

**JULY 25—NOTABLE ENCOUNTER AT HEARST CASTLE®**

**Saturday, July 25, 2009, 6:30 PM**  
**Hearst Castle, San Simeon**

***Octet for Winds*** (1923; rev. 1952)

**Igor STRAVINSKY** (1882–1971)

Anyone who has even the slightest acquaintance with Igor Stravinsky's personality knows that he was a composer who prided himself on musical independence, who resisted being "pigeon-holed" by stylistic labels, and who favored an astringent, unemotional sound. For these reasons, it is still somewhat astonishing to read Stravinsky's own account of the origins of his *Octet for Wind Instruments*, since it sounds far more like the dreamy imaginings of a Romantic-era composer. The octet, Stravinsky said, "began with a dream in which I saw myself in a small room surrounded by a small group of instrumentalists playing some very attractive music. I did not recognize the music, though I strained to hear it, and I could not recall any feature of it the next day, but I do remember my curiosity—in the dream—to know how many the musicians were. . . . After I had counted them to the number eight, I looked again and saw that they were playing bassoons, trombones, trumpets, a flute, and a clarinet. I awoke from this little concert in a state of great delight and anticipation and the next morning began to compose."

It is easy to forget nowadays that in the octet, finished in 1923, the wind instruments are required to perform in ways that would have been impossible for some of them 100 years earlier. For this reason, a work like Stravinsky's was still a novelty—there certainly had been ensembles of winds for centuries, but Stravinsky demanded much more from his players. In the first movement, Stravinsky explored what he called his "rediscovery of sonata form," letting the slow introductions of Haydn symphonies be his model for the "Lento" that leads into the "Allegro moderato."

As classical composers might have done, Stravinsky wrote a dance theme for his second movement; his choice was a slow waltz, and he told his biographer Robert Craft that only after the waltz theme was written did he realize that it was a perfect subject for a series of variations. The first variation illustrates the virtuosic demands that Stravinsky placed on the instruments; Stravinsky described their rapid finger-work as "ribbons of scales," and he used the same "ribbons" to introduce each of the following four variations. Variation "E" (Stravinsky's favorite) leads without pause into the "Finale" movement, a jaunty rondo form that draws to a surprisingly jazzy close.

***Octet for Strings*** (1920)

**Max BRUCH** (1838–1920)

Over the centuries, there have been a number of composers who were celebrated in their lifetimes for their vocal music, but whose posthumous reputations have relied on their instrumental works. Certainly this is true for both Haydn and Vivaldi—who of us can now hum an aria melody from a Vivaldi opera?—and the same shift in focus has taken place with the music of Max Bruch. Somewhat to Bruch's annoyance, much of that shift began occurring while he was still alive, thanks to his (superb) first violin concerto, which reflects Bruch's special affinity for violin writing—and which started to overshadow his other works. It also didn't help that Bruch was somewhat of a musical reactionary: although he admired Brahms very much, Bruch had a family to support, and he played it "safe" as much as he could, writing works that would sell rather than pieces that were intentionally innovative. Moreover, Bruch did not like the direction that Wagner and Liszt were headed; instead, he turned back to older masters such as Mendelssohn and Schumann for his models.

It is no surprise, therefore, to find a great deal of kinship between Bruch's very last composition, the *String Octet in B-flat*, and Mendelssohn's own Octet, written 95 years earlier. One difference, however, occurs in the instrumentation; Mendelssohn's Octet called for four violins, two violas, and two cellos, while Bruch's piece replaces one of the cellos with a contrabass, thereby making orchestral performance feasible. In fact, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the only published edition (based on a flawed set of parts hand-copied by Bruch's daughter-in-law so that Bruch could hear the work before his death) was titled *Concerto for String Orchestra* (Octet). Bruch's autograph score disappeared during World War II and did not resurface until 1986, when it was auctioned in New York. A philanthropic collector donated it to the Austrian National Library, and a critical edition was published at last in 1996.

Although Bruch's octet was considered "old fashioned" even when it was new, there is much to be said for the architectural balance and lyricism that characterize this piece. The faster outer movements frame a passionate "Adagio," reminding us that Bruch had recently suffered not only the loss of his wife but also a son. The whole work showcases the violin, reflecting Bruch's own admiration for that instrument's ability to "sing" a melody—and "melody," he proclaimed, "was the soul of music."

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