The 5 Browns
PROGRAM NOTES

3 Nocturnes for Orchestra
II. Fetes

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) /Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

“The best thing one could hope for French music would be to see the study of harmony abolished… it is the most ridiculous way of arranging notes.” – Claude Debussy

French composer Claude Debussy did his part to move French music forward, eschewing that “most ridiculous way of arranging notes,” as he called it. Debussy purposefully broke the “rules” in order to achieve his own ends, using harmony like a painter might create smeary coloristic effects. (Indeed, he has often been labeled as an “impressionistic” composer, referring to techniques of such late 19th-century French painters as Claude Monet and Edgar Degas.)

Here’s what Debussy wrote about Fêtes:
“Fêtes gives us the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light. There is also the episode of [a] procession (a dazzling fantastic vision), which passes through … and becomes merged … with its blending of music and luminous dust participating in the cosmic rhythm.”

Listen for brilliant and dazzling pianism at the start. About halfway through, a more reserved, repeating pattern emerges (the procession). The energy of the opening returns, and then – as if we have just observed a passing storm – it is gone.
Fellow Frenchmen Maurice Ravel, an accomplished composer and pianist in his own right, transcribed Fêtes for two pianos.

My Favorite Things
Richard Rodgers (1902-1979)/Stephen Hough (b. 1961)

“My Favorite Things” was first performed by Mary Martin in the Broadway production of the Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein musical, Sound of Music, and made famous in the movie version by Julie Andrews. It is the quintessential “standard,” a tune so ubiquitous and well known in American popular culture that people of all ages can hum the melody.

This is what makes a new version of a standard interesting: how can it possibly be redone in such a way as to make it fresh? This version by British-born, now Australian pianist Stephen Hough will likely surprise you. Just like the original, this rendition begins by playing with the harmony against the simple melody. It quickly moves into some pretty diverse areas, sounding at times like a jazzy improvisation, a Rachmaninoff prelude, a boisterous drinking tune, and barrel-chested mazurka.
Suite No. 2, Op. 17
II. Valse: Presto
Sergei Rachmaninoff

Rachmaninoff wrote the Suite No. 2, Op. 17 about the same time as his Prelude No. 5. It was written specifically for two pianists, though not for front parlor amateurs: it is a romping, rollicking *tour de force.* It begins almost as if in perpetual motion, rolling along like a player piano gone wild. This gives way to a sweeter middle section, almost introverted for a moment. When the perpetual motion returns toward the end, it hardly lets up until the mercurial ending in the pianos’ upper register.

*Star Wars: Suite for Five Pianos*
John Williams (b. 1932)/Greg Anderson

American composer John Williams’ name has become synonymous with blockbuster Hollywood film scores. Consider the titles: *Superman, Home Alone,* the first three Harry Potter movies, the *Indiana Jones* series, *Schindler's List, E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, Jurassic Park* and *Jaws,* among others. He wrote music for four Olympic Games, numerous television shows, has garnered five Academy Awards, nearly two dozen Grammy Awards, and received the Kennedy Center Honor in 2004. Additionally, Williams is in demand as a composer for the concert hall—he has written 11 concertos for instruments as diverse as flute, harp, and tuba—and he conducts orchestras around the world.

The Academy Award-winning music he composed for *Star Wars* is among the most popular film music of all time.

*Scaramouche, Suite for two pianos Op. 165b*
III. *Braziliera* (*Mouvement de samba*)
Darius Milhaud (1892-1974)

French composer Darius Milhaud had many lives. Milhaud’s first life in music began in his native Marseilles. Next came the conservatory in Paris; concerts with some of the most influential French composers of the day, a trip to Brazil and the United States; back to France; fleeing the Nazis to America in 1939 (his father was of Jewish descent), to at a professorship Mills College in Oakland where he counted Dave Brubeck, Philip Glass and Steve Reich among his students; back to Paris; and ultimately to Geneva. He would probably be the first to admit that he was influenced by all of the music he heard in all those locales, from his first introduction to jazz in Harlem to the raucous street dances of Brazil, the samba.

*Scaramouche* was created as a two piano suite. In it he brought together music from several already-existing pieces of which “Braziliera” was one (the genesis of “Braziliera” was from incidental music to Molière’s play *Le Medecin Volant,* or “The Fleet-Footed Doctor “in English).
This upbeat piece is surely influenced by the rhythms of the Brazilian samba, but strains of thick Debussian chords and American ragtime are just as present.

**Clair de lune, from Suite Bergamasque**  
Claude Debussy/Greg Anderson

If there is one piece that the average listener knows by Claude Debussy, it is likely that it is this selection from his *Suite Bergamasque*. First written in the late 1880s, it was not published in its “final” form until 1903. The origin of the title *Bergamasque* has been debated by more than a few musicologists, but few would argue that “Clair de lune” (or, Moonlight) was inspired by a poem of the same name by French poet Paul Verlaine. The pensive quality of the original is retained, as are the transparent harmonic colors, in Anderson’s well-rendered version for three performers.

**Danse Macabre for Five Pianos**  
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)/Greg Anderson

Parisian composer Camille Saint-Saëns was every bit the child prodigy that Mozart was. Saint-Saëns’ perfect pitch was noticed at age two, he learned to read and write at three, wrote his first composition at four, played his first public gig at five, etc. Unlike Mozart, he enjoyed a long and fruitful life. Saint-Saëns, perhaps because of his longevity, ultimately was seen as a musical conservative, sticking to the tried-and-true ways of the 19th century.

*Danse Macabre* is best known as a “tone poem,” a single movement instrumental work for full orchestra based on the Halloween story of “Death’s dance” at midnight. The work begins with the clock striking midnight. It also serves as an invitation, by Death, to call forth the dead from their graves to join in the celebration. This zany piece takes us through various twists and turns: a fughetta, shimmering runs and scales, recurring and relentless tritones (the so-called Devil’s interval: first between A and E-flat, then C and F-sharp, etc.), some wild and crazy virtuosic passages, and even a sweet and expressive moment or two. Toward the end, a single, simple line signals dawn: the beginning of the end.

-Notes by Dave Kopplin