

*May 10, 17.00 hrs*

*Catherine Butcher*

*Class of Marcelle Mallette*

*These program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their course.*

## **Program Notes**

Flavor, texture and aroma. For many, the visceral memories of food are tied into the hands that made it, the friends who shared it, the time in our lives we loved that particular dish. In the same way, music can form a mental time capsule, triggered by a string of notes or the opening chords of a song. These associations are so instinctive that we often link things like music and food to the events in our lives both consciously and unconsciously. We use them to augment our deepest experiences with colour and significance.

For example, a dying composer like Claude Debussy (1862-1918) composed his Violin Sonata as part of his final legacy.<sup>1</sup> J.S. Bach, (1685-1750) at the age of thirty-five had lost three children and his first wife, yet simultaneously produced the unaccompanied violin and cello solos, as well the presentation manuscript score of the Brandenburg concertos.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Pablo Sarasate (1844-1908) created a place for the folksongs of Spain in the repertoire of soloists through his own performances and compositions.<sup>3</sup> The pieces of each composer are individual in era and style, yet together they form a three-course banquet of memory and achievement.

The first course of the meal is the entrée, Debussy's Sonata in G minor for Violin and Piano. Filled with shifting colours and flavors, this sonata could be a salad with a tangy dressing and spicy dill almonds, or a golden soup simmering with spices and finely sliced vegetables. This sonata was composed without reference to traditional chamber music forms, as one of Debussy's goals was to experiment with the sounds which could be created in free form, while contrasting instruments from different families, such as strings or woodwinds.<sup>1</sup> This spirit of experimentation can be heard in the whimsical ebb and flow of the piece, with lyrical sections moving into harmonics and truncated by active figuration passages.

The erratic nature of the piece corresponds with the unpredictable flow of Debussy's life. He was born in 1862 into the Late Romantic era, although he composed primarily in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1903 he was honored by being appointed a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, one of France's highest merit awards.<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterward, he began an affair which resulted in an attempted suicide by his wife and the end of two marriages, including his own. This demonstrates the hectic tone of his personal life, which began in 1880 with his first love, another married woman. He was still in composition studies at the time.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Siglind, "Debussy's... Context," 218

<sup>2</sup> Ledbetter, "Unaccompanied... Works," 16

<sup>3</sup> Wooley, "Pablo... Significance," 246

<sup>4</sup> Mahler Foundation, "Claude Debussy (1862-1918)"

<sup>5</sup> Lesure Francois, Howat Roy. "Debussy, Claude"

Despite the chaos of his romantic pursuits, Debussy grew into a steady love for one thing: his country. In his last years, he increasingly championed French music and desired to be associated with the French tradition.<sup>1</sup> This desire took on additional urgency when he was stricken with cancer in his last years. He decided to compose a set of six French sonatas which would form his legacy. The Sonata for Violin and Piano was the third sonata, and progressed through several evolutions. It began as a trio which included French horn but was altered to form a duet after Debussy took inspiration from the Hungarian flair of a violinist named Arthur Hartmann. Debussy had hoped Hartmann would debut the piece, however circumstances were complicated by World War I. Ultimately it was premiered in 1917 by Debussy and a pianist named Gaspard Poulet, playing at a benefit concert for victims of the war.<sup>6</sup> It was Debussy's final performance before he succumbed to his illness the following year, rendering the third sonata the final sonata.

Although the debut was not what Debussy envisioned, the piece remains as a testament to the exotic colours and sounds which formed his final obsession. The piano opens the first movement, *Allegro Vivo*, setting the stage in G minor briefly before the violin enters. Their duet continues in an improvisatory vein, experimenting with tempo and expressive hesitation. The dreamy atmosphere of the first movement is interrupted by the abrupt beginning motif of the second movement, *Intermede*. The second movement also heralds a transition into G major, a favored key which continues into the third movement. After the restless quality of the second movement, the *Finale* movement completes the sonata with focused alertness, proceeding from active virtuosic passages into dramatic lyrical lines and vice versa. Opening with a return to the theme of the first movement, the third movement closes with a whirlwind tour of the accents, trills and tone contrasts which characterized Debussy's vision for his final sonatas.

And now for the main course! The juicy, savory steak of the evening, well seasoned and rounded off with the compositional genius of Baroque composer J.S. Bach. The Chaconne forms the final movement of Bach's D minor Partita, patterned after a dance which had been evolving since the late 1500's. Originally a spicy Spanish dance condemned by the clergy, over one hundred years later the Chaconne was a structured compositional form known for its variations which cycle every 2-4 bars.<sup>7</sup> Bach's chaconne comprises an impressive sixty-four variations, with a bass theme which forms the second ingredient to a good chaconne, or ciaconna, as Bach called it.<sup>8</sup> This alternate term sprang from the dance's roots in Spain and Italy, and corresponds to his using Partia rather than Partita as the title for the entire suite of movements.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to its origins as a joyful dance, Bach's Ciaconna is a serious work which calls to mind the recent passing of his wife, although the composer makes no direct reference such as a dedication. Instead, Bach writes the piece like a story. The opening is a polyphonic statement in D minor, dark and unapologetic. The first declaration drops into a mournful baseline, which repeats itself before being echoed in a higher octave. These initial passages introduce the piece with creative variations which grow increasingly pensive, before slipping into a lengthy passage of broken chords. At this point, the story is overtaken by nostalgia, memories rolling and crashing like waves on a beach. This interlude arrives defiantly back at the opening D minor

