Piercing Moon Trio

Leah Forsyth, oboe · Sofiko Tchetchelashvili, viola · Chialing Hsieh, piano

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The combination of oboe, viola, and piano—the one which the Piercing Moon Trio presents this evening—is certainly uncommon by today's concert standards. Yet, the instrumentation is not totally unfamiliar either. Its precedents lie in the Baroque era when the combination of two melody instruments, potentially a wind and a string, with keyboard would not have been uncommon at all. Indeed, Telemann's Trio Sonata in C minor for oboe, viola, and *basso continuo* is a brilliant precursor to the works heard on this program. Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms all paired single wind and string instruments with piano, but tended to favor clarinet to oboe and, in the cases of Beethoven and Brahms, also substituted cello for viola. The works we hear this evening were not penned by these venerable masters, but were instead written by lesser-known composers, Charles Martin Loeffler and August Klughardt. As we shall hear, their works are also worth exploring. Additionally, our concert closes with the premiere of a new work by Shreveport-based composer, Todd Gabriel, specifically commissioned by Piercing Moon Trio for their performance at our festival.

Charles Martin Loeffler

The Two Rhapsodies for oboe, viola, and piano by **Charles Martin Loeffler (1861-1935)** open our concert. Loeffler was someone with a remarkably varied upbringing. He was born in a town near Berlin, but moved to Paris, claimed Alsatian birth, and took on French mannerisms after political turmoil in Germany led to his father's imprisonment; he also attributed this imprisonment to his father's death. He began violin lessons in childhood and continued these studies in Berlin and Paris, making his career as an orchestral violinist. Composition lessons were with Ernest Guiraud, Bizet's friend who composed the recitatives for *Carmen*. (As an anecdote, Guiraud was born in New Orleans and had his first opera premiered at the *Théâtre d'Orléans* before moving to Paris.) In 1881, Loeffler emigrated to the United States, making inroads in New York City and then settling in Boston. Evidently, he found greater success and personal satisfaction in America, remarking ours was a country "quick to reward genuine musical merit and to reward it far more generously than Europe." He took on American citizenship in 1887. In New York, he played with the orchestra of Leopold Damrosch (a predecessor to the New York Philharmonic) and that of Theodore Thomas, one of the most-respected and ambitious conductors in the history of the United States. In 1882, he joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra as assistant concertmaster, a position he retained for the next twenty-one years until his retirement. He then moved to Medfield, Massachusetts where he split time between his continuing musical activities and the life of a gentleman farmer.

As a composer, Loeffler was incredibly self-reliant, formulating his own aesthetic which merged German technical prowess with the rich harmonies of contemporary French music. His music was international in its scope, and, with the exception of a few works which integrate jazz elements, it does not appeal to an Americanist idiom as do works by Ives and later Copland. He also incorporated elements of Gregorian chant and, for a time, led a boys' choir in the performance of Gregorian chant. Loeffler possessed a deep interest in literature and, appropriately, was well-read. He drew from such literary inspirations as Virgil, St. Francis of Assisi, Yeats, Whitman, and Poe. He particularly enjoyed French literature, including the symbolists Maurice Maeterlinck and Paul Verlaine, powerful literary inspirations for Debussy as well. His Two Rhapsodies react to French poetry by the lesser-known Maurice Rollinat, an admirer of Charles

Baudelaire. Loeffler's compositional output includes operas, orchestral works, chamber music, choral works, and songs. During his lifetime, his compositions were highly-respected in the United States and also back in Europe, receiving performances in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, London, Paris, and Berlin. His music fell into obscurity soon after his death, however, and only now is it regaining interest.

