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Debussy, Claude (1862-1918) -- Sonata for Cello and Piano (1915)

French composer Claude Debussy composed his Sonata for Cello and Piano in 1915, near the end of his life; these final years came at an especially turbulent period for his homeland, as the First World War was in the process of devastating France. His motivations for composing the Sonata were explicitly connected to the conflict; in a letter to publisher Jacques Durand, he lamented the deaths of French youths in the war, and described the new work as an homage to those fallen in battle. The Sonata was the first of six chamber sonatas he intended to write, aiming to invoke a nationalistic spirit while shifting in style from his earlier works; of the six proposed pieces, it was one of only three that he ultimately composed before his death. Since the still-raging war made a public performance in France unsafe at the time, the Sonata was premiered at London's Aeolian Concert hall in 1916, with C. Warwick Evans and Madame Alfred Hobday as the performers.

The Sonata is in three short movements. The first is a slow movement with an agitated middle section bookended by expansive outer segments: the first impassioned, the second resigned. The second movement, a humorous *Sérénade*, is a portrayal of the *commedia dell' arte* character Pierrot (the Sonata was originally subtitled "*Pierrot fâché avec la lune*" or "Pierrot angry at the moon"), with pizzicato passages in the cello imitating the sounds of a guitar. The third movement features pentatonic melodies inspired by Debussy's encounter with Javanese gamelan music at the 1889 Paris World's Fair; lively passages featuring jaunty rhythms in both instruments bring the work to a dramatic conclusion.

Clarke, Rebecca (1886-1979) -- Sonata for Viola (or Cello) and Piano (1919)

British-born composer Rebecca Clarke completed her Sonata for Viola (or Cello) and Piano in 1919 and entered the piece in that year's Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge competition for composers; it initially tied for first prize but was ultimately declared runner-up to the Swiss composer Ernest Bloch's Suite for Viola and Piano, with the patron Coolidge herself casting a tie-breaking vote in Bloch's favor. When Clarke's work was published in 1921 by J. & W. Chester, both viola and cello versions of the piece were included; the inclusion of a cello part was later cynically characterized by music critic Calum MacDonald as "a publisher's bid for

increased sales.” This attitude has seemingly borne out in how the work has been performed in the century since its publication; while the Sonata has become a mainstay of the viola repertoire, it has largely been neglected by cellists. However, the cello version takes advantage of the instrument’s expansive range, providing additional depth by utilizing the lower octave at select points while mirroring the viola part’s upper register at climactic moments.

Though Clarke was born and raised in England, and wrote the Sonata while travelling in the United States, the work is heavily influenced by multiple aspects of French culture. Clarke’s inscription on the Sonata’s title page is a quote from the 19th-century French poet Alfred de Musset’s *La Nuit de mai*, and suggests the nocturnal character that pervades much of the piece:

*“Poète, prends ton luth; le vin de la jeunesse
Fermente cette nuit dans les veines de Dieu.”*

(“Poet, take up your lute; the wine of youth
this night is fermenting in the veins of God.”)

The Sonata itself features similarities to the later works of Debussy and other French Impressionist composers from the time period, from the very beginning of the work; for example, Clarke’s declamatory viola/cello introduction and subsequent improvisatory material evokes memories of the opening of Debussy’s Cello Sonata, written just four years earlier. Additionally, since the Coolidge Competition kept the works of the composers anonymous, multiple judges are said to have misidentified Clarke’s work as that of Debussy’s compatriot, Maurice Ravel; this may have been due in part to the Sonata’s nimble, mischievous scherzo second movement, which is similar in texture and character to the *Pantoum* second movement of Ravel’s 1914 Piano Trio. The third movement begins slowly and melancholically before giving way to a more agitated return of themes from the first movement. This is briefly interrupted by a short, pastoral section (possibly the most identifiably “English” section of the piece) before the declamatory opening theme re-asserts itself for a final time, bringing the work to a triumphant close.

Bridge, Frank (1879-1941) -- Sonata for Cello and Piano, H. 125 (1913-17)

Frank Bridge wrote his Sonata for Cello and Piano during what is considered the “transitional period” of his compositional evolution, where he started to move away from (but not fully eschew) the Romantic-style emblematic of his early works, and incorporated Modernist and Impressionist concepts of composers such as Debussy into his writing. This is heard throughout the Sonata in Bridge’s fragmentation and juxtaposition of melodic material, as well as occasional use of pentatonic and octatonic scales, all utilized by Debussy in his own Sonata. However, the texture of Bridge’s first movement, written in 1913-14, is reminiscent of the works of another French composer, Gabriel Fauré, whose influence was found in much of Bridge’s early chamber music; interestingly, Fauré composed his first Cello Sonata, also in the key of D minor, the same year that Bridge completed his own work. The first movement of Bridge’s Sonata features much rhythmic interplay between the two instruments while maintaining a clear

lyricism throughout; this combination of elements creates a sense of melancholy and anxiety which may have mirrored Bridge's apprehension regarding the impending war.

The second movement, however, was completed at the height of the conflict in 1917, and delves deeper into these emotions. According to the account of Ada May Thomas, a contemporary of his, Bridge was despondent about the state of the world as wartime deaths continued to rise, often could not sleep and regularly took nighttime walks around Kensington, where he lived; she believed it was likely during these nocturnal wanderings that Bridge developed the concept for the Sonata's second movement. Such imagery seems fitting upon hearing the contemplative and brooding atmosphere set from the start of the movement; over time, this transforms into both a nostalgic pastoral theme (similar to its counterpart in the last movement of Clarke's Sonata, arguably the most identifiably "British" theme employed within the work) and then a frantic, menacing middle section before the movement's original material returns and builds to a climax. For the coda, Bridge returns to the opening theme of the first movement, which precipitates an ending that, while ultimately victorious, is complicated by the darkness of the material preceding it. Is this Bridge's expression of triumph? Joy? Relief? Perhaps the answer to this question is the listener's to decide.