

MERCER-McCOLLUM DUO

Lydia Mercer, viola. Ethan McCollum, piano.

Midwest Tour, June 2019

Our Repertoire

Hélène Fleury (1876-1957)

Fantaisie, Op. 18 for viola and piano

Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936)

Elégie in G minor, Op. 44 for viola and piano

Alexander Winkler (1865-1935)

Sonata in C minor, Op. 10 for viola and piano

I. Moderato

II. Allegro agitato

III. Variations sur un air breton



Hélène Fleury

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The **Mercer-McCollum Duo** is passionate about playing undiscovered, underplayed, and newly written gems of the viola-piano repertoire. This duo, including Lydia Byard Mercer, viola, and Ethan James McCollum, piano, is based in Louisville, Kentucky and shares with audiences original music written for their distinctive instrumentation. Formed in spring 2019 by these graduates of the University of Louisville, the Duo launches their first concert tour this June as they share their discoveries with audiences across Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and upstate New York. Their program features the music of three composers active at the turn of the twentieth century—Hélène Fleury, Alexander Glazunov, and Alexander Winkler—each of whose music is tied to the Romantic tradition. Rich in its harmonic vibrancy, the relatively unknown viola-piano music of these three composers reveals an unfairly neglected realm still open to rediscovery. This music also reveals the idiomatic potential of the viola, apart from the commonplace transcriptions of violin and cello repertoire. We hope you will enjoy these selections and, through your voluntary support of our efforts, help us to revive more of this underappreciated repertoire!

The career of **Hélène Fleury (1876-1957)** followed the pattern of so many female composers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: after tremendous successes in their youths, these women found themselves unable to pursue composition as a fulltime profession and their prodigious outputs quickly fell into neglect. More often than not, this occurred as the result of the male-dominated society and not some objective, artistic standard these women could not meet. Fleury, indeed, was the first woman awarded a prize in the *Prix de Rome* competition. The *Prix de Rome*, for the century-and-a-half from 1803 to 1968 in which it was awarded, was viewed as the highest honor available to a young French composer. It not only provided a moderate yearly income to its



Alexander Glazunov

recipient, it also allowed them to study in Rome for a period of two years; even more importantly, it signified official recognition of the young composer's achievements by the establishment of French music, the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. Only in 1903, however, was the award opened to women competitors. Fleury, who had been a student of Charles-Marie Widor at the Paris Conservatoire, participated this first year but without success. The next year, in 1904, she was given the *Deuxième Second Grand Prix*—a runner-up award without the monetary or travel benefits of the *Premier Grand Prix*. She competed again in 1905 but to no avail. In 1913, Lili Boulanger would, instead, become the first woman to receive the *Premier Grand Prix de Rome*.

The *Prix de Rome* years marked the height of Fleury's acclaim as a composer. She began composing and publishing in quantity in 1897, continuing on this trajectory until 1910. After this date, she published no additional works, instead becoming a piano teacher and eventually Professor of Harmony and Composition in Toulouse. She would marry Louis Roy, a scientist who would also teach in Toulouse. The Mercer-McCollum Duo performs Fleury's *Fantaisie*, Op. 18 for viola and piano which was composed in 1906 as an examination piece for viola students at the Paris Conservatoire. Annegret Fauser suggests that Gabriel Fauré, Director of the Conservatoire, might have offered Fleury this commission as a public show of support after political infighting among his faculty potentially cost her the 1905 *Prix de Rome*. The *Fantaisie* is dedicated to

Théophile Laforge who was Professor of Viola at the Conservatoire. The composition possesses the rich chromatic harmonies and metric flexibility of many French works written at the turn of the twentieth century. Its main theme undergoes several tempo changes and transformations of mood throughout the *Fantaisie*'s roughly ten-minute span. Though the viola is often the leading instrument, this does not mean that the piano does not also get its moments to shine. Overall, while this piece makes virtuosic demands on both its musicians, showmanship never precedes poetry.