---

<sup>6</sup> Lesure, "Sonata for Violin and Piano"

<sup>7</sup> Silbiger, "Chaconne...chacona"

<sup>8</sup> Rosencranz, "Chaconne (Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 1004)"

<sup>9</sup> Ledbetter, "Unaccompanied...Works," 3

statement before transitioning softly into D major. The D major section provides relief for the tumult of the previous chapter, as if Bach were remembering happier days. After a brief return to the broken chords, the story enters its final chapter with a melancholic return to D minor. Like any good conclusion, these passages review the key elements of the narrative so far. The notes become fierce, content or tragic by turns, as Bach's chromatic line and pedal tone towards the end take on a resemblance to weeping. After a series of dramatic triplets, the movement closes with a third statement of the opening theme, maintaining a triumphant energy to the end.

At this point in the program, one feels comfortably full. One reaches for a napkin and the vision of a cozy bed with ample quilts and pillows arises. However, before one succumbs to the call of the food coma, the final course appears in the form of dessert! A Spanish dance, bright and lively, perhaps presenting itself as a cool orange sherbet, smooth chocolate ice cream, or a moist lemon cake with cream cheese icing. Pablo de Sarasate's *Zapateado* instantly brings the sparkle back into the evening. Named after the *zapateado* from Andalusia, it opens with a drumroll in the piano which simulates the rapid tapping of the dancer's feet. It also includes syncopation and a degree of coordinated virtuosity in the violin which parallels the original dance.<sup>10</sup> The dramatic opening is followed by a second entrance which begins a pattern of lyrical motifs growing increasingly elaborate, before the piece snaps back to the opening theme, and finishes with a cheeky pizzicato and final chord.

This work epitomizes the virtuosity and flair which made Sarasate famous from his earliest days as a child prodigy. Born into the Early Romantic period in 1844, Sarasate was soon recognized for his talent by multiple patrons. At the age of eleven, he was shepherded into the capable teaching of Jean-Delphin Alard, a French violin instructor at the Paris Conservatory. After winning the Prix de Conservatoire at seventeen, the highest award the conservatory could offer, he went on to a brilliant performing career. Although identifying primarily with France for most of his life, Sarasate's compositions retain the Spanish style of his origins, bringing common Spanish dances to enduring public notice.<sup>11</sup>

## Bibliography

Bruhn, Siglind. *Debussy's Instrumental Music in its Cultural Context*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Hillsdale NY, 2019

"Claude Debussy (1862-1918)." Mahler Foundation. Accessed November 15, 2023.

<https://mahlerfoundation.org/mahler/contemporaries/claude-debussy/>.

"Claude Debussy". In *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 2023

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude\\_Debussy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Debussy)

Debussy, Claude. *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. Edited by Ernst-Gunter Heinemann. Preface by Francois Lesure. Munich: Henle

Eiche, Jon F. *The Bach Chaconne for Solo Violin: A Collection of Views*. Bloomington, Indiana: Frangipani Press, 1985

---

<sup>10</sup> Harvey, "A...Identity," 53

<sup>11</sup> Tao-Chang, "*Spanish...Influences*", 9

- Harvey, Gabrielle A. "A Piece of the Exotic: Virtuoso Violin Compositions and National Identity." 2012
- Ledbetter, David. *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Lesure Francois, Howat Roy. "Debussy, Claude". In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press, 2001.  
<https://doiorg.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.07353>
- Lockspeiser, Edward. "Debussy, Claude". In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claude-Debussy/additional-info>
- Rosencranz, Henriette. "Chaconne (Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 1004)". Violinorum. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.violinorum.com/us/chaconne-johann-sebastian-bach-bwv-1004/#:~:text=The%20theme%20in%20the%20bass,there%20are%2064%20variations%20altogether.>
- Silbiger, Alexander. "Chaconne (Fr., also chacony; It. ciaccona, ciacona; Sp. chacona)". In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press, 2001. <https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05354>
- Tao-Chang, Yu. "Spanish Dances: Their Origins and Influences." DMA diss., University of Maryland, 2006
- Wooley, Grange. "Pablo De Sarasate: His Historical Significance." *Music & Letters* 36, no. 3 (1955): 237–52.
- Zukerman, Joseph. "Debussy." *American Scholar* 14, no. 3 (1945): 335–40.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41200010>.