

TRIO DE LLANO IN CONCERT

Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, Abendmusik Alexandria Series Director

This evening's program features a wide variety of music written for a combination of instruments that for many listeners is probably quite unfamiliar – wind trio. Consisting of flutist Dennette McDermott, clarinetist Malena McLaren, and bassoonist Douglas Bakenhus, Trio de Llano is based in Natchitoches where its members are professors at Northwestern State University. As Trio de Llano, these three talented musicians have toured around the world bringing the often unheard sounds of wind trio to many receptive audiences.

Our concert this evening begins with a brand new piece by Shreveport-based composer Todd Gabriel. Having studied at the Juilliard School and then received his doctorate from the University of Arizona, Todd Gabriel now serves on the Centenary College faculty as Hurley School of Music associate professor of theory, history, and composition. An award-winning composer, Gabriel aims for his compositions to be both well-crafted and accessible, although he does not shy away from more modern devices either. His *Sunflower Dance*, completed a mere two months ago in December 2014, receives its world premiere at Abendmusik Alexandria this evening. With its somewhat roaming, languid motion, *Sunflower Dance* seems to illustrate the well-known characteristic of sunflowers to track the sun as it moves across the daytime sky. *Sunflower Dance* is actually not the first piece written by Gabriel for Trio de Llano. His 2007 composition for this group – *Party Piece* – was his first work to be performed in Europe when Trio de Llano played it at a 2008 recital at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) composed his *Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano'* during the first few years after his arrival in Vienna in 1792. During that time, he wrote a considerable amount of chamber music for wind instruments, both in solo roles and as parts of larger wind ensembles. Originally scored for two oboes and English horn, the piece heard this evening takes as its theme the famous duet *Là ci darem la mano* from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. Translated as "There we shall join our hands," this song is a ploy by the Don to seduce yet another lover – this time the peasant girl Zerlina, and on her own wedding day at that – as he sings of the romance that awaits her if she will only go away with him to his castle. By the time Beethoven had arrived in Vienna, the recently-deceased Mozart was already Vienna's favorite composer, and *Là ci darem la mano* would have been as well-known then as any popular tune is today. Despite the Don's shallow

intentions to add a new name to his ever-growing list of conquests, the original duet is quite beautiful – a trait maintained by Beethoven as he expands on the familiar theme in his arrangement.

Walter Piston (1894-1976) was during his lifetime considered one of America's leading composers. As a young man, he had studied with Nadia Boulanger and Paul Dukas in Paris, and, for the next thirty-four years until his retirement, was a music professor at Harvard where his students included no less than Leonard Bernstein and Elliott Carter. His compositions included eight symphonies, two violin concerti, and much more and won for him two Pulitzer Prizes among other awards. Today, Piston is less well-known, however – his ballet *The Incredible Flutist* is the only work many classical music aficionados even know by Piston. Ultimately, this is because his music is difficult to contextualize. As Leon Botstein writes, "Piston's music exhibited no obvious markers of radical innovation... a composer who excelled at strategies others had pioneered, an artist capable of synthesis." Like his contemporary Copland, he was inspired by Stravinsky and the French, but unlike Copland he did not set-out to create an American music based on images of the American West and the frontier. Instead, Piston's regional backdrop was New England with its conservatories and their scholarly atmosphere – although his music is no less accessible for it.

Piston's Three Pieces for wind trio dates from 1926, the year that Piston left Paris and began teaching at Harvard. Throughout this composition, each of the three instruments seems to have its own intentions – sometimes they coalesce with one another and at other times this simply leads them to play on top of each other. Their clever rhythms and divergent harmonies keep the Three Pieces moving, however, propelling them into the same Neo-Classical territory where Stravinsky, Hindemith, and other composers had found themselves by the mid-1920s.

The little-known French composer François René Gebauer was born in Versailles in 1773, the year before King Louis XVI whose reign would culminate in the French Revolution took the throne. At a young age, Gebauer began taking bassoon lessons and his career as a bassoonist included time spent with various military bands, with the Paris Opera, and as professor of bassoon at the Paris Conservatoire. He died in 1845, having made his career when now-legendary contemporaries like Chopin and Berlioz were actively composing in

France. His music – most of which includes roles for at least one if not more than one bassoon – shows the distinct influence of Rossini. In fact, Gebauer arranged at least six arias from this Italian composer’s opera *The Barber of Seville* for bassoon. The piece by Gebauer heard on this evening’s program is one of three wind trios for flute, clarinet, and bassoon published as his Opus 42. This piece – the second trio of the set – is in two movements. The term “*polacca*” in the title of its second movement refers to the then popular trend of imbuing finales of instrumental compositions with the dotted rhythms of a Polish dance.

Reverie, and *Exit*. An early work, *Fragments* offers a preview of the distinct compositional style Muczynski was still developing with its keen expression and rhythmic intrigue.

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Contemporary composer Stella Sung has written music for all settings and ensembles – for the concert hall, for ballet, opera, film, and others. Since 2003, she has also incorporated multimedia aspects into her works, including her recent opera *The Red Silk Thread: An Epic Tale of Marco Polo* which received its premiere last April. A professor at the University of Central Florida, Sung also serves as Composer-in-Residence for the Dayton Performing Arts Alliance in Ohio. While she is the winner of numerous prestigious awards and has even written a piece commissioned for world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, she sees her artistic calling as even deeper: in a recent interview, she stated “being a composer is a complex kind of profession... everything that we do is created from within.” Speaking about art generally, she said “the arts are part of our lives... the arts define culture... they help us move into our true selves.” She is devoted to helping her students find themselves artistically as well, guiding their ambitions and shaping their talents. Her composition *Paris 1987* is in three movements. It was written in 1987 and premiered on April 24, 1988 by flutist Susan McQuinn, clarinetist Steven Owens, and bassoonist Julie Fox at the University of Central Florida.

The final piece on this evening’s program is *Fragments* by Robert Muczynski (1929-2010), an American composer of Polish descent. Having spent much of his career in academia, Muczynski wrote many of his compositions in response to commissions and awards. Although writing at the same time as many of the fiercest innovators in twentieth-century music, Muczynski always shunned their pursuit of novelty. To this end, the composer once stated “For a long time there was this quest for originality. I’m not an innovator; I’m not a pioneer, a trailblazer, any of those things... It’s the way we use [certain techniques], ultimately, that makes us sound individual.” Although Muczynski admittedly went against modernist trends, his music still found advocates, and his Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Chamber Orchestra was even nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1982. Composed in 1958, *Fragments* consists of five miniatures titled *Waltz*, *Solitude*, *Holiday*,