The most celebrated Russian composer of his era, **Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936)** was the figure who finally reconciled the warring Russianist and Europeanist factions in his country's emerging concert music tradition. From Mily Balakirev and Alexander Borodin, he inherited the nationalistic traits of their idiom while from Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky he gained a polished, professional approach resembling that of western European composers. Balakirev was an important early mentor who recommended that Glazunov study with Rimsky-Korsakov: the latter commented that his student progressed, "not from day to day but from hour to hour." It was after Balakirev conducted the premiere of Glazunov's First Symphony in March 1882 that the young composer came to the attention of the wealthy timber merchant, Mitrofan Belyayev. Greatly impressed, Belyayev resolved to publish Glazunov's Symphony and established his own publishing house to do so—a move which, unfortunately, resulted in a lasting rift with Balakirev who desired Glazunov publish with another firm. In the years which followed, Belyayev remained a fierce advocate of Glazunov and new Russian music more generally, and around him formed a group of composers who would gather weekly and occasionally even collaborate on projects. Dubbed the "Belyayev Circle," this group included Glazunov, Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Scriabin, and many young Russian composers. Though their shared commitment to Russian music resembled Balakirev's own circle of the 1860s, the Belyayev group was committed to professionalism and academicism instead of the robust amateurism encouraged by Balakirev. Rimsky-Korsakov, who had also been active in the earlier group, dually noted this change of atmosphere.

By 1893 when Glazunov composed his *Elégie* in G minor, Op. 44 for viola and piano, he was at the height of his creative powers. He was working on his Fourth Symphony by the end of that year and, within a few years, would compose his masterful ballet, *Raymonda*. These works marked his new synthesis of Russianist and Europeanist tendencies as opposed to his more characteristically Russian works of the preceding decade. In 1899, he would

be appointed professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and become this prestigious institution's director in 1905. His *Elégie* was dedicated to his friend, the Danish violinist and violist Franz Hildebrand, who probably gave its premiere at one of the weekly gatherings of the Belyayev Circle. It was then published by Belyayev in 1894. Belyayev was an amateur violist himself and his enthusiasm for viola music likely encouraged the composers of his circle to write more solo music for viola than was otherwise common at the turn of the twentieth century. It is suspected that Glazunov's *Elégie* memorializes either Tchaikovsky or Anton Rubinstein, major figures in Russian music who had each died within the few years before the *Elégie*'s composition. This short piece is in three sections, two in G minor which frame an E-flat major interior. The tempo is marked *Allegretto* and the meter is compound triple. After several piano flourishes, the viola introduces the tender melody. Though the mood is often dejected, there are many moments which are more uplifted; these perhaps reflect on the accomplishments made by the individual who has passed on rather than the absence left by their passing.

Our program concludes with the Sonata in C minor, Op. 10 for viola and piano by **Alexander Winkler (1865-1935)**, a colleague and almost exact contemporary to Glazunov. Winkler was born in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov which was at the time part of the Russian Empire; moreover, Kharkov was then a bustling center for the Russian coal industry. Winkler initially pursued law studies in Kharkov before beginning his musical studies there; he would complete his musical studies in Paris and Vienna. Though Winkler returned to Kharkov to teach piano, by 1896 he had been recruited to teach at the St. Petersburg Conservatory where he would remain until 1924. In St. Petersburg, he joined the publishing house of Mitrofan Belyayev and co-authored a string quartet with other members of the Belyayev Circle. This was the *Variations on a Russian Folk Song* of 1898 for which Rimsky-Korsakov wrote the theme and successive variations were composed by Glazunov, Scriabin, and other members of the Belyayev group; Winkler composed the ninth variation, a fugato. In addition to original compositions numbering thirty-one published works, Winkler also arranged Glazunov's Eighth Symphony and his ballet *Raymonda* for piano four-hands alongside similar transcriptions of other composers' works. Despite his own accomplishments, however, Winkler is best-remembered as a piano instructor to Sergei Prokofiev, who studied with him at the Conservatory until 1909. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the ensuing Civil War, Winkler emigrated to Besançon, a city in eastern France near the Swiss border, where he would direct their conservatory from 1925 until his death ten years later.

Winkler composed his Sonata, Op. 10 in 1902 and published it with Belyayev that same year. Winkler simultaneously brought-out a version for violin and piano. The Sonata is in three movements, each set in C minor. The first is marked *Moderato* and is in compound triple meter, although its first theme often accents weak beats and the second theme switches to simple triple. Throughout the movement, the music is of a somber, elegiac character which suits well the darker timbre of the viola as compared to the violin. The viola line is also surprisingly sparse, often giving the piano time to respond as if in dialogue. On some occasions, however, the viola becomes reluctant to speak at all, so that the piano must complete thoughts which the viola has left unspeakable. The second movement, a fiery scherzo in simple triple meter, is marked *Allegro agitato*. It features quick ascending and descending passages which contribute to the sense of dismay. A brief transition played by the solo viola ushers in the trio section which is now in the relative key of E-flat major. The piano at first has the melody in the trio section, followed by the return of the viola for music which is more contemplative like the first movement. The third movement is titled *Variations sur un air breton*, implying that its theme is a folksong from Brittany—a region in western France which is Celtic in heritage. This melody, played by the viola, is subdued and lonesome with a folk-like drone in the piano. After its presentation at *Andante*, seven variations in different moods and tempos follow; a coda finally closes the Sonata.

