

## **PROGRAM NOTES**

**April 18, 2019, 8:00 PM**

**Stern Auditorium/Perelman Stage, Carnegie Hall**

**Orchestra of St. Luke's**

**Pablo Heras-Casado, Conductor Laureate**

**Hélène Grimaud, Piano**

### **AT A GLANCE**

Tonight's program puts into dialogue four pieces with very different moods and textures, and yet all have allegiances to a shared set of "classical" traditions and structures. Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 103 might seem like an outlier in terms of chronology and style, but is in fact the key to understanding the program as a whole. In their own ways, the other three composers can be seen responding to the models and structures exemplified in Haydn's music, if only to transform them into something new.

Sergei Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1, "Classical" is perhaps most directly in dialog with its classical forebear, a self-conscious exercise in historical re-imagination, asking the question of what a composer like Haydn would sound like transplanted into the twentieth century. Written late in his life, Maurice Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major offers a modern flair that shows off the facets of the instrument and skills of the soloist to their utmost. Stravinsky's Suite No. 1 for Small Orchestra is a brief but evocative display of the composer's innovative style—an express tour through various musical worlds.

Coming at the end of the end of such a program, Haydn's Symphony No. 103, "Drumroll"—the next to last such work that he wrote in his long career—might sound even more "classical" to some ears. But for other listeners, it might just sound more modern than it might have otherwise.

### **SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)**

Symphony No. 1, "Classical"

Prokofiev did a great deal of his composing at the piano, but for his first symphony he made a conscious decision to work apart from the instrument. He spent the summer in the countryside near St. Petersburg—then called Petrograd—and decided not to bring a piano with him. "The idea occurred to me," as he recounted in his autobiography, "to compose an entire symphonic work without the piano." He surmised that this method of composition would

produce a different result, and that the “orchestral colors would, of necessity, be clearer and cleaner.” In the course of his studies he had been especially engaged with the work of Joseph Haydn, and decided to make his symphony into an experiment of creative anachronism:

“It seemed to me that, were he alive today, Haydn, while retaining his style of composition, would have appropriated something from the modern. Such a symphony I now wanted to compose: a symphony in the classic manner. As it began to take actual form I named it Classical Symphony; first, because it was the simplest thing to call it; second, out of bravado, to stir up a hornet’s nest; and finally, in the hope that should the symphony provide itself in time to be truly ‘classic,’ it would benefit me considerably.”

How much we should take Prokofiev at his word is perhaps up for debate, but his somewhat contradictory thoughts on the symphony square with various aspects of the music. The work is constructed in the “classical” style of symphonic writing codified by Haydn, Mozart, and other Classical-Era composers: written in four movements, with a fast opening movement written in sonata form, an upbeat finale, and shorter middle movements that provide contrast. But it is only half as long as a typical “classical” symphony, clocking in at only fifteen minutes as opposed to the more typical thirty. Other elements seem calculated to elicit “hornet’s nest” reactions from purists, notably the unexpected harmonies and modulations that are heard throughout, and even more so the abrupt ending of the second movement. Notably, the third movement is written in the form of a *Gavotte*, a dance form adapted from the French Baroque and not typically present in canonical symphonies. Whatever its actual allegiance to the classical style, Prokofiev’s first symphony shows his fluency with tradition and his penchant for “neoclassical” innovation.

### **MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)**

Piano Concerto in G Major

During the years 1929–31 Maurice Ravel was at work on two different piano concertos simultaneously: the work heard tonight, as well as his D Major concerto written for the left hand, commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein (brother of the philosopher Ludwig) who had lost his right arm serving in World War I. These two concertos are among the last works Ravel wrote, coming at the end of a career of over forty years. Ravel evidently enjoyed having two projects in progress simultaneously, and explained how his goal was to write concertos that

took advantage of the unique properties of the instrument, in contrast to previous works in the genre:

“I believe that a concerto can be both gay and brilliant without necessarily being profound or aiming at dramatic effects. It has been said that the concertos of some great classical composers, far from being written for the piano, have been written against it. And I think this criticism is quite justified.”

By the early twentieth century, the concerto genre had come to be defined as a work for a solo instrument and a larger orchestra. The interplay between the solo instrument and orchestra provides the central tension of the work, which typically unfolds over three movements. Faster outer movements provide the frame for a slower middle movement, with the third movement typically played at a faster tempo than the first.

The Piano Concerto in G Major certainly lives up to Ravel's goal of medium specificity, taking full advantage of the unique, percussive properties of the piano. Rapid runs, sharp staccato figures, and trills abound, along with dramatic glissandos—in which the pianist grazes her hand up and down the keyboard without pressing individual keys—all providing for dramatic effects. Slower and quieter moments reveal the lyrical side of the instrument, while others create a dissonant and jazzy atmosphere. In the end, this “gay and brilliant” work is no laughing matter in terms of its demands on the soloist and ensemble, yet comes across as playful and overall joyous in its execution and effects on listeners.

### **IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882–1971)**

Suite No. 1 for Small Orchestra

Stravinsky earned international renown in the wake of a series of scores written for the stage, including *Petrushka*, *Firebird*, and *The Rite of Spring*. Written for productions by the Ballets Russes in Paris, these pieces employed innovative uses of the orchestra and often incorporated folk materials both real and imagined. Smaller in scale but no less innovative in their aesthetics, Stravinsky's two Suites written for chamber orchestra are each a set of charming miniatures that offer a compressed introduction to aspects of the composer's style.

The opening of the Suite No. 1 for Small Orchestra is a restrained Andante, with a haunting melody shared among the various instruments of the ensemble, its gentle lines are offset by a lilting and steady accompaniment. The second “Napolitana” ostensibly shifts the mood to Italy, and a more boisterous tempo

and mood. Although the strings enter for a few key moments, the movement is dominated by the woodwinds and brass, who engage in a series of intricate patterns. The “Spanish” third movement features an austere melody that is repeated and somewhat transformed over the course of the action. The final “Balalaika” movement ushers in a more Slavic mood, bringing the suite to a satisfying if somewhat abrupt conclusion.

### **JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)**

Symphony No. 103, “Drumroll”

The city of London has helped propel the careers of many composers from continental Europe, notably Handel, who composed dozens of operas for the city’s stages, and Mendelssohn, whose music was beloved by fans including Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Although he never called the city his permanent home, Joseph Haydn found similar success there, spending extended periods of time in London on two separate occasions. During each visit he wrote a half dozen symphonies and witnessed their premieres before eager audiences.

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Haydn’s visits to London were facilitated by another continental transplant, violinist, composer, and impresario Johann Peter Salomon (originally from Bonn), who moved to the city in 1781. After the death of Haydn’s patron Prince Esterházy, Salomon sensed an opportunity, and arranged for the composer’s first visit to London in 1791.

Haydn’s Symphony No. 103, “Drumroll” was written during his second visit to London, and was premiered on March 2, 1795. It was his next to last work in what was widely regarded as his signature genre and takes its nickname from the drumroll at the start of the introduction to the first movement. Notably, not all performers have always agreed on how this trademark element should be performed, with most assuming that it should start strong and gradually decrease in volume. The second movement is written in “double variation” form, in which variations on two different themes alternate, a technique that Haydn had refined. Like the themes of the second movement, the third movement is also derived from folk melodies, while the finale uses an original theme to bring the “Drumroll” Symphony to a rousing conclusion. – *Jim Steichen*