

Unanswered Questions

March 3 & 4, 2012

Ernest Bloch
(1880 – 1959)

Concerto Grosso No. 1 for Piano and Strings

- I. Prelude
- II. Dirge
- III. Pastorale and Rustic Dances
- IV. Fugue

Susan Grace, piano

Clara Schumann
(1819 – 1896)

Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 7

- I. Allegro maestoso
- II. Romanze: Andante non troppo, con grazia
- III. Finale: Allegro non troppo

Susan Grace, piano

INTERMISSION

Charles Ives
(1874 – 1954)

The Unanswered Question

Igor Stravinsky
(1882 – 1971)

Pulcinella Suite

- I. Sinfonia
- II. Serenata
- III. Scherzino
- IV. Allegro
- V. Andantino
- VI. Tarantella
- VII. Toccata
- VIII. Gavotta con due variazioni
- IX. Vivo
- X. Minuetto
- XI. Finale

Movements played without pause.

Overview: Ernest Bloch

Born: July 24, 1880, in Geneva

Died: July 15, 1959, in Portland, Oregon

Work Composed: 1924 – 1925

Why It Matters: Bloch's Concerto Grosso No. 1 for Strings and Piano brought the concerto grosso out of the oblivion it had endured since the early Classical era. It is one of the best pieces for strings from the 1920s.



The theory of atonality in itself is an anomaly where genuine music is concerned—a theory, frankly, as impractical as it is fundamentally stupid.—Ernest Bloch, to his students at the Cleveland Institute of Music

In 1920, **Ernest Bloch** was asked to found a music school in Cleveland, Ohio. Energized by the idea that founding a school might allow him to focus his energies, he founded the Cleveland Institute of Music, which remains one of the finest music schools in the country today. He must have been perfectly suited for the task, as enrollment increased from seven in 1920, to 200 in 1921, and 400 in 1922. This was probably due to Bloch's notorious sense of focus and energy. Novelist Sherwood Anderson described him as “the most dynamic, overwhelmingly forceful man I ever met.” However, this intensity came at a price, as Bloch soon found himself in conflict with the school's wealthy donors, in part because of his refusal to compromise on artistic issues, leading to his resignation after only five years.

Bloch's style of composition was decidedly traditional, a reaction against atonality and the *avante garde* in an age when innovation was almost more important than quality. Bloch's students at the Institute doubted that traditional forms and techniques could speak to modern audiences, so he wrote the Prelude of his **Concerto Grosso No. 1** to challenge them. When the Institute's orchestra played the piece with obvious enthusiasm, Bloch exclaimed, “What do you think now? It has just old-fashioned notes!” Here was solid proof that the concerto grosso—a genre which had practically fallen into oblivion at the end of the Baroque Era—could speak to the modern age and adapt to a truly modern (though not too modern) musical language.

The piece itself is remarkable for its diversity and depth of expression within the confines of so traditional a form. The funeral dirge of the second movement is surprisingly descriptive, though Bloch never revealed a program for it, and the pastorale and rustic dances of the third movement are also highly evocative. The final fugue is decidedly joyous, yet modern. Throughout, the piano part is just shy of a concerto solo, virtuosically playing a key role but never stealing the show.

About Ernest Bloch: Swiss composer Ernest Bloch (1880 – 1959) began his musical studies on the violin at age nine, and started composing soon afterward. After intensive study at the conservatory on Brussels (including studies with violinist and composer Eugène Ysaÿe) he began a period of moving between major musical centers in Europe to study with leading composers before returning to Brussels in 1903. He moved to the United States in 1916, becoming an American citizen in 1924. In 1920, he founded the Cleveland Institute of Music and moved on to lead the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in 1925, a post which he also held for only five years. In 1941, he moved to Agate Beach, Oregon, a small coastal community, and lived there happily and productively for the rest of his life.

Bloch followed in the footsteps of the German Romantic school, and many of his early works reveal obvious nods to Richard Strauss, but he also deeply admired Claude Debussy. With these diverse influences, he would develop a unique, personal style, fusing it with Jewish liturgical and folk music in his later works.

Overview: Clara Schumann

Born: September 13, 1819, in Leipzig

Died: May 20, 1896, in Frankfurt

Work Composed: 1834 – 1836

Why It Matters: Despite being horribly ignored, Clara Schumann's Piano Concerto had a profound impact on her husband's piano concerto as well as Brahms' First Piano Concerto, with lasting repercussions.



I have seriously considered my future and I have to tell you ... that I cannot be yours until circumstances have entirely altered ... can you offer me a life free from all worries? ... and must I bury my art now?—a diary passage from Clara Wieck, considering her pending marriage to Robert Schumann.

