NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2022

Ravel's *Boléro*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Maurice Ravel Suite from *Ma mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*)

Ravel had roots in the Basque country in the southwest of France, and Basque culture influenced many of his works. In *Ma mère l'Oye*, he favored not Spain but a more universal land of make-believe inspired by the beloved tales of 17th- and 18th-century French authors. Ravel's original *Mother Goose* Suite of five pieces was a four-hand piano duo for the children of close friends. He eventually orchestrated it and expanded the music into a ballet score. Each movement captures the imaginary fantasy of such familiar tales as those of Tom Thumb, Beauty and the Beast and Sleeping Beauty.

Carl Nielsen Concerto for Flute and Orchestra

Nielsen was the central figure in Danish music after the Romantic era. He wrote especially well for woodwinds and originally intended to write a concerto for each instrument in a standard woodwind quintet. He only completed two: a clarinet concerto and the flute concerto Bart Feller plays this weekend. Consisting of two movements, the piece is noteworthy for its quirky scoring, which includes a prominent cameo role for bass trombone. Nielsen is skilled at preserving the flute's front-and-center role without compromising the importance of his orchestra.

Camille Saint-Saëns Cello Concerto No. 1 in A Minor, Op. 33

Most 19th-century French composers were focused on opera, often to the exclusion of instrumental music. Saint-Saëns was unusual in that he cultivated opera, symphony, concerto and chamber music with equal success. His First Cello Concerto is romantic in spirit, but classical in construction. Even though the three movements are connected, they are clearly delineated and conform to the traditional layout of fast-slow-fast. The phrasing is balanced and straightforward, adding to its classical aspect; however, French operatic culture is evident in Saint-Saëns' extravagant themes. The cello part is extremely vocal throughout. Although the soloist plays quite high in its register in certain places, by and large the register is very sympathetic for the

instrument, and the concerto is exceptionally well written.

Maurice Ravel *Boléro*

Snare drums provide the pulse for this sultry Spanish dance. Ravel's slow, steady crescendo builds to a thrilling climax. His masterly tour through the orchestral ensemble gives virtually every melodic instrument an opportunity to shed some new light on the theme. He escalates both dynamic level and tension while sustaining a steady pulse and a virtually static harmonic rhythm. The success of his "exercise" has given Western music one of its most treasured orchestral works.

Maurice Ravel: Suite from *Ma mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*)

Maurice Ravel

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrenées, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris, France

Composed: 1908–10 for piano four-hands; 1911 for orchestral version

World Premiere: January 29, 1912, at the Théâtre des Arts in Paris.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: Full ballet: Summer 1968. Henry Lewis conducted. Suite: 1999–2000 season. Phillippe Entremont conducted.

Duration: 16 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes (both doubling piccolo), two oboes (both doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons (both doubling contrabassoon), two horns, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, xylophone, glockenspiel, celeste, harp and strings.

Maurice Ravel loved children and had a gift for storytelling. When the pianist Riccardo Viñes introduced him to Cipa and Ida Godebski in 1904, the friendship developed in large part because of the two Godebski children, Jean and Mimie. By 1908, Ravel had become a frequent visitor at La Grangette, the family's country home in Valvins, near Fontainebleau. There he spent long hours with Jean and Mimie, reading to them from classic 17th- and 18th-century French fairy tales by Charles Perrault, Marie-Catherine Comtesse d'Aulnoy and Marie LePrince de Beaumont.

Elegant illustrations in the fairy tale books and the children's rapt attention prompted Ravel to compose a

suite for one piano, four hands between 1908 and 1910. He modified his demanding keyboard style to accommodate Jean and Mimie's technical ability. The simpler approach is curiously apt for the tales. In 1911 he orchestrated the suite, adding a prelude and several interludes for adaptation into a ballet. The orchestral suite consists of the same five movements as the original piano work.

