

Espressivo Program Notes April 2018

The evolution of chamber music for a mixed ensemble of winds and strings coincides with the domestication of the double bass. Previously used as an orchestral instrument or in dance music, the instrument was admitted into the salon in the late eighteenth century. The granddaddy of the genre is Beethoven's Septet of 1800, for four strings, clarinet, horn and bassoon. Beethoven seems to have discovered that the largest string instrument, essentially doubling the cello an octave lower and with the capability to play six notes below the lowest note on the bassoon, provided overtones that enhanced the vibrations of the higher instruments. In any case, the popularity of the Septet, which sustains to this day, caused the original players to have a similar work commissioned from Franz Schubert, who added a second violin for his Octet (1824). (*Espressivo* performed it last season.) It is possible, if not probable, that Schubert's good friend Franz Lachner wrote his Nonet for the same group, adding a flute, but the origins, and even the date of the composition are in dispute. An indicator might be the highlighting of the virtuosic violin part, as it would have been played by Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who had premiered both the Septet and the Octet.

All three works, Septet, Octet and Nonet, have slow introductions to the first and last uptempo movements, and all include a minuet. All seem intended to please rather than to challenge. Beethoven's Septet was commissioned by a noble patron for the delectation of his guests, as was Schubert's Octet. That made it one of the last such, however, as the Napoleonic wars had depleted the purses of the aristocracy. Bonaparte's defeat at Waterloo (1815) and the reactionary regime imposed by the Congress of Vienna also muted grandeur in general; the typical venue for chamber music became the living room of a well-to-do merchant. Whatever the impetus for Lachner's Nonet, it is, however inspired and well-constructed, comfortable music. The German word is *Gemütlich*.

NONET

FRANZ LACHNER (1803 – 1890)

Inasmuch as the name Franz Lachner resonates with music lovers, it is as Schubert's fellow prankster and tavern hopper, as well as protector and deathbed companion. Lachner was six years Schubert's junior and outlived him by 62. Their friendship was not impinged on by Lachner's being appointed a coach at Vienna's Kärtner Theater, a position for which Schubert had also

applied and which he could desperately have used. Lachner won not only that job, but also highly competitive competitions for organ playing and to compose a symphony. He made his way up the career ladder, principally in Munich, culminating in his being named General Music Director in 1862. Under his direction, that opera house was the only one that came into question for the 1865 premiere of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. His reward was to be ousted in favor of Wagner's apostle Hans von Bülow. Lachner spent the remaining twenty-six years of his life as a respected elder statesman of musical life in Germany, befitting an excellent musician who lacked only originality to join the immortals.

RONDINO, WoO20

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770 – 1827)

That weird “WoO” above is the abbreviation of the German *Werk ohne Opuszahl*, or Works Without an Opus Number, and is affixed to compositions to which Beethoven did not assign one. Its absence in this case has inhibited the dating of the “Rondino,” which was composed around the time of Beethoven's ultimate move from Bonn to Vienna in 1792, very possibly as dinner music for his hometown prince, Maximilian (Empress Theresa Maria's youngest son, hence Marie Antoinette's brother). There is also speculation that the “Rondino” was at some point intended to be part of the Octet for Winds (two pairs each of oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn), published posthumously. In any case, it fits easily in the tradition of woodwind music as light fare for ceremonial occasions —there are many such compositions by Mozart and Haydn.

This one is particularly fine. The rondo part of “little rondo” means that the original theme recurs, interspersed with other material. After the opening statement is repeated once, Beethoven never brings it back literally, adding different accompaniments and commentary each of the three times. The third time, the theme, in the first horn, overlays little quacks in the oboe; some hear this as pastoral—ducks on a pond—and poetically evocative. It may also be a sly wink.—The little masterpiece is remarkable for the varying instrumental colors highlighted—for instance, the quick muting and unmuting of the horns near the end, when the theme comes a fourth and last time, partial and at half speed, the accumulated energy settling into slumber (on a full stomach).

DIXTUOR (1986)

JEAN FRANCAIX (1912 – 1990)

A recurring indication to the performers of the Dixtuor is *aimable*—friendly. It was indeed the stated intention of this prolific composer of some 200 works to

please. Walking the sunny side of the street, he eschewed the *Angst* of the atonalists and dodecaphonists, taking as his models the French neoclassicists Chabrier, Ravel and Poulenc, along with the sometime Frenchman Igor Stravinsky; 'neo-' implies an ultimate affinity with Mozart and Haydn. Thus, his works are formally clear and balanced; his harmony tonal while spiced with 'extra' notes (those not a functional part of the chords); his counterpoint lucid; and his orchestration transparent, highlighting the conversational exchanges between the instruments. Many of the melodies of the Dixtuor, if isolated from their accompaniments, could in fact be by Haydn, though perhaps with an extra dose of jauntiness or sauciness. (Ah, those French sauces...!)

Francaix composed his first works at the age of six. He was seventy-four when he composed the Dixtuor, on commission from the Linos Ensemble. In between he had been one of the legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger's two all-time teacher's pets (the other being Aaron Copland); written ten film scores for the director Sasha Guitry; composed many works he, a one-time child prodigy pianist, played himself, as well as ballets, operas, cantatas, and chamber music; and been a sought-after chamber music partner.

Please enjoy!

Michel Singher