Composition was a man's world in the Romantic Era. Few women composed seriously, and even **Clara Schumann**, a virtuoso pianist and towering intellect, regarded her own compositions as “mere woman's work.” This is especially ironic, as her **Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 7** would have a profound impact on the development of the piano concerto itself and an obvious influence on her husband's Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 54.

Clara began work on the Piano Concerto when she was only fourteen years old. She and Robert were already infatuated and the two composed numerous piano pieces for each other. The Piano Concerto was supposed to be a single movement, but two years of composition produced three full movements. The influence of Chopin is clearly evident, and there were some remarkable innovations. The dialogue between the solo cello and piano in the second movement would be echoed in Robert's Piano Concerto, and Clara would find a new balance between Chopin's grace and Beethoven's thundering virtuosity. Robert said the piece was “somewhere between a concerto, a symphony and a major sonata,” changing the role of the pianist and influencing Brahms' First Piano Concerto. The single-movement version of the piece premiered in 1841 in Leipzig with Mendelssohn conducting and Clara playing the piano. In 1845, she once again took up the piece and added the Intermezzo and Finale. Robert would orchestrate the final movement for Clara. That this remarkable concerto, with its soulful Romanticism and graceful virtuosity, is not played more is truly a sign of how our world can overlook the contributions of women.

About Clara Schumann: Born Clara Josephine Wieck in Leipzig on September 13, 1819, Clara Schumann was destined for a tumultuous life. Her parents divorced when she was four years old and she was raised by her father. She was a remarkably gifted piano prodigy. She met Robert Schumann after playing a recital when she was only eight. Robert admired her playing so much that he discontinued his law studies to study piano with Clara's father, Friedrich Wieck. Robert would live in the Wieck household for about a year during those studies. Meanwhile, Clara continued her meteoric rise as a piano virtuoso, complete with lengthy European tours, a recital with virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini in Paris, and the title of “Royal and Imperial Chamber Virtuoso”—Austria's highest musical honor.

On August 14, 1837, Clara secretly consented to marry Robert Schumann. When Robert asked for permission to marry Clara, Friedrich Wieck was staunchly opposed, causing a protracted legal battle that was finally settled in the courts. Clara and Robert married on September 12, 1840. Clara continued performing and composing even as she raised seven children with Robert and became a champion of Robert's music in her concert tours. In time, however, Robert's mental instability would compromise her creative efforts. She recorded in her diary the challenges of

finding practice time: “My piano playing is starting to suffer. This always happens when Robert is composing. There is not a single hour in the whole day that I can call my own. Just as long as I do not fall too far behind.” Robert wanted a traditional wife keeping home and raising children, while Clara was a concert pianist at heart. Robert hated touring; Clara loved it. Tensions would rise between them until Robert’s depression would lead him to a suicide attempt on February 27, 1854. Robert requested to be taken to an asylum in Bonn and would remain there until his death in 1856.

After Robert’s death, Clara stopped composing, focusing entirely on her piano performances. She wrote in her diary, “I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea. A woman must not desire to compose—there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?” In 1878, she started teaching piano at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt and continued until 1892, influencing a generation of emerging pianists. She played her last public concert in 1891 and died of a stroke on March 26, 1896.

In 1878, a series of jubilee concerts were held at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig to honor Clara’s half-century career as a concert pianist. She programmed the music of one composer—Robert Schumann.

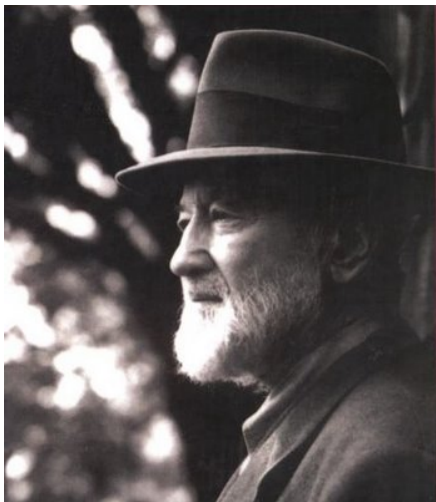
Overview: Charles Ives

Born: October 29, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut

Died: May 19, 1954, in New York City

Work Composed: 1906

Why It Matters: American composer Charles Ives was using certain modern compositional techniques years before they emerged independently in Europe. He was so modern that he was virtually unacknowledged until near the end of his life. *The Unanswered Question* and *Central Park in the Dark* are viewed by some as the first “radical” music of the twentieth century.