Ravel once told an interviewer that he wanted to bring to life "the poetry of childhood" in these miniatures. In the opening movement, sober courtiers dance their sedate pavane while gazing upon the slumbering princess, who has pricked herself with an enchanted needle. "Petit poucet" is Tom Thumb. Ravel's music suggests the boy wandering aimlessly, trying to locate the trail of breadcrumbs that will lead him home. Chirping birds, who have eaten the crumbs, mock him cruelly.

"Laideronette," one of Mme d'Aulnoy's tales, is a child's fantasy in the bath. The air fills with the tinkle of pentatonic bells, Renaissance lutes, and theorbos. "Beauty and the Beast" needs little introduction in our culture. The animated video found its way into millions of American homes in the mid-1990s. Ravel's movement contrasts the grace of Beauty's waltz with the low growling of the enchanted prince imprisoned within the Beast. The suite concludes with the awakening of the fairy garden, a musical breaking of the spell whose peaceful, melodious strains wreak their own sorcery.

Carl Nielsen: Concerto for Flute and Orchestra, FS 119

Carl Nielsen
Born: June 9, 1865, in Nørre-Lyndelse, Denmark
Died: October 3, 1931, in Copenhagen, Denmark
Composed: 1926
World Premiere: October 21, 1926
New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1998–99 season. Cindy Soo-Yun Kim was the soloist; Lawrence Leighton Smith conducted.
Duration: 19 minutes
Instrumentation: two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, bass trombone, timpani, solo flute and strings.

Nielsen was the central figure in Danish music after the Romantic era, yet his music still makes infrequent appearances on American concert programs. As a compositional pioneer and a major symphonist, Nielsen influenced other composers throughout Scandinavia and on the European continent. His chamber music is widely admired, particularly the works for wind instruments; so too are his popular songs. Among his catalogue of compositions are three solo concertos—for violin, flute and clarinet—that are regarded to be among the finest of the 20th century.

During his childhood, Nielsen studied violin, then later cornet, signal horn and alto trombone. His proficiency on brass secured him part-time employment in a military orchestra as a teenager, which in turn fostered his lifelong love of wind instruments. He learned piano on his own, before focusing on violin at the Copenhagen Conservatory. Travels to Germany, Paris and Italy broadened his education and provided exposure to other cultural currents.

A devoted student of Mozart's works, Nielsen emulated classical models in his early compositions. By the turn of the 20th century he had begun to evolve a more personal style that is difficult to categorize. Nielsen never abandoned tonality, but he expanded it, sometimes with modal scales and other times with an austere chromaticism that defined a tonal center with non-traditional harmony. He enjoyed the technical demands of imitative counterpoint and favored striking rhythmic motifs and patterns that often lend definition to his music.

Woodwind and brass instruments hold a special place in Nielsen's instrumental works. In the early 1920s, he began a series of compositions that explored the particular capabilities of the wind family. The first was his Woodwind Quintet, Op. 43 (1922), written for the Copenhagen Wind Quintet. His original plan was to compose a concerto for each of that ensemble's members. Two of those concertos came to fruition: the flute concerto on this weekend's program (1926) and the clarinet concerto (1928), which proved to be his last major orchestral work.

He wrote the flute concerto for Holger Gilbert Jesperson, the Copenhagen Quintet's new flutist. Jesperson had fastidious manners and a predilection for French music. Nielsen is said to have crafted the concerto to reflect the personality of his dedicatee. Comprising two movements, the piece is noteworthy for its quirky scoring,

which includes a prominent cameo role for bass trombone. It engages in a series of odd duets with the soloist, sometimes humorous, elsewhere wistful, perhaps even sad.

Neither movement is particularly fast *or* slow (though there is an Adagio segment for flute and strings in the second movement), which enhances the relaxed character of Nielsen's writing. Much of the concerto feels like chamber music, the result of light instrumentation and the flute's dialogues with the bass trombone and other woodwinds.

