

Ernest Bloch: *Three Nocturnes for Piano Trio* (1924)

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) lives on as one of the most celebrated American composers of the twentieth century, with an indelible impact on music pedagogy across the country. Born in Geneva, he spent his early years in Belgium – where he studied violin under the esteemed Eugène Ysayë. In 1917, he moved to the United States to teach at the Mannes School of Music, and in 1920 he was named the Music Director of the Cleveland Institute of Music. He composed his *Three Nocturnes for Piano Trio* in 1924, shortly before he moved to California to teach at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Though he left SFCM in the 1930s, he returned to the other side of the San Francisco Bay to lecture at UC Berkeley in 1941. He would teach at Berkeley until he retired in 1952, at which point he was named an honorary *Professor Emeritus*, even though he had never held a full-time faculty position at Berkeley. To this day, the music department of UC Berkeley hosts visiting professors under the Bloch Lectureship each year.

Bloch's compositions are known for showcasing his Jewish heritage, both explicitly (in the title) and implicitly (in the melodies and harmonies). Yet this was not his sole inspiration, and he was a master at blending together musical pitches – just as a visual artist would mix their paints – in order to depict a scene through sound. Though his *Three Nocturnes* have no program accompanying them, let the music transport your imagination to a world where sound might invoke image.

The first of the *Three Nocturnes for Piano Trio* begins with a dark and expressive *Andante*. A lonely piano outlines the movement's harmonic trajectory with a four-note scale that reaches down to the piano's lowest octave, setting a dark and foreboding mood. The cello and violin enter, but only hesitatingly and with multiple false steps. Once they finally settle, they take advantage of the piano's low tessitura to sing out in their middle registers, which lends yet another sombre layer to the composition. If this were a painting, each pigment would be blended with earth tones and dark shades to mute their brightness. Bloch further heightens this effect by muting the strings. Both instruments move slowly out to their highest registers, and the violin remains on a high B while the cello drops back down to its open C string, resulting in an unsettling harmonic tension. The piano noodles around in its own stratosphere and then the piece begins in earnest, with lyrical interplay between the strings underpinned by the piano which pipes up in response to the conversation every so often.

The piano rolls along on undulating rhythms in the second movement, *Andante quieto*. Reminiscent of a *barcarolle*, a song evoking the movement of a small boat traveling across a calm river, it begins with the cellist singing a lullaby to their love on the water. As the waves gently rock by, the violinist catches the boat and joins in the sweet rhapsody, after which all three instruments break into song. The pianist maintains an ostinato rhythm nearly throughout the movement, but the moments where the rolling motion stops allow the music to drift off in the air, the sighs of lovers carried away on a light breeze.

The final nocturne, *Tempestoso*, is nothing if not a dance party. The rhythmic drive of the cellist is not unlike a machine's motor, forever leading onward. Despite the joy one might normally feel in dance, this is not a happy dance, but rather one full of nervousness – perhaps a dance competition in which each dancer is trying to outdo the others. After every competitor shows off their chops, the finale is but an uneasy truce, begging the question – who is the victor?

Gaspar Cassadó: *Piano Trio in C Major* (1926)

Gaspar Cassadó i Moreu (1897-1966) was a Catalan composer and cellist active in both roles throughout his life. He was a protégé of the legendary Pau Casals, though the two had a falling out after World War II. Cassadó spent most of his life as a touring cellist, performing throughout Europe and the United States for over 30 years with the singer and pianist Giulietta Gorigiani. Fiercely proud of his heritage, his compositions hold a distinctly Iberian flair, and a number are even based on stories from Catalan folklore. Though he composed many works under his own name, he also participated in the tradition of musical hoaxes, wherein composers would falsely attribute their works to slightly lesser-known composers of the past, claiming that they had stumbled upon the manuscript and had done editorial work to present them to the public. The most well-known example of Cassadó's misattributions is probably his *Toccata* (1925), which he claimed was originally composed by Girolamo Frescobaldi, a seventeenth century Baroque composer and keyboardist.

His *Piano Trio in C Major* was composed in 1926, after a stint in Paris following World War I. When in Paris, Cassadó studied with Ravel and de Falla, and befriended the composer Alfredo Casella through whom many of his professional relationships were formed. Alongside Albéniz and Turina, Cassadó wrote melodies highly reminiscent of Spanish folk music which fed into the growing sentiments of Spanish nationalism outside of the Iberian Peninsula.

