

SAINT-SAËNS ORGAN SYMPHONY: MAJESTY & POETRY

March 3, 4, & 5, 2023 • 2:00 PM / 7:30 PM

Friday Classics presented by Lexus of Edmonton

Sunday Classics presented by The Robbins Foundation

Featuring:

Cosette Justo Valdés, conductor

Bianca Chambul, bassoon

Nora Bumanis, harp

Please hold your applause until the end of each piece.

McCUNE

Aquamarine (2004 ESO Commission)

(7')*

DEBUSSY

Danses sacrée et profane

(10')*

MOZART

Bassoon Concerto in B-flat Major, K.191/186e

(20')*

I - Allegro

II - Andante ma adagio

III - Rondo: tempo di menuetto

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

SAINT-SAËNS

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op.78 "Organ"

(38')*

I - Adagio – Allegro moderato – Poco adagio

II - Allegro moderato – Presto

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

Aquamarine (2004 ESO commission)

Jeffrey McCune

(b. Calgary, 1965)

First performed: January 30, 2004

Last ESO performance: June 2017

(Program Note by the composer)

I've always loved the ocean, and never more so than when I saw the dazzling electric blue and emerald green seas around the island of Raiatea in the Society Islands of French Polynesia. The colours, like bands or rings, encircled the shorelines, and as the contours of the bottom changed, the intensity of the colours shifted from the faintest green through the deepest blue. I was particularly fascinated with the intermediate bands that shimmered somewhere between those of deep green and vivid turquoise – the colour of the gemstone aquamarine. The water there was especially clear and soothing, and it was from this impression that the idea for *Aquamarine* emerged.

When the Edmonton Symphony commissioned this work, we discussed the idea of creating a sort of companion piece for the Saint-Saens *Symphony No. 3*. In recognition of the beautiful warmth, colour, sensuality, and peacefulness of the aquamarine seas of Polynesia, *Aquamarine for Orchestra and Organ* had its genesis.

Based on an undulating melodic idea that flows “between beats” like the bands of aquamarine seas, a theme first heard on the clarinets is cycled throughout the orchestra, eventually coming to the organ where it is augmented, and supported by the harp, piano, and celeste. The melodic fragment is stretched out and expanded, the transformation producing a change of tempo, from the slow, broad twelve-eight time of the first half to a quicker four-four feel for the second half. Where the rhythm in the first half was primarily on the beat, the rhythm of the second half becomes mostly syncopated, like reflective facets on a beautifully cut aquamarine gem flashing in light. The syncopated rhythm is supplied mainly by the strings, with the organ supplying melodic contour. The textures in this work range from string and wind quartets to full orchestra with organ. The work tries to capture a sense of peace, reflection, and contemplation, in homage to the stone, and the beautiful colour, of aquamarine.

Danses sacrée et profane

Claude Debussy

(b. Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1862 / d. Paris, 1918)

First performed: November 6, 1904, in Paris

Last ESO performance: January 2009

The pedal harp, the type of harp most familiar to us, and the one on which Nora Bumanis will perform at these concerts, has seven pedals, which allow it to move through the full range of keys. In the early 20th century, Parisian instrument maker Pleyel came up with a “chromatic” harp, without pedals, and containing many more strings to cover the range of notes. It caught on well enough that the Paris Conservatoire began offering classes on the instrument, and because of that, Pleyel commissioned Claude Debussy to create a work which would both serve as a test piece for the instrument, and showcase its range.

Pleyel's harp, alas, ebbed quickly from public favour, but the *Danses sacrée et profane*, the work Debussy composed for the chromatic harp, has not. The first dance ("sacrée") is given an antique feel with modal harmonies and is reminiscent of the gossamer *Gymnopédies* of Erik Satie (solo piano works that Debussy admired so much that he orchestrated some of them). Following that, the next dance ("profane") is in a waltz metre, featuring harp passages that grow in complexity, until the work finishes with playful suddenness.

