

**Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**September 28, 2019**  
**Michael Allsen**

**Conductor's Note:** Immediately following the chaos of World War I, Paris became the center of the artistic universe. Many of the 20th century's greatest European and American artists lived or got their start there. It was a time of great artistic innovation and collaboration. Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* employed young composers, artists, choreographers, and designers such as Stravinsky, Picasso, Balanchine, and Coco Chanel for its productions. A mecca for American composers as diverse as Aaron Copland, Virgil Thompson, and Elliot Carter, the Paris home of musical guru Nadia Boulanger became the place where some one hundred American composers eventually found their muse. And where Germany failed, Jazz succeeded when James Europe's 369th U.S. Infantry Regiment's "Hellfighters Band" introduced Jazz to Europe, captivating Paris with this new musical style and inspiring Paris' composers. In the midst of Paris' *l'Anées Folles* (The Crazy Years) stood two musical giants: Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky. It is their music and inspiration which we celebrate tonight. And while this was an era of innovation and forward thinking, it was also a time of reconsideration of the past—recent and distant. In the three suites by Ravel and Stravinsky performed tonight, you will hear their re-imagined Neo-Baroque and Neo-Classical styles expressed through the dance suite, used to great effect by Baroque composers such as Bach, Händel, and Couperin. —G. Stelluto

**François Couperin (1688-1733)**  
**Forlane from *Concert Royaux No. 4***

**Quick Notes:** Couperin composed four *Concerts Royaux* for the Court of Louis XIV between 1714 and 1715 and published them in 1722. Though suites of dances, they were probably meant as concert pieces rather than for actual dancing. Couperin intentionally left their instrumentation ambiguous so they could be performed as solo keyboard pieces or as chamber music with various instruments. Duration 3:00.

**Context:** The Baroque music heard here is part of a well-established tradition: the dance suite. From the 17th century onwards, composers would group together contrasting movements for harpsichord, chamber ensemble, or a small orchestra. Though the suite was initially a French form, Couperin was noted for blending French and Italian styles in his later music. In fact, the title of his 1724 *Le goûts réunis* ("The Tastes Reunited")—a kind of sequel to the *Concerts Royaux*—refers to this blended style. The similarity of movements between authentic Baroque dance suites and Ravel's suite are striking. The full *Concert Royaux No. 4* movements are: *Prelude, Allemande, Courante française, Courante à l'italienne, Sarabande, Rigaudon, Forlane*. For *Le Tombeau de Couperin* they are (in tonight's order): *Prelude, Fugue, Forlane, Menuet, Toccata, Rigaudon*.

**Background:** The composer François Couperin was the most prominent member of a large and successful family of French musicians. He eventually served both as the organist at the Parisian church of Saint-Gervais and as a royal musician in the courts of Louis XIV and Louis XV.

**What You'll Hear:** The *Forlane* performed by Mr. Weiss this evening is the final dance from his *Concert Royaux No. 4* and was the direct inspiration for Maurice Ravel's *Forlane* in his *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, composed almost two hundred years later. True to Couperin's practice of blending cultures, the *forlane* is of Italian origin with possible Slavic influences. It is a light and skipping dance in two but in 6/8 meter - which embeds two triplets within the duple pulse. Noticeable in Ravel's suite to follow will be his direct borrowing of melodic and rhythmic material from Couperin.

### **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)** **Le Tombeau de Couperin**

**Quick Notes:** Ravel composed this work between 1915 and 1919. The orchestral movements were first performed by the Padeloup Orchestra in Paris on February 28, 1920. Duration 33:00.

**Context:** The lament, homage, or *tombeau* to the memory of a great person recently (or not-so-recently) deceased is one of the oldest of musical genres. There are surviving lamentations on the death of Charlemagne and other medieval nobles, and from the 14th century onwards, dozens of musical commemorations of composers. These works, often by the dead composer's friends and admirers, are usually written in the musical style of the composer and frequently include musical quotations from his works. French composers of the 17th and early 18th centuries produced dozens of heartfelt *tombeaux* for deceased colleagues and teachers. François Couperin, the greatest French organist of his day, produced two such works, for Lully and Corelli.

