

The Seventieth Season of
The William Nelson Cromwell and F. Lammot Belin
Concerts

National Gallery of Art



2,876th Concert

Roger Wright, piano

February 26, 2012

Sunday, 6:30 pm

West Building, West Garden Court

Admission free

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that cell phones, pagers, and other electronic devices are turned off.

For the convenience of concertgoers, the Garden Café remains open for light refreshments until 6:00 pm on Sundays.

Please note that late entry or reentry of the West Building after 6:30 pm is not permitted.

Music Department
National Gallery of Art
Sixth Street and Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC

www.nga.gov

COVER: Félicien Rops, *Gaspard de la Nuit* (detail), 1868, etching, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

Program

Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884–1920)
The White Peacock (1915)

Robert Muczynski (1929–2010)
Masks (1980)

Scott McClain (b. 1954)
Snow (1997)

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
Masques (1903–1904)

Debussy
L'Isle joyeuse (1904)

INTERMISSION

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)
Gaspard de la nuit (1908)
Ondine
Le Gibet
Scarbo

Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938)
“Down by the Riverside” from *North American Ballads* (1989)

Mily Balakirev (1837–1910)
Islamey: Oriental Fantasy (1869)

The Musician

Hailed by reviewers as “a true romantic pianist” (*Washington Post*), “astonishingly evocative” (*San Antonio Express News*), and “savvy, elegant, and charismatic” (*American Record Guide*), Roger Wright has taken his place among the most respected virtuosos of our time. A native Texan, he has had the honor of performing with that state’s Houston and San Antonio symphony orchestras, the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, the Glacier Symphony Orchestra (Montana), and the Mission Chamber Orchestra in San Jose, California. Outside the United States, he has appeared with the Brussels Chamber Orchestra and the Costa Rica National Symphony. In the coming months, Wright will be the featured soloist in Tchaikovsky’s *Piano Concerto no. 1* with the San Jose Mission Chamber and Choral Society orchestras, and will play the inaugural recital of the 2012 San Antonio, Texas, International Piano Competition. Recent recital venues include Dublin, Ireland, and Pretoria, South Africa, as well as Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, San Antonio, San Diego, and Washington, DC.

Featured in numerous television and radio broadcasts for Chicago Public Radio, Texas Public Radio, and radio stations in Australia and Canada, Wright was featured on David Dubal’s celebrated series *Reflections from the Keyboard* on New York City’s WQXR. A versatile performer, Wright is also in demand as a chamber musician, appearing with members of Camerata San Antonio, the Las Vegas Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Taos Chamber Music Group.

A two-time recipient of the coveted fellowship award at the Aspen Music Festival (2000 and 2001), Wright received special recognition from the audience, radio listeners, and critics during his participation in the 2000 Sydney International Piano Competition. A CD resulting from that broadcast competition, *Piano Masterpieces*, was hailed by music critic Neville Cohen as “CD of the Year 2001.” Appearing at the National Gallery by arrangement with Maestro Management, Roger Wright maintains a website at www.rogerwright.com.

Program Notes

Fortunate to enjoy widespread recognition during his lifetime, Charles Tomlinson Griffes, who received his early music instruction in his native New York City, cultivated a style that reflected his subsequent study in Germany. As he matured, however, his affinity for French culture and art prevailed, and he tended to compose more in the French tradition after Debussy and Ravel, reflecting as well some influence of Mussorgsky and Scriabin. Like those composers, Griffes used descriptive titles for his works, incorporated oriental-sounding pentatonic scales, and unfolded his melodies in rhapsodic form. *The White Peacock* originated as a movement from Griffes's *Roman Sketches* for piano (1915), which the composer later expanded into an orchestral arrangement. Having encountered white peacocks in Berlin during his student years, he gained further inspiration from the final verses of an eponymous poem from the third volume of *Sospiri di Roma* (Sighs from Rome) by Scottish poet William Sharp (1855–1905):

Here, as the breath, as the soul of this beauty,
White as a cloud through the heats of the noontide
Moves the White Peacock.

Each episode of the piece begins with short, fragmented motives that extend into longer melodies—a musical portrayal of a bird hopping aimlessly in place before taking flight.

Born in Chicago, Robert Muczynski studied piano with Walter Knupfer and composition with Alexander Tcherepnin at DePaul University. Following a debut concert of his piano works at Carnegie Hall in 1958, major orchestras in the United States and abroad began to play and commission his work. In 1982 his *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Chamber Orchestra* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. To prepare the listener for the generally ominous mood of *Masks*, Muczynski precedes the music with a quotation in the preface from Jonathan Swift: “Harlequin without his mask is known to present a very sober countenance.”

