

Vive la France!
An American Composer's Perspective on
Berlioz, Saint-Saëns, Poulenc and Gershwin

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Tonight's Plano Symphony Concert features music by three French Composers and one American composer who was evoking the sights and sounds of Paris. We Americans like to emulate the French. When we want to say something with more class, we say it in French: R.S.V.P. (*Répondez s'il vous plaît*). We use French words when we want to talk about qualities we admire: *élégant, charmant, suave, distingué, débonnaire, savoir-faire*. And we use French when we want to talk about things that are a little naughty: *risqué, femme fatale, liaison, lingerie, boudoir, tête-à-tête, rendez-vous*. French music has these same qualities. Like French cooking, it has elegance, and it openly delights the senses.

I.

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) was the most important French composer of his time. Of the post-Beethoven generation of composers, Berlioz rejected the German symphonic tradition of absolute music as in the works Schubert, Brahms and Schumann. Instead, he followed the lead of Wagner and Liszt, who emulated Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* with programmatic music that told a story in freer forms. Berlioz' entire musical output is based either on texts or scenarios. He enjoyed his status as a "bad-boy" musical revolutionary, and he was often at odds with his critics. Berlioz, however, was confident of his place in history; on his deathbed, he uttered "At last, they are going to play my music."

Berlioz's first opera, the 1838 *Benvenuto Cellini*, Op. 23, is based on the colorful life of the Renaissance Italian goldsmith. The rousing overture was a success at its premiere, but, even after several revisions, the opera itself did not endear itself to the public. In order to make the best of his artistic investment, Berlioz produced a second overture, based on a scene from the opera and called it the *Roman Carnival Overture*, which is better known than the opera's original overture. Like the *Roman Carnival*, *Benvenuto Cellini* begins with a bustling orchestral flourish that announces, "Make way for the hero." There follows a medley of tunes from the opera which seem to interrupt each other as episodes of vigorous activity suddenly stop in their tracks to give way to slower and more stately sections. Twice, he introduces themes quietly in the woodwinds with the strings gently accompanying; then the sections switch roles, and the strings take the lead, with the winds providing flowing countermelodies. At the end, the composer shows off his contrapuntal and orchestration skill by superimposing brilliant filigree in the strings with the processional grandeur of the brass in a grand musical layer cake; then, after another pensive pause that sounds like the waving of a papal incense censer, the music grandly closes.

II.

Camille Saint-Saëns (Saa-SAW) (1835-1921) was famous as a child prodigy who could play all 52 of Beethoven's piano sonatas at the age of 10. He taught many distinguished students, most notably Gabriel Fauré, and he left a substantial catalogue of works in all the musical forms of his day. He was a generation younger than Berlioz, and his taste was decidedly conservative. His admiration of modernism stopped with Wagner and Liszt, and he is reported to have stormed out of the Paris premiere of Stravinsky's revolutionary *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring) in 1913. He was particularly at odds with his more progressive contemporary Claude Debussy (1862-1918), who stated, "I have a horror of sentimentality, and I cannot forget that its name is Saint-Saëns."

Saint-Saëns's 1872 Cello Concerto No. 1 in A-minor combines the symmetrical phrase structure of the German symphonic school of Schumann and Mendelssohn with Lisztian techniques of gradual thematic transformation. Expertly crafted for the cello, the solo part is virtuosic, but not flashy -- always clearly heard and never covered by the orchestra. There are three movements, played without pause. An unusual feature is that the vigorous opening theme of triplets in quadruple meter returns at the beginning of the finale to unify the work.

A Classical sonata-allegro succession of theme groups follows, but, instead of a development and recapitulation, the composer goes right on to the second movement, which is a delicate muted minuet. In the middle, there is a short cello cadenza before the minuet returns; then, the string mutes come off, and, this time, the music has a lustier swing that turns it into more of a waltz.

At the end of this movement, Saint-Saëns again declines to make a full stop. Instead, the first movement's triplets slip in quietly. There are contrasting episodes throughout the rest of the piece, in which the minuet/waltz and new transformations of the themes alternate with increasingly brilliant cello passages and gradually build to a triumphant up-tempo coda.