The concerto is delicately scored, often pairing the flute in dialogue with other principals. On the rare occasions that Nielsen calls for full orchestra, the flute recedes—often to re-emerge in an unlikely conversation with bass trombone. Cadenzas occur twice in the first movement: one brief one, then a major solo foray, with timpani in the background, joined by clarinet in imitative conversation and bassoon in a supporting role. The second movement introduces other duets and shifts tempo a couple of times. Nielsen is skillful in preserving his soloist's front-and-center role without compromising the importance of his orchestra. It is masterful writing.

IN THE SOLOIST'S WORDS

Program Annotator Laurie Shulman asked Principal Flute Bart Feller to weigh in on the Nielsen Flute Concerto, which he performs with the New Jersey Symphony in early March. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Laurie Shulman: Has the Nielsen been in your repertoire for a long time?
Bart Feller: I learned it at a young age, maybe 15. I had a wonderful flute teacher, Alex Ogle, who thought it would be a good fit for me. I'm sure there was plenty about it I wasn't ready for, but the upside is that the Nielsen concerto has been in my musical "bloodstream" for a very long time!

LS: Nielsen isn't exactly a household name among the famous composers. Why is this concerto significant in the concerted flute literature?
BF: It ranks among the finest of the 20th-century flute concertos; certainly, one of the most musically nourishing and substantial.

LS: What is Nielsen's musical language like? For example, many of his contemporaries in the 1920s incorporated elements of jazz into their compositions. Did he?
BF: I hear wonderful rhythmic energy and great syncopations, but not necessarily jazz. The solo part is challenging to play, but Nielsen does a great job of showcasing so much of what the flute does well: the long, flowing melodies and the brilliant, sometimes biting, technical passages.

LS: Many elements of the concerto's structure are classical, yet he limits himself to two movements rather than three. Thoughts?
BF: I love the fact that it's two movements. I feel like he says with the concerto everything he set out to say. Plus, there's so much variety within the movements, many different moods and tempi within each movement, including a set of variations in the second movement.

LS: What's your thinking on the two cadenzas in the first movement, particularly the longer second one with the timpani pedal point, then the duo with clarinet?
BF: I love that his cadenzas aren't merely displays of virtuosity; they represent an emotional journey. When you leave the cadenzas, you're in a very different place and altered mood from where you started.

LS: The flute's interaction with the bass trombone is very witty, particularly in the second movement. Is it also fun?
BF: So fun to play! And they say that the flutist he was writing for particularly disliked the bass trombone, so it's also an inside joke!

LS: Nielsen provides other opportunities for duets with your fellow principals. Are those also fun?
BF: Absolutely! It's such a delight that clarinet, bassoon, timpani and bass trombone all get such star turns in the concerto. He pairs them with the flute in the most colorful way. And to play those duo passages with my orchestral colleagues is a very special, satisfying experience.

LS: Most of the audience will not be familiar with this piece. What do you want them to take away from your performance, and from hearing this concerto?

BF: I hope they'll take away appreciation and delight at Nielsen's great creativity and his unique compositional voice.

Camille Saint-Saëns: Concerto No. 1 in A Minor for Violoncello and Orchestra, Op. 33

Camille Saint-Saëns

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Composed: November 1872

World Premiere: January 19, 1873, in Paris.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1927–28 season. Pablo Casals was the soloist; Philip James conducted.

Duration: 19 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns, and trumpets in pairs; timpani, solo cello and strings.

For most of the 19th century, France was Europe's musical capital, and the highest temple of music was the Paris Opéra. Composers from all over Europe sought to have their operas produced in Paris, and French composers looked upon opera as the ultimate accomplishment. Not surprisingly, such an environment left instrumental music somewhat shortchanged in France. The most notable exception to that rule is Camille Saint-Saëns, who achieved brilliant success in both opera and instrumental music. He was France's greatest champion of the concerto form, and the only Frenchman to excel in the genre during the romantic era.