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2019 Midwest Tour Stops

June 2: First Unitarian, Louisville, KY
 June 7: Loretto Motherhouse, Nerinx, KY
 June 7: Richland Place, Nashville, TN
 June 10: Stephen Foster Music Camp, EKU, Richmond, KY
 June 12: St. Paul United, Cleveland, OH
 June 15: First Baptist, Mayville, NY
 June 21: Stephen Foster Music Camp, EKU, Richmond, KY

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Artists and Scholar Bios

Lydia Byard Mercer became a U.S. national Scottish fiddle champion at 16 years old. Her love of Scottish folk music led her to record her solo album of original and traditional Scottish music, entitled “A Peculiar Sense of Humor.” She has gone on to create an active performing and teaching career as a violinist, violist, and fiddler. Lydia has been a featured performer at venues across the U.S. and Scotland, including the Strathspe Away Festive in Kingussie, Scotland, the Edinboro Highland Games, the Ohio Scottish games, the Joe Luckey recital series, as a finalist in the Neil Gow International Tune Writing Competition, and as a soloist with the Greenville Symphony. Along with her national title, other honors include the Allegheny Mountain Fiddling Champion, Baldwin Wallace University Concerto competition winner, and Ohio Scottish Games Fiddle Champion. Lydia was also a member of the winning quartet in the Macauley chamber music competition. She holds a BM in violin performance from Baldwin Wallace University and an MM in viola performance from the University of Louisville. Teaching has been and continues to be an integral and meaningful part of Lydia’s life. She has maintained a private studio of violin, viola, and fiddle students for over ten years, and has taught clinics and masterclasses in group settings including the Bonnie Loch Fiddle Clinic in Lakewood, NY and the Heart of the Arts Folk Festival in Titusville, PA, and has been a guest lecturer on the Scottish fiddle at Edinboro University. Find her online at www.lydiamercer.com.

Ethan James McCollum is a pianist and choral conductor based in Louisville, Kentucky. A sought-after collaborative pianist around the city, he regularly plays with instrumentalists, singers, choirs, and orchestras. He also performs chamber music regularly, with an emphasis on lesser-known works and composers. A supporter of contemporary music, he enjoys performing works by living composers, and even had a composition dedicated to him by Chinese composer and pianist Chen Yihan. Ethan has received prizes in the Macauley chamber music competition as a part of a quartet, as well as prizes in solo piano competitions including the Nathaniel Patch competition, Eastern Kentucky Piano Competition, and at the Kentucky Music Teacher's Association. He has been a pianist for the Kentucky Music Educator's Association's high school All-State choir and orchestra, and Intercollegiate orchestra. Ethan is also a ballet class pianist, accompanying technique classes and summer intensives at the Louisville Ballet School and Youth Performing Arts School. He received both his bachelor's degree in piano performance and master's degree in choral conducting at the University of Louisville. His principal piano teachers were Dror Biran, Gregory Partain, Laurie Choi, and Brenda Stratman. He also had lessons and master classes with many renowned pianists



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including Karen Shaw, Alessio Bax, Elisabeth Pridonoff, Craig Nies, Donna Lee, and many more. His choral conductor teachers were Kent Hatteberg, Wonjoo Ahn, and Bomi Lee.

Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his MM in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 upon the completion of his thesis, “Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho.” He has shared this pioneering research through presentations given at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter’s annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. During his studies in Louisville, he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight D. Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world’s leading contemporary composers. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars’ College in Natchitoches, LA. Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. He has remained a concert annotator and organizer, co-directing the annual Sugarmill Music Festival. The scholarly writings he has produced for this festival have even attracted the attention of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Aside from his studies, he is a composer, choral singer, and award-winning nature photographer. Read additional program notes by Jackson at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.