OPENING NIGHT: MOZART, RAVEL AND BEYOND
PROGRAM NOTES

By Jeff Wall

Augusta Holmès (1847-1903)
La Nuit et l'amour (*The Night and Love*)

Before hearing a note of her music, the first thing one notices about Augusta Holmès is the accent over the e in Holmes. It's not a gimmick though, like the umlaut in Motley Crüe—Holmès added it to the English surname inherited from her Irish father when she took French citizenship at the age of 25. One source says that she not only wanted to affirm her French nationality after having lived in Paris all her life, but to protest the English suppression of the Irish as well. In any event, it looks like English, is pronounced like French, and sounds vaguely like Spanish: Ohl-MEZ.

Considering her later obscurity, Holmès was astonishingly prominent in the Parisian artistic community from the 1860s to 1890s, praised by leading composers, idolized in poetry, depicted by painters, and pursued by all of them. She was a fine pianist and a respected singer, but composition was her profession, and it was not restricted to the songs and salon pieces expected of women: in addition to symphonic poems and cantatas she wrote four operas, the last of which was produced at the Paris Opéra. Her Triumphal Ode for the centenary of the French Revolution was performed on that occasion by some 1,200 choristers and musicians.

La Nuit et l'amour is excerpted from the 1888 'ode-symphony' *Ludus pro patria* (Patriotic Games), from the title of a painting by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Although a pupil of César Franck, Holmès was a disciple of Richard Wagner, similarly writing her own poetry for her vocal works. The narrator of the ode is silent during this symphonic interlude, but the associated text is translated as follows:

"Love! Inspiration of Fruitful Ecstasy! Love! Conqueror of conquerors who makes the virgin blush at the touch of your wing…Join together lips and hearts!"

Whew.

While Holmès employs some Wagnerian techniques in its construction, aficionados of 19th century French opera will feel quite at home with this brief 'symphonic interlude'. Magical wind chords introduce a warm and yearning melody in the cellos, increasing in ardour until the full orchestra declares its devotion—and blissfully subsides.

As they used to say, "Ain't Love grand?"

Rodrigo Prats (1909-1980)
Canta el Carretero Cuando Dan Las Seis (The Cart Driver's Song at 6)

Apart from the Malagueña by Ernesto Lecuona—a pops concert standard for decades—Cuban composers have rarely appeared on Canadian symphony orchestra programs, although Cuban artists have long been prominent in popular music. So—introducing Rodrigo Prats!—a violinist, conductor, composer and arranger active in the theatrical, radio and television institutions of mid-20th century Cuba. Zarzuela, the Spanish form of musical comedy, comprises a major portion of his output, in addition to light popular numbers like *Canta el Carretero Cuando Dan Las Seis*.

Whether the jolly cart driver is singing at the beginning or end of his day is unclear—the opening bird song suggests bright and early. However, the rambunctious conclusion suggests he may have big plans for the evening.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937):
Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G Major

It has been said that the concerto is a young composer's form. Ravel's two concertos were his next-to-last completed works. So much for that. Perhaps it could more accurately be said that the concerto used to be a young composer's form, prior to the near extinction of the composer as performer: in our days of specialization few young musicians write concertos to advance their playing careers, as was commonly the case from Mozart to Shostakovich.

Ravel nearly upheld the tradition. In his younger days he had indeed begun a piano concerto, which had to be abandoned when he enlisted for service in World War I. Revisiting the idea in the mid-1920s, he promised a concerto to Marguerite Long, the pianist who had premiered his *Tombeau de Couperin*; but as he composed, the desire to play it himself took hold, to the point where he was devoting considerable time to practising. To no avail, however; Ravel finally had to let Long do the honours on 14 January, 1932, taking to the podium instead. After they had toured the Concerto through Europe for three months, Long recorded it while Ravel supervised from the booth, driving everyone crazy by demanding take after take until about 3 a.m.

The Concerto in G took Ravel from 1929 to 1931 to write, in part due to health problems, but largely because in 1930 he received a commission from a pianist who had lost his right arm in the war for a piano concerto to be played with the left hand alone. And from writing no concertos for 35 years Ravel found himself writing two very different piano concertos at once.

