



Smithsonian Associates

A Celebration of French Music

5-Session Daytime Course on Zoom

Monday, May 3 to Friday, May 7, 2021 - 12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. ET

France is an immeasurable powerhouse of cultural achievement. Through French politics and history, philosophy, fine arts, cuisine, our daily lives continue to be shaped by the Gallic vision of society. And in many ways the history of French music is also the history of Western music. We are used to focusing on the achievements of Germany and Italy, and we tend to forget that right up until the middle Renaissance, it was France that led the way. Looking closely at those earlier periods, we find many of the defining moments in the grand procession of Western musical development were carved out by the French. Such composers such as Guillaume de Machaut and Josquin des Prez were as important as Mozart and Beethoven, and two centuries later Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau were internationally celebrated as great innovators. Following the violent cataclysm of the French Revolution, the 1800's saw the emergence of figures such as Hector Berlioz and Georges Bizet, two of the most brilliant and controversial figures in the European musical pantheon. Along with such composers as Camille Saint-Saëns and Gabriel Fauré, they laid the groundwork for a simply astonishing collection of late 19th to mid-20th French artists who forged a wide path through musical Impressionism to Modernism. Our current century would be infinitely the poorer without the genius of Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, the group of composers known as Les Six, Olivier Messiaen, and many others. But what makes French music French? Over five days we explore social, political, religious and cultural issues that shaped the output of these great composers, and listen to a selection of the greatest French music in the literature.

May 3: 700 years in 90 minutes

A lightning tour of French music written before the 19th century, beginning with the mystery and beauty of early 12th c. polyphony by Pérotin from the mighty School of Notre-Dame. Touching briefly on exquisite work by Guillaume de Machaut and Josquin des Prez, we'll then jump forward to the Baroque period which saw the meteoric rise of French opera and non-vocal instrumental music. We'll enjoy splendid dance music and opera by Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau, plus witty keyboard pieces by master clavecinist Francois Couperin.

Works explored, media used:

Anon: Saint Jean Baptiste, Ad Magnam Missam. Alleluia Inter Natos Mulierum, Hilliard Ensemble

Anon: Alleluia -Dies Sanctificatus, Hilliard Ensemble

Pérotin (c. 1155/60-1205): Sederunt Principes, Hilliard Ensemble

Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1377): Douce Dame Jolie, La Morra

Josquin des Prez (c. 1450/55-1521): El Grillo (the cricket), Voices of Music

Jean-Baptiste Lully: (1632-1687)

- Entrée d'Apollon, L'Eventail

- Excerpt from film, "Le Roi Danse"

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764):

- Hippolyte & Aricie, l'Opéra de Paris

- Platée, l'Opéra Garnier

Francois Couperin (1668-1733):

- Le Tic Toc Choc ou les Maillotins, Elaine Comparone

- La Lugubre, Rachel Franklin

May 4: Excess and Outrage

Reaching the 1800s, it seemed that the horrors of the French Revolution unleashed a taste for massive scale and spectacle. The bizarre musical program of Hector Berlioz's brilliant *Symphonie Fantastique* combines sexuality, drugs and diabolism. Equally mesmerizing for Parisians was the new glorious gigantism of Grand Opera, a style that demanded extreme melodrama, much death and destruction, and perilous stage machinery! We get a taste of this with *Les Huguenots* by Giacomo Meyerbeer and continue Bizet's demonic theme with Gounod's *Faust*.

Works explored, media used:

Hector Berlioz (1833-1869): Symphonie fantastique, Aurora Orchestra

Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864): Les Huguenots

- Blessing of the Swords, Grand Théâtre de Genève, Laurent Alvaro

- Tu m'aimes, Bard Festival, Michael Spyres

Charles Gounod (1818-1893): Faust, Latvian National Opera, Andreas Bauer

May 5: Breaking Norms and Creating Virtuosity

The magnificent *Carmen* by Georges Bizet was a very different kind of opera, featuring a revolutionary heroine who stubbornly sets herself outside of the standard social hypocrisies of the time. It caused a furor and failed utterly at its premiere. Although opera was the main public obsession in Paris, the 19th century also saw the city become a glittering center for pianism when those twin constellations Liszt and Chopin came to town. We'll enjoy some indigenous offerings: some wild and wonderful piano music by the reclusive Charles Valentin Alkan, the exquisite *Violin and Piano Sonata* by César Franck, and the *Piano Concerto no. 2* by Camille Saint-Saëns, plus his delightful *Carnival of the Animals*.

Works explored, media used:

Georges Bizet (1838-1875): *Carmen*

- Seguedille, Grace Bumbry
- Chanson Bohème, Julia Migenes

Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888): Grande Sonate, Op. 33, "Les quatre âges", Ronald Smith

César Franck (1822-1890): Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano, Kaja Danczowska (violin), Krystian Zimmernan (piano)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921):

- Piano concerto no. 2, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Lara Melda
- Carnival of the Animals, Sheku Kanneh-Mason and family

May 6: Passing the Flame

Saint-Saëns was Gabriel Fauré's deeply revered teacher. And Fauré was equally influential as the chief mentor for Maurice Ravel. Connections continue on a less exalted level as singer Emma Bardac was mistress to both Fauré and Claude Debussy! Whether composing religious works or fantasy tableaux, Fauré, Debussy and Ravel combined sensuousness and extreme refinement, frequently inspired by Symbolist poetry. We explore Fauré's beautiful *Requiem*, Debussy's symphonic masterpiece *La Mer*, and Ravel's extraordinary journey into the supernatural with his piano masterpiece *Gaspard de la Nuit*, plus his charming short opera, *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*.

Works explored, media used:

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Requiem, John Eliot Gardiner, Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique

Claude Debussy (1864-1918): *La Mer*, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Sir Georg Solti. Video by Gilda Tabarez

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937):

- Gaspard de la Nuit, Gina Bachauer, Sir John Gielgud
- L'Enfant et les Sortilèges, Oper Köln

May 7: Modernism Smashes Old Idols

"Enough of clouds, waves, aquariums, watersprites, and nocturnal scents; what we need is a music of the earth, everyday music." With those inflammatory words French mover, shaker and trouble-maker Jean Cocteau relegated Debussy to the musical history books and ushered in the reign of eccentric genius Erik Satie and his group of rambunctious protégés, Les Six, particularly Darius Milhaud. Delicious satire and irreverence will be provided by both Satie and Jacques Ibert. Finally we cannot leave French music without a brief discussion of the great Olivier Messiaen whose place in musical modernism is utterly unique. His *Quartet for the End of Time* is deeply moving and a 20th c. landmark.

Works explored, media used:

Erik Satie (1866-1925): Entr'acte, directed by René Clair

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974): La Création du monde, The Presidents Own US Marine Band

Jacques Ibert (1890-1962): Divertissement, WDR Symphony Orchestra, Cristian Măcelaru

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992): Quatuor pour la fin du temps, Antje Weithaas, Violine / Sol Gabetta, Cello / Sabine Meyer, Clarinet / Bertrand Chamayou, Piano