaps the first example of a ‘prepared’ piano. In a rare but notable performance at Black Mountain College in 1948, John Cage played just such a piano (and Merce Cunningham danced the monkey).

Satie seems to have regarded instrumentation as flexible. He himself arranged the score for small orchestra in 1921 for the first public performance, conducted by Darius Milhaud, and it therefore seemed entirely appropriate when in 2018 the Fidelio Trio commissioned John White to arrange the pieces for them.

Each of the seven pieces is very short, apparently treating conventional dances with the utmost respect before unavoidably (this is Satie) lapsing into moments of idiocy.

Satie *Je te veux* (c1902)

Although Satie made many subsequent arrangements of this comparatively simple piece, it was originally a *valse chantée* (*sung waltz*) written as accompaniment to erotic lyrics and first sung by cabaret artiste Paulette Goddard at the La Scala music hall in Paris in 1903.

Satie *Prière pour le salut de mon âme* (1893-95) arr. John White (2018)

The *Messe des Pauvres*, of which this piece is the seventh movement, is Satie’s only liturgical work, published posthumously in 1929. The Mass was for organ and mixed choir and the *Prière* was originally an organ solo. It’s a slow and solemn piece, leading one readily into a meditative state.

The above is taken from the Resonus notes (© 2018 Nigel Simeone) to the Fidelio Trio’s 2019 CD RES10232, with additions by Dick Ware.

Oscar Bettison (b1975) *Still Life, Slow Fall* (Festival Commission)

Oscar Bettison was born in the UK and attended the Purcell School. In 1993 he won the BBC Young Composer of the Year prize and was then tutored by Simon Bainbridge at the Royal College of Music, before moving on to the Guildhall School for his Master’s. He currently lives in New Jersey and since 2009 has been Professor of Composition at Johns Hopkins University’s Peabody Institute.

As Dale Keiger writing in the *Johns Hopkins Magazine* puts it: “The narrative thread of Bettison’s creative life is an oscillation between surrendering control and reasserting it, between venturing outside convention and applying conventional rules to shape the inchoate into music, between deliberately getting lost and finding his way. ‘You have to have a lot of faith that you’re going to get there in the end,’ he says. ‘The composers who I admire are the ones who are always changing and always challenging themselves to do something new. All the time, you know?’”

INTERVAL

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) *La Mer* (1903-05) arranged by Sally Beamish (b1956)

1 De l’aube à midi sur la mer (très lent, animé un peu)
2 Jeux de vagues (allegro, dans un rythme très souple – animé)
3 Dialogue du vent et de la mer (animé et tumultueux – cédez très légèrement)

Regarding the conventional symphony as outdated, Debussy instead wrote what he called ‘symphonic sketches’ of which *La Mer* is one (*Nocturnes* and *Images* the others). Despite eschewing the term, however, the work has a traditional symphonic form, with strong outer movements framing a lighter centre.

Sally Beamish was commissioned by the Trio Apaches to arrange *La Mer* for piano trio in 2013 for the Lincoln Festival that year. Her own words from a piece in *The Strad* follow:

“It was a daunting prospect. The temptation was to try to represent every note from Debussy’s score. But in order to do that (in any case nigh on impossible) all three musicians

had to be playing pretty much all the time, which led to an unchanging, dense texture, and a loss of clarity...

I decided instead to look at the piano trio itself as a medium - particularly works such as the Ravel - and reinvent Debussy's orchestral score with the piano trio in mind. I needed to create light and shade, and subtleties of colour. This meant exploring what strings and piano can do in terms of texture, and concentrating on idiomatic and natural techniques... Very often I had to give Debussy's string lines to the piano, so that the violin and cello could sustain the wind melodies. At other times I needed to use the cello to sustain a bass resonance, and had to give a cello solo to the violin. It reminded me of a particularly tricky game of Sudoku – you changed one instrumentation, and another no longer worked. In the end it was better to forget Debussy's orchestration, and to rethink the material for the new medium.

Once I'd completed the score, I worked with the players, who often suggested feats of virtuosity I hadn't thought possible, thereby opening up new possibilities previously discounted. In fact it was quite jaw-dropping to see Ashley [Wass] adding in a harp part to an already fiendish piano line, without missing a beat (so to speak). There was a (friendly!) altercation with cellist Tom Carroll about an oboe solo he'd set his heart on. 'Why can't I play that?' he complained – and then realised that if he played that, there was material left unplayed that no one else could cover.

Some string lines took on a completely different resonance when played by a single instrument; for instance the lower strings opening of the last movement. On a single cello, this became much more specific, and virtuosic; no longer the threatening rumble of an entire cello and bass section. Elsewhere, a single sustained harmonic on Matt [Trusler's] violin had a fullness that equalled the orchestral violins, but with a specially poignant luminosity.

It turned out to be an illuminating and stimulating journey, and made me think about instrumentation in a new and more creative way... And it was also inspiring to get right inside that monumental Debussy score, and to digest the detail of its construction.

I'm profoundly glad I said 'yes' in the end."

Notes compiled by Dick Ware

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Programme Notes

FIDELIO TRIO

French Impressions



3pm, Sunday October 6th, 2024
Little Missenden Church

64th Little Missenden Festival

The artists

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Since their debut at London’s Southbank Centre, the **Fidelio Trio** have regularly appeared at the Wigmore Hall and Kings Place and at festivals including Spitalfields, Cheltenham, St. Magnus and Huddersfield. In Ireland they regularly perform at the National Concert Hall, Dublin, the Kilkenny and Belfast Festivals as well as Shanghai Oriental Arts Centre, Beijing Modern Music Festival, Hong Kong Chamber Music Society, Singapore, Bangkok, Porto, Paris, Venice, Florence, Johannesburg, Harare, New York City, Pittsburgh, San Francisco and Boston. Their 2023/24 season includes performances at Dark Music Days Iceland, an extensive USA tour including National Sawdust New York and the Andy Warhol Museum Pittsburgh, Les Jardins Musicaux Neuchâtel and the Hay Festival.

Their extensive discography includes a *Gramophone Magazine* Editor’s Choice and Critics’ Choice 2022 of *Chamber Music* by *EJ Moeran*, a composer with whom they are closely associated, and the release of premiere recordings on *Mode Records* of music by Gerald Barry. Forthcoming in 2024 is a portrait CD of Xiaogang Ye. Other significant releases include two albums of Ravel & Saint-Saëns, and of Fauré. Chausson & Satie; Philip Glass *Head On & Pendulum* on *Orange Mountain*; Korngold (*Piano Trio op1*) and Schoenberg (*Verklärte Nacht* arr. Steuermann) for *Naxos*; the complete Michael Nyman Piano Trios for *MN Records*; multiple releases on *NMC*, *Delphian Records* including portrait CDs for composers such as Luke Bedford, Piers Hellawell and Michael Zev Gordon. Their previous release of French Piano Trios for *Resonus* was also a *Gramophone Magazine* Editor’s Choice.

fideliotrio.com

***This concert is sponsored by the Friends of the
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