The first movement of the *Piano Trio* begins *Allegro risoluto*, pushing the cellist to the extremes of virtuosity as it doubles the violin's melody, spanning the stretch of its range. The angular and dramatic opening chords evoke the movements of Spanish dances, and this resonance stretches across the entirety of the work. After the fiery introduction, we venture into the realm of *Allegro ma non troppo*, in staid contrast to the drama that immediately preceded it. Cassadó maintains a large amount of parallel voice leading between the two strings, which continually harkens back to the music of Spain. The ending returns to the bombast of the opening, with the strings imitating the full-throated lyricism of a Spanish tenor.

The second movement, *Tempo moderato e pesante*, is something of a rhapsodic scherzo. Filled with portamenti galore, the Iberian flair continues into this movement, and all three instruments show off their technical prowess one after the other. In this movement, the piano gains a greater degree of independence from the strings than in the first movement and engages in a more involved conversation with them. Solo lines are passed from one instrument to the next, giving each a chance to shine. The *Allegro giusto* is a sudden turn to lyricism, and here a duet texture prevails. As the violin begins its rhapsody, the cello provides a *flautando* ostinato backing, and the two switch places to give the cello a moment of glory. The piano weaves in and out with short statements throughout this section but remains largely tacet.

The final movement is an operatic tour de force, even being marked *Recitativo. Moderato ed appassionato – Rondo – Allegro vivo*. An opening recitative in the strings is followed by a dance in triple meter, with the piano providing a constant ostinato to back it up. Beginning with the violin, all three instruments trade spots in the limelight, but the triple rhythm drives through it all. Cassadó only breaks from his strict meter at the very end, leading up to a violent coda in which all reason is left by the wayside.

Maurice Ravel: *Trio in A Minor* (1914)

An insistence on cultural heritage has been a thread tying together all the works presented in this concert, and Ravel's *Trio in A Minor* is no exception to this. Laying claim to Basque heritage through his mother, Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) often wove elements of Basque folklore into the fabric of his compositions. Although he himself did not appreciate the label, Ravel has often been described as the poster child of French impressionism. Labels aside, Ravel layers musical sounds in such a way that analogies with the visual arts are difficult to avoid.

Ravel's style departed so dramatically from the old guard of the Conservatoire de Paris in the late nineteenth century that he found little success there. In fact, he was kicked out in 1895 for being too average of a student! He was readmitted in 1897 to study under the wing of Gabriel Fauré, who saw in him great potential. Indeed, like Stravinsky, Ravel's compositional style would not be fully appreciated until after World War I and a profound change in Parisian tastes. His *Trio in A Minor* was composed right around the outbreak of the war, and he dedicated it to his counterpoint teacher, André Gedalgé. The work was première'd by Gabriel Willaume on violin, Louis Feuillard on cello, and Alfredo Casella on piano (the very same Casella who was good friends with Cassadó).

The *Trio* is divided into four movements, beginning with a *Modéré* introductory movement. This piece is in stark contrast to the overtly Spanish flair of Cassadó's *Piano Trio* or the Jewish-influenced themes of Bloch's *Nocturnes*. Continuing the painting analogy here with Ravel, it's perhaps more useful to think of each musical influence as a color, which through blending loses a great deal of its original identity. Yet we do not think any less of it, in fact it is more nuanced on account of being blended with other colors. The second movement has a curious label – *Pantoum: Assez vif*. Based on a Malay poetic form (*pantun berkait*), in which quatrains of verse are interwoven together by repetition of lines. Lines two and four of one stanza are repeated as lines one and three of the following, in a continuous pattern until the final stanza, which sometimes hearkens back to the very first stanza's first and third lines. Though such overt formal structure is not readily apparent in Ravel's work here, the driving principle is not unlike a theme and variations, which continually takes up a new theme and then hashes out a variation in a cyclical manner. Thus, each musical idea dovetails into the next.

In the third movement, Ravel looks back to the dances of the Baroque era and labels it *Passacaille: Très large*. A *passacaille* (a.k.a. *chaconne*) is a form of theme and variations, in which an initial bassline is repeated throughout the piece, and melodic variations unwind over the top of it. Another key element of the *passacaille* is its walking tempo – a dance which bespeaks a passage through space. In Ravel's *Trio*, the bassline is first introduced by the pianist, and the cellist enters soon after with the first theme over the bassline. The violinist adds onto the texture and the pianist then moves on to the next variation. After building up one by one, it is only halfway through the movement that the full ensemble plays together in earnest. The *Finale* (marked *Animé*) is a lively showstopper with which to end such an exciting concert. Beginning with a controlled and unified texture between the three instruments, the finale quickly expands out to the drama of Cassadó's work, filling the hall with the resonant sonorities for which Maurice Ravel, the master orchestrator, was known.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Maurice Ravel in 1912

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Gaspar Cassadó i Moreu

Seattle Chamber Music Society



Ernest Bloch in 1917

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