III.

Of the six French composers of the early 20th century who followed the idiosyncratic aesthetic philosophy of composer Eric Satie and polymath Jean Cocteau, only two of them --- Francis Poulenc (Poo-LENK) (1899-1963) and Darius Milhaud (Mi-YO) (1892-1974) --- had talent. The goal of "Les Six" (Lay SEEZ) was to reject both the Romantic Germanic tradition of Wagner and Schoenberg and the Impressionistic lushness of Debussy and Ravel. Instead, they advocated leaner, playful "street music" that contained elements of satire, jazz and the cabaret.

Poulenc produced a long and distinguished legacy of operas, ballets, concertos, choral and orchestral works, piano solos, chamber music and an exquisite multitude of songs.

An excellent pianist, he was widely known as an interpreter of his own works. His music is characterized by elegant wit, slinky charm and more than a few sly references to the cabaret, even in his religious works. English musicologist Jessica Duchén described Poulenc as "a fizzing, bubbling mass of Gallic energy who can move you to both laughter and tears within seconds. His language speaks clearly, directly and humanely to every generation." Also, Stravinsky wrote to him in 1931: "You are truly good, and that is what I find again and again in your music"

Poulenc's 1923 ballet *Les Biches* (Lay BEESH) has a fanciful punning title. In French, "biche" means both "female deer" (or "doe") and "female sweetheart"; in English, the piece could be called "The Sweethearts." He wrote it for Serge Diaghilev and his *Ballet Russe*, and the premiere in Paris featured sets by Marie Laurencin and choreography by Bronislava Nijinska, sister of the famed dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. There is no plot, and there are no named characters. The action simply consists of a series of flirtations among small groups of young people to create a sexy fantasy of "the beautiful people at play," cavorting on and around a huge blue couch. From this ballet, Poulenc extracted a five-movement orchestral suite: Rondeau, Adagietto, Rag-Mazurka, Andantino and Final. The music pays tribute to Satie's circus-inspired ballet *Parade* and Poulenc's own racy comic opera *The Breasts of Tiresias*, especially in the "sassy brassy" sections. Here, the phrase structure is more regular and traditional than the composer's many "spikier" scores, but there is still plenty of Poulenc's signature French "Ooo, la, LA."

IV.

George Gershwin (1898-1937) was born Jacob Gershovitz in Brooklyn, New York, and in his brief 39 years, he became a star composer both on Broadway and in Hollywood. His life-long ambition, however, was to transcend the popular realm in favor of what he considered the more respectable and meaningful world of classical music. He succeeded on all fronts, and Gershwin's unique combination of classical complexity and popular appeal has made him --- like Kurt Weill, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim -- one of the few composers whose music is admired equally by lovers of classical music and popular music.

Gershwin based his 1928 symphonic poem *An American in Paris* on a trip to Paris, which was at that time the mecca of modernism. The music represents Gershwin at his full musical maturity. The commissioner was Walter Damrosch, who conducted the premiere with the New York Philharmonic. According to Gershwin's own notes, "My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere." Gershwin specifies automobile horns in the score, and he brought actual taxi horns from Paris to New York for the premiere. Midway in the score, the energy winds down, a solo violin gets sentimental and a muted trumpet plays a bluesy tune backed by a chorus of saxophones to show that, as Gershwin puts it, "our American friend...has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness." But, since "nostalgia is not a fatal disease," the

American visitor quickly recovers his *joie de vivre* and becomes once again “an alert spectator of Parisian life.” At the end, the “blues” theme and the French atmosphere and street noises merge in a triumphant synthesis.

Some New York critics of the time were not enthusiastic about accepting jazz-influenced music on a program with classics of the standard repertoire. Always sensitive about the issue of popular vs. classical music, Gershwin retorted, "It's not a Beethoven Symphony, you know...It's a humorous piece, nothing solemn about it. It's not intended to draw tears. If it pleases symphony audiences as a light, jolly piece, a series of impressions musically expressed, it succeeds." And so it does.

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