

PROGRAM NOTES

Quincy Symphony Orchestra, Quincy, Illinois
November 20, 2021 Dr. Paul Borg

Our concert this evening spans 125 years of musical creativity. We begin with a composition that was commissioned by the Quincy Symphony pre-pandemic, and now performed in our in-person concert season. Here is what Professor Taylor says:

Kepler is a short piece inspired by the intricate orbits of the Solar System, from Mercury flying around the sun, to the giants Jupiter and Saturn, and out to tiny Pluto and beyond. At first I wanted to call this piece “Orrery,” an 18th-century mechanical model of the planets’ orbits. It’s a beautiful, ornate piece of machinery, but many people don’t know the word, and it’s hard to pronounce.

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) discovered how our planets orbit the sun. While the inner planets whiz by (a year on Mercury lasts 88 days) the outer planets can take decades (Neptune’s year is 60,182 Earth days). The musical portrayal of different rates of speed has always fascinated me, and I hope you’ll hear these in the piece. Finally, “Kepler” is the name of the telescope that has been searching for planets around other suns. So maybe someday, this piece could also be inspired by some other solar system.

The 1920s, the central decade of our selections this evening, offer good examples of the variety of musical tastes after WWI and before the 1929 Depression.

The German composer Kurt Weill came of age during the Roaring Twenties, and he certainly absorbed the variety of music that flourished then. In 1928 he was invited by Bertolt Brecht to write the music for a dramatic work based upon the 18th-century ballad opera, *The Beggar’s Opera* by John Gay. It was conceived as a challenge to capitalism (think the partial cause of the depression) and was premiered in Berlin in August 1928. It intended to bridge the gap between popular theater works and the prestige of opera. Brecht once noted “You are about to hear an opera for beggars. Since this opera was intended to be as splendid as only beggars can imagine, and yet cheap enough for beggars to be able to watch, it is called the *Threepenny Opera*.”

The work was extremely popular, translated into several languages, and produced in film by the early 1930s. The role of Jenny became one of Lotte Lenya’s hallmark characters. Because of its ambiguity between opera and popular theater, between classical music genres and jazz/popular styles, and the many reinterpretations it has received over the past 90 years, it has many differing versions.

Weill's own instrumental suite *Little Three Penny Music for wind orchestra* (1929) incorporates many of the musical numbers created for the theatrical production, omitting the singers, of course. It was scored for wind instruments, piano, plucked strings, and percussion, much like the original scoring for the opera itself. The movements are framed by the opening Overture and the closing Finale. The two most familiar tunes are the *Ballade of Mack the Knife* and *Polly's Song*.

Gabriel Fauré composed incidental music for a London production of Maurice Maeterlinck's new play *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1898. Debussy later created an opera based upon the play. Fauré later created a suite of four works for orchestra performance. This is what we hear this evening.

The four movements consist of contrasting musical statements that either support the content of the play or supply the incidental music between the acts. Fauré's own reluctance to title the movements led the publishers to create names for "Fileuse" (the woman who spins) and "La morte de Mélisande" (the death of Mélisande.) The most familiar movement is the Sicilienne which uses the harp's supportive arpeggios to accompany a floating melody, repeatedly becoming ingrained in our memories. What we hear are the characteristic features of Fauré's compositional techniques—lyric, memorable melodies, accompanied by musical portrayal of images (like the spinning activity of the second piece, or the dirge of the last.) Often within the individual movements, moments of increasing intensity and loudness abate into a quiet repose—quite typical of Fauré's most famous compositions.

During and after WWI Igor Stravinsky resided in Switzerland or in Paris, where he had his amazing successes with his ballet scores in the early 1910s. He also composed several teaching pieces (Studies) for beginning piano students that incorporated a variety of musical elements from different countries. *Three Easy Pieces* dates from 1915; *Five Easy Pieces* from 1917. When he adapted these studies into *Suites 1 and 2 for Small Orchestra* in the early 1920s, he reordered the eight pieces and let each Suite have four movements.

The types of movements reflect both the "classical" and the "popular" traditions of the time. As Roman Vlad writes, "Stravinsky singles out . . . the more hackneyed and banal clichés of European music. Seen through the distorting mirror of his acid humour, these musical commonplaces have a tragi-comic drollery." Though the movements are all very brief, they accommodate many of Stravinsky's interpretations of what music should be as he began his neo-classical style period. For example, the duple meter of the marche is often interrupted by triple meter extensions. Persistent accompanimental figures in most of the movements allow both easy, simple melodic phrases and strange schizophrenic passages. Both suites end with an emphatic bang!