**Background:** Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* ("The Tomb of Couperin") commemorates François Couperin, but it is also a celebration of the spirit of French Baroque music. Ravel, like many "Neo-Classical" (or Neo-Baroque) composers of the day, was interested in incorporating 18th-century forms and musical idioms into his compositions. Like many of his orchestral works, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* began as a piece for solo piano. His original version, initially titled simply "*Suite française*," was begun just before Ravel left for volunteer service on the front lines in World War I in 1915, and left unfinished until 1917. By this time, several of Ravel's closest friends had been killed in the war, and the *Tombeau* took on an added personal dimension: each movement was dedicated to one his lost comrades. In 1919, Ravel orchestrated four movements of the piano suite to create the orchestral *Le tombeau de Couperin*.

**What You'll Hear:** Ravel was known as one of the greatest orchestrators of all time. His ability to create both beautifully delicate and richly sensual sound environments is unsurpassed. Tonight, you will hear a "mash-up" of his original piano suite and the orchestrated version of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* that will highlight his genius for both piano and orchestral music. Mr. Weiss will begin with the *Prélude*, and we will follow that with the orchestral version of the same movement—a unique chance to hear the composer's two visions of this music side-by-side. We will also hear solo versions of two of the more "pianistic" movements of the original suite that Ravel chose not to orchestrate, the *Fugue* and the *Toccata*. Finally, piano and orchestra join together for the final *Rigaudon*.

The six movements are built along the lines of a French dance suite of Couperin's time. The music of Ravel's orchestral *Prélude* clearly reflects its origins as a piano piece. The

flowing sixteenth-note line introduced by the oboe and clarinet provides an element of perpetual motion throughout the movement. The *Fugue* develops a delicate, almost hesitant fugue subject throughout. While the music clearly sounds “modern,” Ravel uses a fairly strict Baroque approach to the fugue form, including devices like playing the subject in inversion (that is, upside down!). The *Forlane*, with its regular phrasing and rhythms, is the most “danceable” of the movements. (*Le Tombeau de Couperin* was the basis of at least one ballet during Ravel’s lifetime, and several others since then.) The *Menuet*, a stately yet tender 3/4 dance, was introduced at the court of Louis XIV in the 1650s, and remained the most popular court dance in Europe for well over a century. The opening section features woodwind solo lines above a light accompaniment. In the central trio, there is a change to minor key, and a new melody stated in chords. The *Toccata* is an intense showpiece for the solo piano, with a furiously driving 16th-note figure punctuated by accents. A series of short contrasting ideas maintain the same ferocious character. The forward motion of this movement pauses briefly only once near the end, before a brilliant closing passage. The *Rigaudon* was a Provençal peasant dance that was refined and introduced at the French royal court in the 17th century. Ravel’s *Rigaudon* features high-spirited outer sections outlined by a repeating trumpet figure. The more serious inner section features a pair of lovely woodwind duets.

### **Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)** **Suites 1 and 2 for Small Orchestra**

**Quick Notes:** Stravinsky initially composed this music for piano duet between 1914 and 1917. He orchestrated the eight movements heard here between 1917 and 1924. Duration 14:00.

**Context:** Several famous orchestral works from early 20th-century Paris were originally composed as children’s piano pieces. Works like Debussy’s *Children’s Corner* or Ravel’s *Mother Goose Suite* had their origins in simple and charming works intended for very young players. While he was living in Switzerland during World War I, Stravinsky composed a series of eight piano duets (two players on one piano) intended for his children Theodor and Mika. The first three were composed with a very easy left-hand part, and the remaining five had an easy right hand part. These were later transformed into the two orchestral suites heard here.