Composer-pianist Scott McClain's compositional style embodies his versatile training in jazz, folk, and classical music. He completed his studies

in composition with Stefan Young and in piano with Harold Zabrack at Westminster Choir College in 1997. Based in Mesilla, New Mexico, McClain has received commissions to compose for choirs; instrumental ensembles; and dance, theater, and radio productions. He composed *Snow* as an impressionistic meditation on the first snowfall of 1997.

Claude Debussy often drew inspiration from other forms of art, as in the case of *Masques*, a musical setting of Antoine Watteau's (1684–1721) painting *Le Mezzetin*. A guitar player is shown, recognizable by his costume as Mezzetin from the cast of the *Commedia dell'arte*, a character who is forever frustrated in love. In the background is a silhouette of a woman with her back turned to Mezzetin. In Debussy's piece, an understated but palpable tension prevails throughout, underscoring the duality between tragedy and comedic irony. Debussy's friends and pupils commented that he often wore a metaphorical mask to suppress his poignant feelings, and surmised that this trait found musical expression in *Masques*.

Debussy wrote *L'Isle joyeuse* in 1904, just before taking a summer vacation with his lover, Emma Bardac, to the island of Jersey in the English Channel. The landscape of this island doubtless provided Debussy with a definite image as he edited and revised his work, but his primary inspiration once again was a painting by Watteau—*L'Embarquement pour Cythère*. Cythère, the island home of Aphrodite in Greek mythology, resembles an idyllic paradise in Watteau's work, although it is unclear whether the travelers are embarking to or from the island. Regardless of direction, this voyage represents the fleeting nature of love and emphasizes man's nostalgia and longing for paradise. Debussy's setting is equally ambiguous in creating an image of departure or arrival. There is an introduction followed by a rhapsodic sequence that builds in volume, speed, and intensity with shorter, lyrical interruptions, all culminating in a rousing finale. *L'Isle joyeuse* is a true virtuoso piece. Debussy himself wrote, “Heavens! How difficult it is to play...This piece seems to embrace every possible manner of treating the piano, combining as it does strength and grace.”

Maurice Ravel composed the three tone poems that make up *Gaspard de la nuit* to represent three of Louis Bertrand's macabre poems written in the

gothic style of Edgar Allan Poe. In the first poem, *Ondine*, the narrator hallucinates a water-nymph's attempt to lure him down into her dwelling place for all eternity. The second, *Le Gibet*, is a morbid picture of the gallows at sunset with church bells tolling in the distance. The third, *Scarbo*, is a virtuosic tour-de-force illustrating a sinister troll who darts about and ultimately vanishes into thin air. The technical demands of *Gaspard* were unprecedented at its time of composition, as Ravel intended. An enthusiastic orchestrator of most of his solo piano pieces, he left *Gaspard* untouched because he believed it too intrinsically pianistic a work to reimagine for orchestra.

In *North American Ballads*, Frederic Rzewski manipulates and varies American folk tunes in much the same way that Johann Sebastian Bach incorporated Lutheran hymn tunes in his chorale preludes for organ. "Down by the Riverside" — the only movement from *North American Ballads* not based on a political protest tune — is based on an African American spiritual. It begins with gospel-style ostinato accompaniment and adds contrapuntal layers, building to a climax, which is followed by an improvisational section. The movement ends as it began, with a gospel-blues feeling.

Mily Balakirev was the central figure of a group of Russian composers known as "The Five," who dedicated themselves to elevating the recognition and appreciation of Russian music in the late nineteenth century. A deliberate and methodical composer by nature, Balakirev produced few works that gained enduring recognition, but *Islamey* is an exception, both in its "gestation period" (one month) and in its subsequent fame. Having heard a dance melody played on the violin during a visit to the Caucasus, he developed it into a full work for solo piano. Thanks to enthusiastic adoption of the piece by Franz Liszt and Nikolai Rubinstein, who played the premiere, it quickly became a benchmark for pianistic virtuosity. Although the composer was regarded as a first-rate pianist, he admitted that there were certain passages that he could not play. Known and admired by Ravel, *Islamey* was his model to be surpassed as he conceived the fiendishly difficult passages in *Gaspard de la nuit*.

Program notes by Michael Jacko, concert aide, National Gallery of Art

Concerts in March at the National Gallery of Art

Pascal and Ami Rogé, duo pianists

Music by Debussy

Presented in honor of the reopening of the
Nineteenth-century French galleries

March 4, 2012

Sunday, 6:30 pm

West Building, West Garden Court



Carmen Balthrop, soprano

José Cáceres, pianist

Music by Dvořák, Greenleaf, Tchaikovsky, and other composers

March 11, 2012

Sunday, 6:30 pm

West Building, West Garden Court



Cyrus Forough, violinist

Stephen Ackert, pianist

Music by J. S. Bach, Beethoven, Falla, and Handel

March 18, 2012

Sunday, 6:30 pm

West Building, West Garden Court