Clair de lune, arr. Caplet (1905)

Claude Debussy (August 22, 1862–March 25, 1918)

Debussy believed that the primary aim of French music was "to give pleasure."

Claude Debussy was born in France in 1862, just as Impressionist paintings were emerging and alarming viewers with bright colors and light where solid objects once existed. Impressionist music evolved simultaneously, typically utilizing the whole-tone scale and avoiding conventions of harmonic and rhythmic development.

Debussy explained it as such: "I should like to see the creation…of a kind of music free from themes or motives…which nothing interrupts and which never returns upon itself. There will not be, between two restatements of the same characteristic theme, a hasty and superfluous 'filling in.'"

Debussy became a leader of Impressionism, along with Ravel, marking the shift away from Romantic music, which dominated the 19th century. When asked what rule he followed when composing, Debussy replied: "Mon plaisir" (My pleasure).

In 1890, at 28, Debussy began *Suite bergamasque*, a piano suite in four movements: *Prélude, Menuet, Clair de lune,* and *Passepied*. Tonight's performance is an orchestral arrangement of the third movement by André Caplet, a colleague of Ravel and Debussy.

Clair de lune (moonlight) was originally called *Promenade sentimentale* (sentimental walk), both from poems by Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine. It was renamed shortly before publication in 1905. Debussy had previously set *Clair de lune* for voice and piano twice, along with 18 other Verlaine poems.

The poem describes "charmante masques et bergamasques," inspiring the name of the suite. "Bergamasques," masked festivals in the ancient Italian theater tradition, were a French tradition, full of archetypal peasant characters (Harlequin, Columbine and Scaramouche) from the town of Bergamo.

The poem also refers to "au calme clair de lune triste et beau" (the still moonlight sad and lovely). The most elegant and mysterious of the suite's movements, *Clair de lune* became the most popular, eventually making it into films such as *Giant* (1956), *Casino Royale* (1967) and *Ocean's Eleven* (2001).

Clair de lune sweeps the audience away for a mere four luminous minutes. From the first flicker of moonlight, there's ambiguity. Debussy avoided traditional major and minor keys in his music, without fully eliminating traditional tonal centers. However, the tonality always feels uncertain. So while the piece opens in D-flat major, straying briefly into E major, the listener is left wondering.

Debussy's instrumental texture, color, and suggestive harmonies all avoid traditional combinations, giving it an exotic quality. *Clair de lune* lacks a distinctive rhythm and breaks all kinds of harmonic rules in order to create a mood. It also lacks the grand crescendo. Although the music grows more agitated, with dissonant chords, it defies stereotypical structures.

Returning to a variant of opening theme, Debussy changes it up, the harmony remaining fluid and ever-changing throughout. As the piece grows more technically demanding, it manages to retain a peaceful melancholy that grows sadder and more mysterious. It's

as if there's a layer of gauze over the notes, making them less distinct, dreamier. It's all emotion—there for individual interpretation. It's about the essence, not the details.

Finally, at the end, there is a perfect cadence, harmony that Debussy used sparingly, providing a tonal anchor to announce his "painting" is complete. When the last note resounds, you're reminded of what Debussy wrote earlier—that the primary aim of French music "is to give pleasure."

Instrumentation: strings, harp, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns

Intermezzo from *Notre Dame* (1914)

Franz Schmidt (December 22, 1874–February 11, 1939)

Schmidt's Hungarian heritage shaped his opera, Notre Dame, and the "filler" between scenes became its best-loved music.

Music critic Hans Keller once said: "As a composer, conductor, piano virtuoso, chamber-musical pianist and string-quartet cellist, Franz Schmidt was the most complete musician I have come across in my life." Franz who? If you Google him, you're likely to get a hangman's bio. So, if Schmidt was so remarkable, why isn't he better known?

Schmidt was born in 1874 in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a city called Pozsony, now Bratislava, to an overall musical family, with his mother having studied under Liszt. In 1888, the family moved to Vienna, where Schmidt took piano lessons, studied composition with Bruckner, theory with Fuchs, and cello with Hellmesberger.

Schmidt went on to play cello in the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under Mahler, who along with Bruckner, Wagner, and Brahms, influenced his post-Romantic style. He composed on an extravagant scale like Mahler, Strauss, and Schoenberg, but distinguished himself by avoiding expressionism, atonality, and the tragic nature of their works. Regarded as a conservative composer, Schmidt's music followed Western tradition: it was rich, harmonic and unapologetically tonal, but also chromatic and salted with dissonant flavors.

His most enduring work is the scrumptious, four-minute orchestral *Intermezzo* (Interlude—a light instrumental section performed between acts of a play) from his first opera, *Notre Dame*, loosely based on Victor Hugo's novel, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." The highly symphonic opera, featuring extended orchestral passages, drew both praise and criticism; some accusing its symphonic nature of overshadowing the dramatic content.