**Background:** After his initial success with the ballet *Firebird* in Paris in 1910, Stravinsky and his family spent increasing amounts of time in Switzerland. When war broke out in 1914, he found himself unable to return to Russia, and he and his family spent most of the next six years in Switzerland. They returned to Paris after the war. The war years were hard times financially for Stravinsky, but his time in Switzerland was important in his development as a composer. During the war years, he experimented with smaller, more compact forms, while continuing to explore Russian and other folk styles. He also began to forge the Neo-Classical style that would occupy him for the next couple of decades. Some of this new simplicity comes through in the witty children’s piano pieces he wrote for his son and daughter.

**What You’ll Hear:** Because they are so short, the suites are often played together. They are scored for a chamber orchestra and there are four short movements in each suite. *Suite No. 1* begins with a quiet *Andante* melody above a rippling woodwind accompaniment. The next two movements were inspired by trips Stravinsky took during

the war. The dancelike *Napolitana* was inspired by a visit to Naples in 1917. The more dramatic *Española*, with subtle shadings of Flamenco style, came from a visit to Spain in 1916. *Balalaika* mimics the strumming of a folk instrument from Stravinsky's Russian homeland. The music of *Suite No.2* opens with a comical *Marche*. The *Valse* that follows is just as humorous...and just slightly demented! The fun continues in a sarcastic *Polka*. The set concludes with a wild *Galop*, whose music is interrupted, first by a mournful bassoon, and then by a quick trumpet/tuba duet.

## **Maurice Ravel**

### **Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G Major**

**Quick Notes:** This concerto was composed between 1929 and 1931. The premiere was in Paris, on January 13, 1932, with Ravel's student Marguerite Long as soloist. Duration 23:00

**Context:** One main compositional focus of composers in Paris in the 1920s was Neo-Classicism—the adoption of 18th-century musical forms. Another prime influence was American Jazz. Ragtime and Jazz were phenomenally popular in early 20th-century Paris, and many composers—Debussy, Stravinsky, Milhaud, Ravel, and others—eagerly incorporated this exciting new style from America into their own compositions. Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G Major* incorporates both influences.

**Background:** In 1927-29, Ravel made a highly successful tour of America. This seems to have been inspiration for finishing a G Major piano concerto he had been working on for some 18 years. Though he eventually returned to Paris, Ravel was seriously considering another long tour in the United States as a pianist and conductor. The G Major concerto was probably intended to serve as a solo for Ravel himself, but when he completed the work he found that he had apparently created something that was beyond his talents as a pianist! (The task of premiering the work fell to his protégé Marguerite Long.) He was actually working on two piano concertos at the same time—from 1930-32, was also working on the D Major concerto for left hand alone. Despite the fact that they were produced simultaneously, the two pieces are strikingly different in character. The D Major concerto is a dense work of almost heavy-handed virtuosity, while the G Major is a light and happy piece that attempts to create an equal balance between soloist and orchestra. Both concertos show strong Jazz influence but these effects are used in a much more casual and humorous way in the G Major concerto.

**What You'll Hear:** The work is laid out in the mold of a Mozart concerto, in three movements. In the opening movement (*Allegramente*), the main theme is a quirky, offbeat melody carried first by the piccolo, as the piano provides a showy accompaniment. The second theme, presented by the piano, is a sleepy Spanish-flavored melody, accompanied by Jazz-inflected “blue notes” from the woodwinds. The second movement (*Adagio assai*) begins with a dramatic rhythmic effect in the piano: the right hand melody is in 3/4, while the left hand accompaniment is in 6/8. This figure continues throughout, adding a note of uneasiness to what is otherwise a quiet and atmospheric movement. In keeping with the “Mozartian” character of the concerto, the last movement (*Presto*) is a rollicking rondo in 6/8. This is the most clearly “Jazzy” of the three movements, but it also provides a showcase for the soloist, as everything flashes by at blazing speed.

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