

Symphony No. 3 in G minor, Op. 42

Albert Roussel

Everyone who knew Albert Roussel seemed to like him. He refused to get involved in musical polemics, and he was a generous friend to young composers just entering the profession. He provided a forum for many through his position as president of the French division of the International Society for Contemporary Music. *La Revue musicale*, the most prestigious French music journal, honored him twice through special issues dedicated entirely to his achievements. The first, in 1929, was accompanied by celebratory pieces composed in his honor by eight eminent figures, including Maurice Delage, Arthur Honegger, Jacques Ibert, Darius Milhaud, and Francis Poulenc. At that point some of his best work still lay ahead, including his Third and Fourth Symphonies, the ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*, the Concertino for Cello and Orchestra, and the String Trio. Following Roussel's death, in 1937, his colleague Charles Koechlin summed things up: "He was a complete artist — a musician, a thinker, a man."

It was not just in France that Roussel was esteemed. In Poland, for example, Witold Lutosławski was captivated by Roussel's music, and even quoted it (in veiled form) in the second movement of his own First Symphony. In 1988 Lutosławski told his biographer Charles Bodman Rae,

I heard the Third Symphony of Roussel for the first time in the Warsaw Philharmonic shortly after its first performances Later, during the war, a record of it made a strong impression on me The richness of harmony in Debussy's and Ravel's music had a strong influence on me; but I was never happy because it was used for suites or ballets or some symphonic poems, but never for more serious forms like sym-

phonies. Roussel's symphonies, especially the Third, filled that gap. He used the richness of the French world of harmony ... in a form which makes us think about Brahms. He is sort of a French Brahms of the 20th century.

A French Brahms of the 20th century? One could lie awake nights pondering that. Easier to grasp is the characterization offered by the composer and critic Paul Landormy: "Roussel is a sort of Debussy trained in counterpoint."

He came to music late, having already embarked on a career as a naval officer. He took a first stab at composition in 1892, while on an ocean voyage, and when he was 25 he decided it was how he would make his mark in the world. He entered the Schola Cantorum in Paris and so excelled that he was invited to assume the direction of the school's counterpoint classes, which he did from 1902 to 1914 (at which point he resigned to volunteer

In Short

Born: April 5, 1869, in Tourcoing, France

Died: August 23, 1937, in Royan

Work composed: August 1929–March 29, 1930, on commission from Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, its dedicatees

World premiere: October 24, 1930, at Boston's Symphony Hall, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 2, 1935, Bruno Walter, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 22, 1984, Erich Leinsdorf, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 22 minutes

for military service in World War I). Roussel's pupils at the Schola included Erik Satie and Edgard Varèse, both of whom felt they learned a great deal from him even if they chose not to apply it to their own compositions.

The Third Symphony — the third of four — brings into focus many of Roussel's salient hallmarks: a preference for counterpoint as opposed to vertical harmonic procedure, a penchant for bitonality (sometimes expressed in a fusion of major and minor modes), incisive rhythms (in more regular patterns than in some of his compositions), wide-ranging melodies that can be spun out over a couple of octaves, and a delight in extended (even jazzy) chords of the eleventh and the thirteenth and in dissonant intervals (such as the augmented fourth, major seventh, and minor ninth).

Roussel may appeal most deeply to the connoisseur who is prepared to delve into what he considered “the most hermetic and least accessible of all the arts.” In a 1928 interview he summed up his goal as a composer:

What I would like to achieve is a music that is entirely self-contained, music that aims to free itself from any pictorial or descriptive element and completely removed from any geographical connection. ... Far from wanting to describe anything, I always attempt to remove from my mind the recollection of objects or forms that might invite translation into musical effects. I want only to make pure music.

Instrumentation: three flutes (two doubling piccolos), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine, tambour, tam-tam, celesta, two harps, and strings.

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Listen for . . . a Unifying Theme

A succession of five notes — C-sharp descending to A and then D, followed by an octave jump up to D and a descent back down to E — serves as a motto-theme for Roussel's Third Symphony, appearing as a melody or bass line, generating several themes, even serving to link the four movements. The composer sometimes alters the specific notes but retains the general shape. Its first prominent appearance comes in the middle of the energetic first movement, at the climax of a two-page crescendo, where the five-note motto-theme is proclaimed *fortississimo* by the woodwinds and brass:



In the second movement the motto is speeded up to become a fugue subject; and in the finale, the concertmaster intones it in an *Andante* section (played *dolce*), in slightly altered form.