Schmidt's Hungarian heritage helped shape *Notre Dame*, and the "filler" between scenes became its best-loved music. Composer-violinist Karl Goldmark described the *Intermezzo* as "the most beautiful of Gypsy music." Conventionally Romantic, the *Intermezzo* is a delightfully lyrical, upbeat piece, with especially passionate string writing.

Enamored with the *Intermezzo,* Julius Korngold, music critic and father of composer Erich Korngold, credited the lush orchestration to Schmidt's experience as a cellist: "…he may have discovered that, while everything enraptures, the strings are most irresistible. This string sound colors his new work to great effect, and it is particularly well presented, with full, sense-beguiling sweetness and urgency, in the Hungarian section of his *Interlude*."

Notre Dame debuted in Vienna in 1914 to great success. Around this time, Schmidt,

along with colleagues Joseph Marx, Franz Schreker, and Alexander Zemlinsky, ruled the music scene. Yet, today there is little of Schmidt's work to admire. *Notre Dame* remained popular until the early 1920s, before disappearing.

Mahler aside, much of 20th-century Austrian music became a casualty of the Nazi era. A Catholic, educated in Vienna, Schmidt managed to escape the Nazis' "degenerate" label, while Jewish composers Schreker and Zemlinsky works were banned in Germany, and later, Austria. But mere association with the Nazis became Schmidt's downfall, despite his reputation as an apolitical composer with no known anti-Jewish sentiment.

It was Schmidt's bad luck that the Third Reich embraced his music. They thought his *Book with Seven Seals* (1938), an oratorio based on the Book of Revelation, embodied their regime, despite Schmidt's attempt to omit inflammatory references, including Christ establishing his kingdom ("Reich") on earth, a phrase Hitler adapted in 1933. Schmidt's *German Resurrection* cantata ended with "Sieg Heil!" allegedly to express his pan-German support, not his allegiance to the Nazis.

Schmidt's friends defended him, something he was unable to do himself, dying at 64 in 1939, shortly after the Nazis seized Austria. He was spared the ever-increasing evil perpetrated by the Nazis, including the murder of his mentally ill wife as part of their euthanasia program.

Instrumentation: *strings, harp, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns*

Le Chausseur maudit (1883)

César Franck (December 10, 1822-November 8, 1890)

César Franck was born in 1822 in Liège, a French region that became part of Belgium in 1830. His family was ambitious: Franck's father expected him to become a concert pianist. The Paris Conservatoire initially rejected him for study because of his nationality, but eventually accepted him—as a composer not a performer. He became a teacher and organist in Paris, while also composing.

Suddenly, the horn, in a more sinister role, represents the end of the joyride and the beginning of a hellish epiphany.

A straight arrow, Franck surprisingly joined the ranks of other 19th-century composers who dabbled in the supernatural, including Berlioz, Liszt, Chopin, and Paganini, whose burial in consecrated ground wasn't allowed by the church for more than two years after his death.

Franck's symphonic tone poem, *Le Chasseur maudit, (The Accursed Hunter)*, written in 1882 and premiering the next year, takes the audience on a wild hunt through the woods. Unlike Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, leaving mere impressions of what's happening, Franck created a very specific storyline—a movie in music.

The title was taken from a ballad by the German poet Gottfried Bürger's, *Der wilde Jäger (The Wild Huntsman)*. The highly evocative music, written in one continuous movement divided into four distinct scenes—Sunday Morning Call to Worship; The Hunt; The Curse; and The Demon's Chase—is a cautionary tale about disobeying the will of God, as a count of the Rhine goes hunting in violation of the Sabbath.

The composer's program notes make clear what the listener should be imagining: It's a

bright, cheery Sunday morning, with church bells ringing and a chant beckoning the faithful to worship. The horn (playing various roles) is interspersed with a beautifully serene theme in the cellos, accompanied by the church bells: God is in the house!

But one mean, stubborn German count decides he'd rather go hunting than sit in a pew. He ignores the bells and pious elders beckoning him, mounts his horse, announces the hunt with his horn, and rides roughshod through the village farms, trampling crops and whipping peasants in his path.

This section has sensational pace and momentum—there's no doubt you're flying along on a horse. But then, the horn, in a more sinister role, represents the end of the joyride and the beginning of a hellish epiphany. The count realizes he's lost. His horse is immobile; his horn won't blow, when a mysterious voice bellows via a piercing theme: "Accursed hunter, be thou eternally pursued by Hell!" The count has been cursed for his blasphemy and will be chased eternally by demons.

