

University of Florida Performing Arts

presents

Young Concert Artist: José Franch-Ballester, Clarinet

Tuesday, February 22, 2011, 7:30 p.m.
Squitieri Studio Theatre

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José Franch-Ballester, Clarinet
Anna Polonsky, Piano

Program

Grand Duo Concertante for Clarinet and Piano op. 48

Carl Maria Von Weber

Allegro Con Fuoco

Andante Con Moto

Rondo-Allegro

Rêverie for Clarinet and Piano

Claude DeBussy

Première Rhapsodie for Clarinet and Piano

INTERMISSION

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Bohuslav Martinu

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Schenectady

4th Street Drag

Recuperation

Full Stride Ahead

Program Notes

Grand Duo Concertante for Clarinet and Piano op. 48

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

German composer Carl Maria von Weber was a quintessential figure in the 18th and 19th century Romantic Era, a period in which emotions and personal expression came to the forefront in the arts. The notion of the tortured artist that still lingers in our culture has its roots in that era.

The Grand Duo Concertante, op. 48, began life in 1815 and was completed in 1816 or so. With Weber at the piano, the Duo received its first complete performance in Berlin in 1817.

It is a duo in every sense of the word, and likely a reason its popularity continues. The piano part is equal in stature to the clarinet part, maybe even more difficult for one intriguing reason: Weber, a fine pianist, had huge hands and was able to write – and play – passages that average-handed pianists found impossible.

Listen as the first movement begins (tempo marking *Allegro Con Fuoco*, or “Lively, but with force”). This is an energetic discussion between clarinet and piano, almost like a friendly rivalry at times. A snappy interjection by clarinet is answered immediately by piano, and back and forth it goes. They even seem to be “talking” over each other at times. The second movement, marked *Andante Con Moto* (“moderately, but with some urgency”) is among the most lyrical in the clarinet repertory. It begins with piano in a secondary role and clarinet singing a sorrowful tune. Piano has its say next, further exploring the solemn mood. The two join together for a tuneful, though sorrowful conclusion. The Finale is cheery and light, with a bounciness that almost never lets up. Cascades of notes are fast and furious here, a dazzling display by both piano and clarinet.

— Written by Dave Kopplin

Rêverie for Clarinet and Piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Though French composer and pianist Claude Debussy was steeped in the Western classics of the concert hall, he also found inspiration in other traditions. The French Symbolists, for example, were an early influence. Rather than a linear, goal-oriented narrative, Symbolists believed art could express its meaning through indirect means, such as symbols. Under their influence, Debussy began experimenting with new harmonic ideas, ancient church modes, symmetrical scales and he began to write works that didn't have customary notions of development or form. Most of his works had evocative titles, too, rather than traditional monikers; he never wrote a work that he labeled a “symphony,” for example.

In the late 1900s, French Impressionist painters began to challenge the accepted norms in their art, too. Realistic art gave way to blurry and shimmering landscapes, less well-defined colors, and painting techniques using points of paint rather than smooth lines. No doubt because Debussy's music seemed “blurry” compared to his forerunners, he was dubbed a musical Impressionist.

Rêverie, from about 1890 (originally written for solo piano), reveals Debussy the Symbolist and the Impressionist. The title itself means “dream,” and the whole notion of dreaming and dream states were an important influence on the Symbolists. The piano part is liquid, moving like waves in a pond. The melody is tranquil and unhurried. There is no sense of tension or goal: the music simply unfolds and envelops swells and recedes and ends as quietly as it began.

— Written by Dave Kopplin

Première Rhapsodie for Clarinet and Piano

Claude-Achille Debussy (*born in St. Germain-en-Laye, a suburb of Paris, on August 22, 1862; died in Paris on March 25, 1918*)

Debussy composed only two works for solo clarinet, both of them in 1910, a few years after his unfortunate encounter with the saxophone which Adolphe Sax had invented in Paris in 1846. A wealthy woman, Mrs. Richard Hall, from Chicago had commissioned a saxophone piece from Debussy in 1895, and had actually performed it in Paris, where the composer had the opportunity to watch her at work. He immediately lost interest in Mrs. Hall, her commission and the saxophone itself. "I think it ridiculous so see a lady in a pink frock playing on such an ungainly instrument," he wrote, but he half-heartedly finished the composition he had finally put together for her, though he left it un-orchestrated and never heard her play it.

