

# HEBRIDES ENSEMBLE EAST WEST

1pm Monday 13 March 2017

**Yann Ghiro** - Clarinet

**William Conway** - Cello

**Philip Moore** - Piano

Kenneth Leighton *Fantasy on an American Hymn Tune* (11 mins)

Claude Debussy *Première Rhapsodie* for clarinet and piano (18 mins)

Isang Yun *Espace I* for cello and piano (8 mins)

Francis Poulenc *Trio* for clarinet, cello and piano (14 mins)

## **Kenneth Leighton (1929-1988) *Fantasy on an American Hymn Tune* (1974)**

Kenneth Leighton was born in Yorkshire but he spent much of his life working in Edinburgh as a composer and lecturer at the university. Unlike many twentieth-century composers of the same era, Leighton did not go out of his way to be experimental – which may explain why much of his music is still relatively unknown. Leighton was far more interested in writing music with a strong melody, so you will often hear catchy tunes and jazzy rhythms amidst passages that are more complex and dissonant. ‘All my days are spent trying to find a good tune’, he once said.

His *Fantasy on an American Hymn Tune* for clarinet, cello and piano has a strong melody behind it but it may take you a while to hear it. Leighton disguises the original hymn tune (which was written in America in 1865) beneath a whole host of different ideas – some slow, some fast, some chromatic (using notes outside the normal scale) and some jazzy. It is for this reason that it is called a ‘Fantasy’ – it is as though Leighton started off singing the tune out loud and then began making up new ideas along the way before writing them down. At the start there isn’t much melody at all – you’ll hear five soft piano chords that become increasingly ‘scrunchy’ before the clarinet enters with an oscillating idea all of its own. In fact, Leighton keeps us guessing right through the piece, only ever playing snippets of the original melody until the final section. Listen out for the end, when the cello and piano at last play the whole hymn tune in its entirety – it’s quite slow too, which makes it easier to hear and produces a really beautiful effect.

Further listening...

*Second Symphony* (Leighton)

*Old American Songs* (Aaron Copland)

## **Claude Debussy (1862-1918) *Première Rhapsodie* for clarinet and piano (1909-10)**

Claude Debussy was one of the most important French composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He lived and worked in Paris, which was one of the most important cultural centres of the era – the scene both of pioneering artistic collaborations and infamous premieres. But even within Parisian circles, Debussy’s music caused a stir. Many would use the term ‘impressionism’ to describe it – because listening to it suggests images or ‘impressions’ of visual scenes: the swirling waves or the rolling countryside, for example. Debussy disliked the term impressionism, insisting: ‘My foremost ambition, in music, is to produce something that represents as closely as possible life itself. It is a free art... boundless as the elements, the wind, sky, and sea.’

Since his music was so radically different, Debussy often fell out with the establishment and was never properly accepted by the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied composition between 1872 and 1883. So when he was invited to join the Conservatoire’s advisory board some years later, he was very surprised but gladly accepted his new role. Every year the Conservatoire held a competition for its clarinetists and Debussy’s first task was to write two new works for them to perform – one of which would be a spectacular showpiece, while the other was written for them to perform unrehearsed ‘at sight’. The *Première Rhapsodie* is the showpiece, meaning that it tests almost every skill a clarinetist can learn. It begins slowly but not for long! A ‘rhapsody’ is very much like a ‘fantasy’, a free-form piece with lots of different ideas performed one after the other. So you will hear a spiky fast section followed by a slower, more expressive section, followed by another fast-moving passage with rapid scales – and so on. Listen out for the beautiful, slow melody that you hear just after the introduction – it reappears twice more in the clarinet during the piece. The last time it appears is just before the end, as a way of bringing the music full-circle and drawing it to a satisfying close.

Further listening...

*Prelude de l’après-midi d’un faune* (Debussy)

*La Mer* (Debussy)

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## **Isang Yun (1917-1995) *Espace I* for cello and piano (1992)**

Isang Yun was born in what is now South Korea at a time when political circumstances were particularly difficult. In the early part of the twentieth century, Japan believed Korea to be one of its territories – something to which Yun felt strongly opposed. After a period of study in Japan, Yun returned to Korea and joined a group of protestors aiming to win Korea's independence – but he was soon captured by the Japanese and put in prison. He later moved to Germany and built a career for himself as a composer, but was kidnapped by the South Korean secret service who suspected him of being a German spy. After being tortured, imprisoned and even sentenced to death, he was eventually released thanks to a petition signed by a huge number of international artists, writers and musicians.

Yun's music is still not well known, although its distinctive mix of Korean and western musical features makes it quite unique. *Espace I* for cello and piano was written just a few years before he died and is softer and more 'easy' to listen to in many ways than much of the music he wrote earlier in his life. But you will still hear typical Korean techniques used here within a piece that sounds very 'western': the pizzicato (plucked) passages and cellos glissandi (slides), for example, are characteristic of Korean performance. As the title 'Espace' (French for 'space') suggests, Yun wanted this piece to suggest a sense of space and stillness – listen out for the quiet, almost suspended passages that keep appearing between the more jumpy, loud sections. Do you think Yun was also trying to say something here about bringing together music of extremes?

Further listening...

*Bara* (Yun)

*And then I knew 'twas Wind...* (Tōru Takemitsu)

## **Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) *Trio* arranged for clarinet, cello and piano (1926)**

Like Debussy, Poulenc lived and worked in Paris during the early part of the twentieth century, but unlike Debussy he was not a musical prodigy. He did not have any formal musical education and, except for piano lessons from his mother, he was largely self-taught. Despite being rejected by the Paris Conservatoire, Poulenc went on to find fame with a group of like-minded composers who called themselves Les Six. Together, they reacted against what they considered to be the over-indulgence of the musical mainstream – preferring clean lines, uncomplicated harmonies and even a touch of humour to bring French music back to its roots. Poulenc became celebrated above all for his beautiful melodies. His colleague, Darius Milhaud, once said: 'Francis Poulenc is music itself, I know no music more direct, more simply expressed nor which goes so unerringly to its target'.

The *Trio* for oboe, bassoon and piano – which is performed today in an arrangement for clarinet, cello and piano – was written in 1926. It is written in three movements which follow the traditional pattern of fast-slow-fast, although the first movement is (perhaps confusingly) preceded by a slow introduction. Poulenc uses this opening section to introduce each of the instruments in turn – first the cello, then clarinet, then piano. It sounds very grand – and deliberately so – this is exactly the kind of 'pompous', over-indulgent music that Poulenc wants to send up. And as soon as the introduction is over he does so with a cheeky new melody that keeps changing from high to low, often sounding as though the three instruments are chasing each other. The slow movement that comes next is very different – slow, lyrical and very passionate – but the last movement is as silly as the first. Listen carefully and you might hear that the music keeps changing time signature, so it is almost impossible to tap along!

Further listening...

*Trio* for oboe, bassoon and piano (Poulenc)

*Sonata* for clarinet and bassoon (Poulenc)

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