Hold onto your seat—this final section is downright cataclysmic. Through the night and into the next day, the wild, desperate ride continues until hunter and horse fall into an abyss. Flames shoot up as they rise into the sky, with demons in hot pursuit. All of these unfortunate events point to the fact that he should never have skipped church…

You might imagine that Franck had some of his heartless huntsman in him (or maybe a little Wagner), but his reputation was as a very nice, humble man, a paragon of virtue. He was an admired teacher, a role model for French musicians, a talented composer, pianist, and organist.

While today Franck's talents are recognized, in 19th-century Paris he was largely overlooked. Opera was "in," and instrumental and choral music were "out." He came to represent "Old School" in France, as Debussy gained popularity in his stead. Franck died in Paris in 1890, without ever managing to live up to his father's expectations.

Instrumentation: strings, two flutes, one piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbals, chimes, bass drum, triangle)

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, op. 78, "Organ" (1886)

Saint-Saëns (October 9, 1835–December 16, 1921)

Audiences may recognize the climactic moment from the family film, "Babe" (or from other uses and abuses).

"I gave everything to it I was able to give. What I have here accomplished, I will never achieve again."—Camille Saint-Saëns after finishing his Third Symphony, "Organ."

Saint-Saëns' life began in 1835 in Paris, where his widowed mother and her aunt raised him. Already demonstrating perfect pitch at 2, the prodigy was given his first public concert by 5. He could soon play from memory any Beethoven piano sonata the audience requested as an encore.

Saint-Saëns studied the organ and composition at the Conservatoire de Paris, where he won top prizes and met Franz Liszt, who became a close friend, describing him as "the greatest organist in the world." After writing his first symphony at 16, the prodigious

composer continued writing in virtually all genres.

He was 40 before he married a young woman of 19. Their two sons both died within six weeks of each other—one from illness, the other by falling from a window. Saint-Saëns blamed his wife for the accident and left her, although they never divorced.

At 51, he produced his two most famous works, *The Carnival of the Animals* and Symphony No. 3 "Organ," which he dedicated to Liszt, who died two months later. The work, both beautifully and emotionally rendered, sounds like a heartfelt farewell.

Saint-Saëns was not on such warm terms with other colleagues. While he'd been an early fan of Wagner, he often criticized his music. As a result, he lost engagements and received negative reviews in Germany after making particularly cutting remarks. Saint-Saëns also had a prickly relationship with Debussy, who said, "I have a horror of sentimentality and cannot forget that its name is Saint-Saëns.'

The organ, however, he loved unconditionally. In his "Organ" Symphony, Saint-Saëns explored progressive thematic ideas that Liszt had earlier pioneered. The piece is cast in two longer movements, while retaining the classic four-movement pattern within the two halves. He shaped the work like a tone poem, something Liszt also helped establish.

The themes were developed from *"Dies irae,"* (a medieval chant from the *Mass for the Dead*), which appears in the first movement's *Allegro moderato*, featuring ominous strings. The "celestial" passage at the finale's beginning has similarity to an *Ave Maria* by Jacques Arcadelt, which Saint-Saëns knew through an organ transcription by Liszt.

Technically sophisticated, this late-Romantic orchestral work is plump with tunes, colors, and thematic creativity. The haunting opening does little to reveal the grandiosity of what's to come and instead begins with the rising four-note figure that evolves into the much quicker *Allegro* development. The tension dwindles into a slower, melodic section that finally introduces the organ in an unexpected way—the bearer of tranquility.

It isn't until the last section that the true power of the organ shines through. Audiences may recognize this climactic moment from the family film, "Babe," or from other uses and abuses, it's a melody that Saint-Saëns called "the defeat of the restless, diabolical element," which leads to "the blue of a clear sky."

The work's harmonic tragedy-to-triumphant mimics Beethoven's Fifth, as the C minor at the start is eventually replaced by C major in the last movement. The finale is both bombastic and full of joie de vivre. The symphony was popular at and after its premiere in London's St James's Hall in 1886, when Saint-Saëns himself conducted the Royal Philharmonic Society's orchestra.

Toward the end of his life, Saint-Saëns, like Franck, found his musical style was no longer in vogue. He died of a heart attack in Algiers in 1921, and was buried in the same Paris cemetery as Franck. Unlike Franck, his name is known the world over.

Instrumentation: strings, three flutes, one piccolo, two oboes, one English horn, two clarinets, one bass clarinet, two bassoons, one contra bassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, triangle), organ, piano

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Program Notes by Jayce Keane

Jayce Keane, who began her career as a journalist for *The Rocky Mountain News*, has been working in the orchestra industry and writing about music for the last 14 years. A longtime resident of California, she now lives in Colorado.