The clarinet, on the other hand, is perhaps the most intriguing of the orchestra's reed family, with a sweet mellow tone that may be why today's players sometimes refer to it as a "licorice stick," (or perhaps because it is made of ebony and is nearly always black and shaped like a "stick" with a gently bulbous bell at the bottom end). It is a comparatively new instrument, based on the much older and more primitive chalumeau, to which a German musician named Johann Christoph Denner and his son Johann added a register key about the last decade or two of the 18th century. When Mozart first encountered it in the late 1770s, he immediately fell in love with its sonic texture and began to use it in his symphonies and serenades, to enchanting effect. Thanks to such later compositions as those by Brahms, Wagner, Richard Strauss, Debussy and Igor Stravinsky, the clarinet now possesses the richest literature of any of the reed instruments. Originally named for the clarino, or trumpet, because early examples reminded some ears of the pleasingly focused sound of the Baroque trumpet, which carried well over the orchestral sound of the day. (To *clarino* is simply added the Italian diminutive "et," or the French "ette." . . .) *Et voilà!* As Debussy might have said, excitedly.

The sound of the clarinet was much more agreeable to him than the saxophone, and when in 1910 a member of the Paris Conservatoire faculty, M. Prosper Mimart, asked him not only to write a couple of works for the instrument but to adjudicate at the wind instrument examinations, Debussy did both, completing a *rhapsodie for clarinet* and a *petite pièce* as well, the latter meant for sight-reading tests. In the opinion of biographer Edward Lockspeiser, they are both "exquisitely written for the instrument," and when the composer himself heard the first performance of the rhapsodie, played by Mimart himself, he spontaneously declared that it was "one of the most pleasing pieces I have ever written." In apparent corroboration, he arranged the piano accompaniments for orchestra the following year.

— Written by Clair Von Ausdall for Susan Wadsworth and Young Concert Artists

Sonatina for Clarinet and Piano, H. 356

Bohuslav Martinu (*born in Policka, eastern Bohemia, on December 8, 1890; died in Liestal, near Basel, Switzerland, on August 28, 1959*)

Moderato

Andante

Poco allegro

Legend has it that the Czech composer Martinu lived as a boy in the church tower where his father, a shoemaker by trade, was also employed as a municipal watchman. The little Bohuslav was never allowed out of the tower even for a moment until he was seven years old and ready to enter school. By that time he had spent hours gazing down, day after day, at the remote goings-on far below him. Some musical analysts even suggest that this sequestered childhood is responsible for the "finely detailed figuration encountered in works of the composer's maturity," to use Geoffrey Thomason's deft phrase.

Such kinetic patterns may thus be viewed as an adult's recollection of a child's world wherein the scurrying people in the village below appear as so many insects swarming about on their day-to-day entomological tasks.

The Sonatina for Clarinet and Piano is a mature work indeed, completed in 1956, less than two years before the composer's death. Martinu all his life had had a hard time settling down. He was schooled in Prague, at the Conservatory (where he practiced the violin so little that he was threatened with expulsion to the pipe-organ department), and in Paris, where he ultimately spent 17 years and benefitted a great deal from his brief study with Albert Roussel. Hounded by the Nazis, he came to the United States. Life was not easy, partly because he spoke no English; but he composed assiduously, completing no fewer than six symphonies and a formidable array of chamber music. Despite three years on the faculty of Princeton's music department, he complained of the slickness of American life, and departed for Nice, in France, where he began a series of chamber cantatas based on memories of the homeland he had not seen for many years. He was induced to return to the United States to teach for a year at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and it was here, busy with the composition of his fourth piano concerto, that he somehow found time to dash off his Sonatina for Clarinet and Piano. The following autumn, once again wearied with his surroundings, he moved, first to the American Academy in Rome, where cancer was diagnosed, and then to Switzerland, where he died in a Basle hospital.

The Sonatina shows the effects of two predominating influences on Martinu's music: the works of Brahms and the folk-madrigal. The charming first movement, *Moderato*, is highly Brahmsian in both melodic material and decoration, including some triadic figurations remarkably like those of the Brahms F-minor Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, op. 120, No. 1. Martinu's lines are long and discursive, like those of his idol, interrupted from time to time by rhythmic punctuations that may remind the listener of Poulenc.