Interestingly, the Concerto for the Left Hand has the larger orchestra and fuller sounding solo part, because Ravel strove to provide no aural clue that the pianist was using only one hand. The Concerto in G, having nothing to justify in that department, is by

comparison neo-classical, lean in texture with a chamber orchestra accompaniment. The concertos of Mozart and Saint-Saëns were its models. As Ravel observed, “A concerto can be gay and brilliant and need not try to be profound or strive after dramatic effects.”

There were other sources of inspiration. Ravel’s music often reflects his birth near the Franco-Spanish border: launched with a crack of the whip, the Concerto’s opening piccolo tune—conceived on a train between London and Oxford—has a Basque colour, while the piano’s second theme embodies the languor of Spain. Jazz is next, first in a blues-tinged interjection with wood-block off-beats and then in a rising pentatonic melody that will soon launch the first bassoon into the stratosphere. Indeed, Ravel exploits the limits of orchestral technique in this piece, with especially wicked solos for the trumpet, and a cadenza for the harp as well as the piano.

Following the exhilarating chatter of the first movement, with its surprising conclusion—attaching the top half of a major scale to the top half of a minor scale—the Adagio is seamless serenity, studiously avoiding any cadence even after the orchestra has crept in underneath an expectant Mozartian piano trill. The repose of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet larghetto was in fact Ravel’s goal and writing it was a bar-by-bar battle: “It nearly killed me!” he told Long when she remarked on it.

Shrill woodwinds in the wrong key have the first theme of the finale, imparting a circus atmosphere to the proceedings, with a sassy insouciance added by jazzy take-offs of ‘Good evening, friends’. Except for the initial five cadential chords, which return periodically to mark sections, ‘semi-perpetual motion’ is the driving force and when the torrent of notes flags, fanfares (and the whip) urge everyone back to business.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Symphony No.39 in E-flat Major, K.543

Mozart’s three greatest symphonies, No.39 in E-flat Major, No.40 in G Minor and No.41 in C Major known as the “Jupiter” Symphony, were all written in the space of about three months in the summer of 1788 (a stupendous achievement even without the two piano trios he sandwiched in between them). The year was a difficult one: Austrian economic times were hard, with bad harvests and war expenditures constricting the musical market, and Mozart’s income was significantly down and his debts alarmingly up. In June he was forced to move to cheaper lodgings in the suburbs; furthermore, his infant daughter was ill (she died three days after he completed the E-flat symphony) and his letters to moneylenders became desperate. As a financial remedy—and as a form of collateral for loans—he apparently planned a series of concerts with new symphonies as drawing cards, which however he was unable to bring off. So, the three symphonies landed on the shelf unplayed.

Or so it was thought. Although there are no specific references to a performance of any one of these works in Mozart’s remaining three years, circumstantial evidence suggests

that the assumption that he never heard them is incorrect. As many as three unidentified symphonies were performed during Mozart's tour to Germany in 1789, and it seems natural that at least one of the new masterpieces would have been included. And tellingly, a music dealer's 1790 catalogue lists a Mozart Symphony in E-flat with trumpets and drums which must be No. 39; the implication is that if parts were circulating, the work had already been played.

Unfortunately, no one seems to have commented on either it or the other two, which is almost as astonishing as the symphonies themselves. No. 39 is the only one of them with a slow introduction, notable for its daring repeated clash of a minor second high in the violins and the rather cryptic bit of canon that leads to the lyrical main Allegro. The rapid violin scales of this opening Adagio soon reappear in a most exhilarating way.

In the second movement the main theme's calmly composed exterior is unexpectedly shattered by two outbursts of the most harrowing, tortured emotion Mozart ever penned, the second of them particularly extended and keening—visions of unbridled anguish over which control is quickly reasserted. Contrasted with the decorum of the Minuet and the hijinks of the Haydnesque finale these episodes are even more remarkable, and the temptation to connect them to the contemporary hardships of the composer's life is strong. But of course, Mozart was a consummate professional who could create any required mood irrespective of circumstances.

Of all Mozart's symphonies the E-flat Major comes closest to satisfying Mahler's 1907 dictum that the symphony, "like the world, must embrace everything". One finds in it majesty, mystery, serenity, ebullience, agony, poignancy, tenderness, resignation, formality, drama and wit. Perhaps that is why, among Mozart's final six symphonies, the E-flat is unique in having attracted no nickname.