Saint-Saëns composed 10 solo concertos plus many other concerted works, the most famous of which are the Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso (1863) and *Havanaise* (1887), both for violin and orchestra. Of the concertos, two of those for piano, one for violin and the cello concerto on this program have secured a permanent place in the literature. The First Cello Concerto is a compressed, tightly organized work that has it all: a dramatic and immediate main theme, wide emotional range and persuasive writing for both soloist and orchestra. Although the piece is played without pause, it divides into three easily discernible sections that correspond to the traditional fast-slow-fast order of a three-movement concerto. In a way, it is an oversized sonata structure, whose thematic connections among movements link it to the cyclic works of Franz Liszt (this concerto actually precedes the cyclic music of César Franck).

Cellists have always loved this concerto because it emphasizes the lyrical aspects of their instrument. Also, Saint-Saëns achieves an admirable balance between soloist and orchestra through his inherent skill and his limitation of the accompanying ensemble to double winds and trumpets; he forgoes trombones and tuba altogether. As in his other more successful concertos, he brings in the soloist immediately with a multidirectional theme that is ablaze with triplets and explores the cello's wide range. The second theme, true to the principles of classical contrast, is Schumannesque: rhapsodic, yearning. A contrasting middle section that functions as a slow movement uses muted strings in an elegant minuet. Although the soloist declaims a sustained melody, it is really the accompanist here to the larger ensemble. There is no question about who is in charge in the final section, however, which is the most virtuosic part of the concerto. Throughout, Saint-Saëns makes excellent use of the cello's wide range and avoids orchestral tuttis except as transitions between sections. The concerto is well-paced and convincing, making its popularity easy to understand.

IN THE SOLOIST'S WORDS

New Jersey Symphony Principal Cello Jonathan Spitz is a big fan of the Saint-Saëns First Cello Concerto, a piece he first learned when he was 14. He still enjoys playing it—and teaching it to his own advanced students. "It's a demanding piece, for sure, but accessible to gifted young cellists," he explains. "A talented student can sound really good with this piece. It doesn't require the power of the Dvořák Cello Concerto, nor the depth of the Elgar Concerto. And it certainly isn't the knuckle-buster like the First Shostakovich Concerto!"

Spitz is drawn to the piece because of its marriage of neoclassical and romantic traits. "Because of its classicism, the cello's role in the Saint-Saëns is like the piano in Mozart's mature piano concerti," he says. "Both are filled with sentiment, but its delicate and gentle, not overpowering. There are other classical elements, too. I hear the central movement as Saint-Saëns's take on a classical era minuet. It's as if he's channeling Haydn in that section."

Harmonically, he allows that the concerto is firmly entrenched in 19th-century romanticism. "His harmonic language is not drastic. He's drawing on the vocabulary of Mendelssohn and Schubert. There's no hint of Wagner's extended chromaticism, but he does use cyclic elements and some thematic transformation, which connects him to his contemporary César Franck."

And he loves that the concerto is so idiomatic for his instrument. “The solo part lies exceptionally well in the hand, and he makes the cello sound great! Yet his writing is always polished, with the clarity and elegance of his other music.”

Spitz also admires the structure, which connects the three movements without pause. “I love how composers can work with sonata-concerto form,” he says. “He is very skilled in writing transitions that are organic and natural-sounding, to move between sections that are vastly different in character. The orchestra always prepares what the cello will do next. Saint-Saëns uses chromaticism to facilitate modulations between sections. It’s all exceptionally well-integrated and doesn’t interfere with opportunities to display all the technical tricks the cello can do.”

He points out a remarkable segment in the finale that originates in the cello’s lowermost register, then ascends to the highest possible harmonic. “I find that very unusual and operatic. He treats the cello vocally in the slow movement as well—its initial entrance is almost like a descant.”

Spitz finds the dazzling perpetual motion of the finale challenging, but fun to practice. “It’s like he’s saying: ‘Look what the cello can do!’ And then—after most of the piece being in darker keys, he ends in A major. After all the drama, he gives us a warm, lighthearted, happy ending!”