The *Andante* is almost dirge-like, much of the clarinet's meditative melody played against the piano's sombre pattern of rising and falling minor seconds. The last movement, *Poco allegro*, is very short, very jazzy, whimsically syncopated once again in a style reminiscent of Poulenc, not quite so pungent but even briefer. The three movements, though well defined, are played without pause.

— Written by Clair Von Ausdall for Susan Wadsworth and Young Concert Artists

Milonga del angel

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

From its roots in the brothels of Buenos Aires, the tango became an internationally popular dance. Sultry moves are often punctuated with seemingly violent kicks and sudden changes of direction; the dancing is always up close and personal. The music mirrors the mercurial dance.

Like the tango, Argentinean composer Astor Piazzolla's background was international. He spent his childhood in New York City, where he first discovered the bandoneon, a button accordion that is the national instrument of Argentina. By age 16, living back in Buenos Aires, he was engrossed in the music of the Germans and Russians, including J.S. Bach and Igor Stravinsky. A few years later, he had won a competition and was off to Paris to study with none-other-than Nadia Boulanger.

Boulanger was to show him his direction in life: back to Argentina. Piazzolla wrote, "I showed her my [work]... After a long while, she said, 'Here you sound like Stravinsky, there like Bartók, there Ravel... I can't find Piazzolla in this.' ... She kept asking, 'What instrument do you play, then?' And I didn't want to tell her that I was a bandoneon player ... Finally, I confessed and she asked me to play some bars of a tango of my own. She suddenly opened her eyes widely and told me: 'That's Piazzolla!'"

In Piazzolla's hands, the tango found renewed life (the term *nuevo tango*, or "new tango," was used to describe his music and that of his followers). *Milonga del angel* is from an early 1960s stage play about

an angel that visits a down-trodden Buenos Aires neighborhood. It begins simply, unadorned. As the “milonga” rhythm kicks in, a slow and sultry dance rhythm that was a forerunner to the tango, a wistful and melancholy mood settles in, intensifies, and never lets up until the final note.

— Written by Dave Kopplin

Four Rags for Two Jons

John Novacek (b. 1962)

John Novacek is a multi-faceted American musician, active as a pianist and as a composer. He is the winner of numerous awards as a pianist, regularly performs recitals in major music capitols, has performed in concert with major orchestras worldwide, and collaborates with such artists as Joshua Bell, Leila Josefowicz and Yo-Yo Ma. As a composer, Novacek has composed works for solo piano, for piano and violin, and piano and guitar duo.

He is best known for his ragtime pieces, or rags, an American turn-of-the-20th century style marked by its syncopated or “ragged” rhythm. In the tradition of ragtime composer Scott Joplin, Novacek’s rags are a rhythmic romp, mixing every pianistic trick in the book.

Schenectady, for example, is marked by its rhythmic verve, not to mention its sudden key changes. It is also at times quite virtuosic.

The “slow drag” was a sensual ragtime era dance that became a popular rag style. The *4th Street Drag*, originally for guitar and piano, first appeared on Novacek’s *Nohvarags* recording in 1995.

The syncopated *Recuperation* is marked by a downward sliding melody in the opening section. This gives way to a rising, boisterous middle segment, then explores different sonorities, such as the successive “thwumps” in the piano, or the comical “high-low” ending.

Full Stride Ahead mixes in the vaudeville piano tricks of the 1910s and ‘20s with a pulsing up-down “stride” technique in the piano’s lower register. It is a madcap romp from start to finish.

— Written by Dave Kopplin

José Franch-Ballester, Clarinetist

As recipient of the 2010 MIDEM Classique Outstanding Young Artist Award, which aims to introduce the as yet unsigned recording stars of the future to the Classical recording industry, clarinetist Jose Franch-Ballester performed Debussy’s Rhapsody with the Sinfonietta Cracovia at the awards ceremony in Cannes, which was broadcast live on *France Musique*, *Radio Luxembourg* and *Polish Radio*. Since winning the 2004 Young Concert Artists International Auditions, Mr. Franch-Ballester’s career has gone from strength to strength. He became a member Lincoln Center’s Chamber Music Society Two and continues to perform with them in New York. He is on the roster of Astral Artistic Services in Philadelphia, was selected by Carnegie Hall for Master Classes with Emanuel Ax and Richard Stoltzman, and performed in Carnegie’s Weill Hall. Mr. Franch-Ballester was awarded an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2008. His other prestigious awards include the Alexander Kasza-Kasser Concert Prize for his Kennedy Center debut, and the Claire Tow Prize, which sponsored his New York debut. He performs with the woodwind quintet, Astral Winds.

