



## **Program I: First Impressions**

Thursday, August 10, 2023

### **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912): Clarinet Quintet in F-sharp Minor, Op. 10 (1895)**

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born in London, the son of Daniel Taylor, a Creole doctor from Sierra Leone, and Alice Martin, a white Englishwoman from a musical family. Samuel's talents as a violinist and singer in local churches attracted the attention of a succession of musical patrons, the last of whom paid his way into the Royal College of Music (one of the best music colleges and conservatoires in the world), which he entered in 1890. Around this time, Dvořák was producing much of his greatest music in 'national Romantic' style, and he became a guiding light for the young man, who also idolized his composition teacher, Sir Charles Stanford.

Coleridge-Taylor's Clarinet Quintet, which dates from 1895, was composed after a performance of the Brahms clarinet quintet, when Stanford is reputed to have told his class that no one could now write such a composition without escaping the influence of Brahms. Within two months, the young composer did just that and, in the process, produced what is an undeniable masterpiece.

The thematic references between the movements create a structure of remarkable subtlety and sophistication, and Dvořák's influence can be clearly heard. The opening Allegro energico begins in a dark vein, then evolves with upbeat energy. The lovely second movement, Larghetto affectuoso, recalls the slow movement of the New World Symphony. At the heart of the scherzo movement is the exuberant interplay between the division of the beat into twos and threes with a contrasting trio based on a gently appealing melody, leading to an exciting Allegro agitato finale.

### **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937): Piano Trio in A Minor (1914)**

Maurice Ravel was a French composer, pianist, and conductor. He is often associated with Impressionism along with his elder contemporary Claude Debussy, although both composers rejected the term. Born to a cultured, music-loving family, Ravel was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire at age 14, and later studied with Gabriel Fauré. A self-critical and painstaking worker, he found his own way as a composer, incorporating elements of modernism, baroque, neoclassicism and, in his later works, jazz.

Ravel composed his Piano Trio in the spring and summer of 1914 as Europe descended into the First World War. Swept up in the fervor of the moment, Ravel rushed to complete the work in order to enlist. (Thankfully, for Ravel and posterity, he was deemed too slight of build to fight, and he served as an ambulance driver instead.) The work opens with an ethereal movement marked *modéré*, which contains allusions to the *zortziko*, a Basque dance rhythm. Next comes a glittering scherzo charged with distinctive sonorities, whose title "pantoum" refers to a Malaysian form of poetic verse adopted by a variety of French writers of the period. The third, slow movement is titled *Passacaille*, the French equivalent to the Italian *Passacaglia*, an old Baroque theme-and-variations form built around a ground bass melody that recurs through ever changing contexts. Haunting and timeless, this is the trio's unforgettable center of gravity. After the variety of meticulous forms in the previous movements, the Finale is a welcome flurry, soaring to heroic and wildly euphoric heights.