Maurice Ravel: *Boléro*

Maurice Ravel

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrenées, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris, France

Composed: 1928

World Premiere: November 22, 1928, in Paris.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1970–71 season. Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 13 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes (second doubling oboe d’amore), English horn, clarinet in E-flat, two clarinets in B-flat, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, high D trumpet, three

trumpets in C, three trombones, tuba; sopranino, soprano, and tenor saxophones; timpani, two snare drums, cymbals, tam-tam, celeste, harp and strings.

The Polish-born composer Alexandre Tansman once told musicologist Roger Nichols: "*Boléro* was first performed as a ballet by Ida Rubinstein, commissioned by her, and it was not a musical success. And then Toscanini came with the New York Philharmonic and played it much faster. And Ravel was not pleased at all. We were in the same box and he wouldn't stand up when Toscanini tried to get him to take a bow. Then he went backstage and told Toscanini, 'It's too fast,' and Toscanini said, 'It's the only way to save the work.'"

Neither Ravel nor Toscanini could possibly have foreseen the enormous popularity that *Boléro* would achieve. Even before Blake Edwards's film *10* (1979) assured it a permanent place in every film soundtrack collection, *Boléro* was one of the most frequently performed compositions in the concert hall, readily recognized by non-musicians. Something about its insistent, understated (and deceptively simple) rhythm and magnificent, controlled crescendo to the ultimate orchestra climax has captured audience imaginations for nearly nine decades. With *Boléro*, Ravel secured an enviable spot in the permanent repertoire.

"17 minutes of orchestra without any music"

Ironically, Ravel had very mixed feelings about the work, dismissing it as a "crescendo on a commonplace melody in the genre of Padilla; *Boléro*: seventeen minutes of orchestra without any music." He told Michel Calvocoressi that it was an experiment: "Orchestral tissue without music. . . .There are no contrasts, and there is practically no invention save the plan and the manner of execution. The themes are altogether impersonal, folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind, and the orchestral writing is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity."

Was it embarrassment in the face of such enormous success that caused him to be so self-disparaging?

Ballet with Spanish roots

Ravel began work on *Boléro* upon returning from a four-month tour in the United States and Canada early in 1928. Prior to his departure he had agreed to compose a ballet for his friend Ida Rubinstein, a former dancer with Diaghilev's *Ballets russes* who had formed her own troupe. Her initial suggestion was an orchestration of pieces from Albéniz's *Ibéria*. After discarding that idea, Ravel next thought to arrange one of his own pieces.

Eventually he began work on an entirely new composition, called *Fandango*. Shortly afterward, he altered the title to *Boléro*, completing the score in a matter of months. The ballet was premiered in November 1928.

For most audience members, the music of Ravel's *Boléro* is so familiar as to not require comment. What may enhance the experience is concentration on the intricacy of the melody, whose rhythmic nuances and sinuous wanderings are vastly more complex than one initially thinks. (Try singing the melody on your own, without a recording in the background to help you along!) Also, Ravel's incomparable orchestration technique reaches a pinnacle in this work. His masterly tour through the orchestra gives virtually every melodic instrument its chance to shed some new light on the theme. He escalates both dynamic level and tension while sustaining a steady pulse and a virtually static harmonic rhythm. The success of his "exercise" has given Western music one of its most treasured orchestral works.

FANDANGO AND BOLERO

Both fandango and bolero are Spanish dances in triple time. Fandangos, which are first mentioned in Spanish literature at the beginning of the 18th century, are traditionally danced by a couple with accompaniment of castanets and guitar, often with singing as well; the balletic appeal of such a tradition is obvious. By contrast, the bolero is a more recent development, not appearing until the last quarter of the 18th century. Rarely moving at more than a moderate tempo (whereas the fandango can range from moderate to fast), boleros allowed for more intricate choreography incorporating some highly stylized traditional poses.