Mr. Franch-Ballester is in demand for numerous festivals, both national and international, including Chamber Music Northwest, Saratoga Chamber Music Festival, the Skaneateles Festival, the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival, Music from Angel Fire, and the Usedomer Musikfestival in Germany, the Verbier Festival in Switzerland, the Cartagena Festival Internacional de Música in Colombia, and the Young Concert Artists Festival at Nexus Hall in Tokyo, Japan.

This season, Mr. Franch-Ballester's concert tours take him to South America as soloist with the YOA Orchestra of the Americas, performing Copland's Clarinet Concerto, and to Mexico with Pro Musica. Other concerto engagements include performances with the International Clarinet Association, the La Crosse Symphony and the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra. Mr. Franch-Ballester appears at Montclair State University, with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Arts Council of Moore County, the Tryon Concert Association, Morning Musicales, Rockport Music, at Wisconsin Lutheran College, the University of Florida, and the Howland Cultural Center and Chamber Music Circle.

Mr. Franch-Ballester has given concerts at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Iowa State University, Buffalo Chamber Music Society, and at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts, and as soloist with the Victoria and Wichita Falls symphonies in Texas, the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra, the Orchestra of St. Luke's under the direction of Keith Lockhart at Lincoln Center, the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico, and with the BBC Concert Orchestra and conductor Keith Lockhart. In Spain, he has performed with the Orquesta de Radio y Television Española, Orquesta Sinfonica Castellon, Orquesta Supramusica, Orquesta Cambra XX Teatro Monumental (Madrid), and the Musica de Vall de Uxo Orchestra. He performed the world premiere of Jake Heggie's *Winter Roses* with mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade.

Born in Moncofa, Spain into a family of clarinetists and Zarzuela singers, Jose Franch-Ballester began clarinet lessons at the age of nine with Venancio Rius Marti, and gave his first recital in Valencia at the age of 16. He graduated from the Joaquin Rodrigo Music Conservatory in Valencia in 2000 and won First Prize of the Cultural Council of Valencia for three consecutive years (2001-2003) and First Prize in the "Francisco Hernandez Guirado" Interpretive Soloists Competition. Mr. Franch-Ballester came to the U.S. to study at The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he graduated in 2005, studying clarinet with Donald Montanaro and Ricardo Morales and chamber music with Pamela Frank.

Anna Polonsky, Pianist

Anna Polonsky is widely in demand as a soloist and chamber musician. She has appeared with the Moscow Virtuosi and Vladimir Spivakov, the Buffalo Philharmonic with JoAnn Falletta, the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and many others. Ms. Polonsky has collaborated with the Guarneri, Orion and Audubon Quartets, and with such musicians as Mitsuko Uchida, David Shifrin, Richard Goode, Ida and Ani Kavafian, Cho-Liang Lin, Arnold Steinhardt, Anton Kuerti, Gary Hoffman and Fred Sherry. She is regularly invited to perform chamber music at festivals such as Marlboro, Chamber Music Northwest, Seattle, Moab, Music@Menlo, Bridgehampton, Bard, and Caramoor, as well as at Bargemusic in New York City. Ms. Polonsky has given concerts in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, the Vienna Konzerthaus, the Alice Tully Hall, and the Stern, Weill and Zankel Halls at Carnegie Hall, and has toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. A frequent guest at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, she was a member of CMS Two during 2002-2004. In 2006, she took a part in the European Broadcasting Union's project to record and broadcast all of Mozart's keyboard sonatas, and in the spring of 2007, she performed a Carnegie Hall solo recital, inaugurating the Emerson Quartet's Perspectives Series.

Anna Polonsky made her solo piano debut at the age of 7 at the Special Central Music School in Moscow, Russia. She immigrated to the United States in 1990, and attended high school at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. She received her Bachelor of Music from The Curtis Institute of Music, where she worked with the renowned pianist Peter Serkin, and continued her studies with Jerome Lowenthal, earning her master's degree from the Juilliard School. Polonsky was a recipient of a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship in 2003. In addition to performing, she serves on the piano faculty of Vassar College. Anna Polonsky is a Steinway Artist.