Bassoon Concerto in B-flat Major, K.191/186e

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

(b. Salzburg, 1756 / d. Vienna, 1791)

Manuscript dated June 4, 1774, in Salzburg

Last ESO performance: November 2013

Mozart's lone *Bassoon Concerto* is not only the first non-piano concerto he composed – it was one of the earliest concertos he ever wrote. He was 18 years old when he put the date of June 4, 1774, on the manuscript, but by then, he was already a veteran musician, and a well-travelled one at that. It's likely that he had a particular musician in mind for this unique concerto; who exactly that was remains a mystery.

While adhering to a familiar format in design, the *Bassoon Concerto* still brims with Mozartean grace, and absolutely mastery of that design. The orchestra presents the main material of the opening movement, while the soloist's entrance takes that material, and begins to build upon it, demonstrating the surprisingly lyrical and technical capacities of the instrument.

Listen closely to the main melody of the second movement. It first appeared in sketchbooks dating back to Mozart's childhood, but opera lovers may recognize it as the opening of his famous aria "Porgi amor," from *Le nozze di Figaro*. It was obviously a melody dear to the composer's heart, so to assign such a lovely song to the bassoon shows that Mozart saw melodic aspects in the instrument that many overlook. The finale is in a rondo-variation form, set to a minuet rhythm. The bassoon is given ample opportunities for flashy display, including leaps of surprising expanse, and nimble work for the fingers.

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op.78 "Organ"

Camille Saint-Saëns

(b. Paris, 1835 / d. Algiers, 1921)

First performed: May 19, 1886, in London

Last ESO performance: June 2017

Franz Liszt was the composer who developed the concept of "thematic transformation," a compositional technique in which a single melodic idea forms the foundation for an entire work, put through increasingly elaborate manipulation while maintaining its identity; in this way, a large work can be unified throughout its length. Liszt was also a great friend of Camille Saint-Saëns. Both of those factors feature prominently in Saint-Saëns' last large orchestral work – his *Third Symphony*.

Saint-Saëns was a frequent, and very welcome, fêted visitor to London. The symphony was commissioned by London's Philharmonic Society (it wasn't yet the "Royal" Philharmonic at the time). "I gave everything to it I was able to give," he said of its composition. "What I have done, I will never do again." Saint-Saëns conducted the premiere, at a concert at which he also performed the solo part of his *Fourth Piano Concerto* – all for a fee of merely 30 pounds; the Society felt the honour they did him compensated for the trivial amount of actual money.

The "*Organ*" *Symphony* can be seen as being in two large sections, "although ... the Symphony in practice contains all four traditional symphonic movements," Saint-Saëns wrote. The main theme of the entire symphony is heard after the slow introduction, aggressively in the strings. This theme, which undergoes a very Lisztian transformation through the whole piece, propels the dramatic first section forward, achieving a grandiose climax halfway through the movement. The bracing drama carries on, ebbing away as we arrive at the Poco adagio, the second part of the first large section. It is here that we have the first real contrasting melodic idea – and it is here that we first hear the organ. The deeply felt string melody here, combined with the organ, lend a hymn-like quality to this section.

The main second part begins aggressively once again, the motto theme returning as the basis for a robust Scherzo, with touches of Mendelssohnian lightness in the woodwinds. The organ falls silent once again, while the orchestral texture is made more transparent with some dazzling passages for piano four-hands. The organ, at last, is given full vent as the final section begins. The main theme returns now as the basis of a fugue, and the might and power of the organ is matched by the full intensity of the large orchestral forces. Designed to leave its audiences breathless, the work has been doing just that since its first, spectacularly successful premiere.

Only three months after the premiere, Franz Liszt died. Liszt had often stood by his friend, for example backing Saint-Saëns' opera *Samson et Dalila* when even the Paris Opera wanted nothing to do with it. Soon after Liszt's death, Saint-Saëns dedicated the score of his "*Organ*" *Symphony*, "À la mémoire de Franz Liszt."

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