Loeffler's Rhapsodies were composed in 1901. Three years earlier, he had composed three songs for voice, clarinet, viola, and piano after poetry by Rollinat, but, Loeffler put these songs away when the intended clarinetist, Léon Pourtau, a colleague in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, died suddenly. Loeffler reworked the first two songs into the Rhapsodies, and the remaining song became an orchestral tone poem. The First Rhapsody is titled *L'Étang* (*The Pool*) and it paints macabre images of a mysterious body of water; it is dedicated to the memory of Pourtau. The English translation of its poem by Rollinat describes a lonely pool "full of old fish, blind-stricken long ago," identified "only by the croakings of consumptive frogs." In the last stanza, the "moon, piercing at this very moment," looks into the pond as if to see her reflection. These strange, vivid images are evoked by the peculiar music, with the mood brightening up in the second half as the moon peers through the clouds. The Second Rhapsody, called *La Cornemuse* (*The Bagpipe*), is dedicated to Georges Longy, the oboist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It is imbued with the same mystery as *The Pool*, but is perhaps a little more hopeful in parts. Rollinat's poem again paints a desolate image: it opens, "His bagpipe groaned in the woods as the wind […] wept." The piper is dead, it continues, though the speaker claims to still hear the groan of his bagpipe. Open fifths and octaves contribute to a drone sound, while the oboe often substitutes for the bagpipe of the title. In both Rhapsodies, quotations from the *Dies irae* chant contribute to the morbid imagery.

August Klughardt

Our second piece, *Schilflieder* (*Songs of the Reeds*), Op. 28, also has literary inspirations, drawing on poems by Nikolaus Lenau. The composer **August Klughardt (1847-1902)** was part of the so-called New German School associated with Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner. Like them, he emphasized opera and programmatic music, but apparently was not ready to give up either absolute forms or chamber music: he wrote symphonies and concerti, genres relatively neglected by Liszt and Wagner. In his operas, he also attempted to blend the Wagnerian reforms—the large orchestra and use of *leitmotivs*—with the aria-recitative format that had structured opera from its beginning. Such attempts were met with varying success, but, at least within his lifetime, he was regarded as a distinguished composer. Aside from composition, he was known as a theatre conductor, holding various posts around Germany until finding more permanent employment in 1882 as court conductor in Dessau. He had met Liszt in 1869 while employed at Weimar and formed a friendship with him. This friendship brought him into contact with Wagner in 1873, and he was at Bayreuth three years later for the first production of the *Ring Cycle*. Klughardt staged his own *Ring Cycle* in Dessau in 1892 and 1893.

Klughardt composed his *Schilflieder* in 1872 and, upon its publication the following year, dedicated it to Liszt. It is scored for oboe, viola, and piano with the option that violin may be exchanged for oboe. Considering though that the poems by Lenau depict a pond encircled by reeds, it is mildly programmatic that the oboe, which utilizes two reeds to make its woody sound, would be the instrument of choice. The five pieces of *Schilflieder* correspond to five poems by Lenau which grow increasingly poignant in their imagery. The first piece, marked *Langsam, träumerisch* (*slow, dreamily*), paints the scene: the poem opens, "Over there the sun is setting, weary day sinks into sleep and the willows hang down low to the pond, so calm so deep." The piano plays slowly like ripples on water while the oboe introduces a sorrowful melody; only later does the viola enter as we learn the speaker has lost his lover. A storm erupts in the second piece as darkness descends. The tempo is described as *Leidenschaftlich erregt* (*passionately excited*), and certainly the frightful music captures this mood.

The third piece is marked *Zart, in ruhiger Bewegung* (*gentle, in a quiet movement*). The speaker describes wandering through forests, thinking of his beloved. He imagines: "I can hear the gentle music of your voice while your charming song is sinking into the pond without a trace." The music is nostalgic but also mournful. The fourth piece, marked *Feurig* (*fiery*), is again

tempestuous, and now his beloved's image appears in the pond. The fifth piece, *Sehr ruhig* (*very quiet*), witnesses the speaker and the world around him returned to calm. The speaker seems to come to terms with his beloved's absence. Like in the first of the Loeffler Rhapsodies, it is the moon who restores peace: "Motionless upon the pond lies the moonlight's gentle glow, weaving her pallid roses into the reeds' green wreath below."

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a graduate student pursuing his master's degree in musicology at the University of Louisville where, in April 2017, he was awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, Louisiana following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." From 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria, and since that time has remained concert annotator for presenters of classical music across Louisiana. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He recently shared this research in March 2018 at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meeting in Asheville, North Carolina. Also a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into compositions which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His compositions have been performed at the Sugarmill Music Festival and New Music on the Bayou.

Read additional program notes by Jackson at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.