But maybe music was not intended to satisfy the curious definiteness of man. Maybe it is better to hope that music may always be transcendental language in the most extravagant sense.—Charles Ives

Ives composed *Central Park in the Dark* and *The Unanswered Question* in 1906 as a pair of pieces. For *The Unanswered Question* he considered two titles—*A Contemplation of a Serious Matter* and *The Unanswered Perennial Question*—eventually settling upon the title we know today. One of the titles he considered for *Central Park in the Dark* was *A Contemplation of Nothing Serious*, so one might think the pair of pieces was a contrast, yet they use the same compositional technique that became so associated with Ives’ style—the juxtaposition of different musical textures and ideas, moving at different rates of time. *The Unanswered Question* has three distinct elements: a slow and virtually pulse-less string background, a series of strident phrases in the woodwinds, and the solemn trumpet solo repeatedly sounding a five-note phrase that represents “the question.” Ives revised the piece in the early 1930s, incorporating more detail and slightly altering the wind and trumpet phrases. He added a note to this revised score: “The strings play *ppp* throughout with no change in tempo. They are to represent ‘The Silences of the Druids—who Know, See and Hear Nothing.’ The trumpet line intones ‘The Perennial Question of Existence,’ and states it in the same tone of voice each time. But the hunt for ‘The Invisible Answer’ undertaken by the flutes and other human beings becomes gradually more active. ... The ‘Fighting Answerers,’ as the time goes on, and after a ‘secret conference,’ seem to

realize a futility and begin to mock “The Question”—the strife is over for the moment. After they disappear, “The Question” is asked for the last time, and the ‘Silences’ are heard beyond in ‘Undisturbed Solitude.’”

About Charles Ives: Charles Ives (1874 – 1954) was born in Danbury, Connecticut, to a U.S. Army bandleader and his wife. Receiving his early music studies from his father, Charles learned about unusual harmonic tools and studied the music of Stephen Foster. He became a church organist at the age of 14, composing and harmonizing hymn tunes for the services and even writing one of his most popular works, *Variations on ‘America,’* during this period. He moved to New Haven in 1893, enrolling in the Hopkins School and moving on to Yale University one year later, studying composition with Horatio Parker and finding time to be active in sports. In 1899 – 1906, he worked for an insurance company that eventually failed, causing him to cofound a new company, which remained his steady source of employment until he retired. As an insurance broker, he devised new ways to structure life insurance packages, essentially laying the groundwork for modern estate planning, and even published a groundbreaking text on the subject. He composed in his spare time and kept a second job as a church organist until he married in 1908.

According to his wife, Ives greeted her one morning in 1927 with tears in his eyes and declared that he could compose no more. (Strangely, this is roughly the same time that Jean Sibelius declared that he would stop composing.) His health caused him to retire from the insurance business in 1930. His only remaining musical activity was a revision of his *Concord Sonata* in the 1940s. When Ives died in 1954, his widow decided that the royalties from his music would go the American Academy of Arts and Letters to fund the Charles Ives Prize.

Overview: Igor Stravinsky

Born: June 17, 1882, near St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Work Composed: 1919 – 1920 for the ballet, 1922 for the suite (revised in 1949)

Why It Matters: After stunning the orchestral world with choreographic wonders like *Rite of Spring* and *The Firebird*, Stravinsky became decidedly neo-Classical in his later years, writing pieces for smaller forces and adopting forms from the Classical Era. This “pure music” is critical to understanding Stravinsky’s more popular works. *Pulcinella* was Stravinsky’s first neo-Classical work.



In everyday life we choose our garments to fit the occasion, though our personality is the same whether we wear a dress suit or pajamas. The same applies to art. I garb my ideas in robes to fit the subject, but do not change my personality.—Igor Stravinsky.

Stravinsky was approached in 1919 by Serge Diaghilev—the legendary impresario with whom he collaborated for *Rite of Spring*, *The Firebird*, and *Petrouchka*—with the idea of composing a ballet based on the music of Pergolesi. Stravinsky initially declined, but when Diaghilev showed him some of Pergolesi’s lesser-known works, he changed his mind. Unlike his earlier ballets, which featured huge orchestras and some of the most challenging orchestration in the repertoire, Stravinsky would opt for a small orchestra, Classical forms, and a simpler musical language, beginning a neo-Classical period which would remain a central characteristic of his compositions for the remainder of his career.

The original ballet received its premiere in Paris on May 15, 1920, with costumes and scenery by Pablo Picasso. It was an immediate success, so Stravinsky followed with a concert suite in 1922, which was premiered in Boston on December 22, 1922. Always updating his works to maintain

copyrights, Stravinsky would slightly revise the suite in 1949. He chose to keep eleven of the original eighteen movements for the suite, covering vocal lines in the orchestra. Today, the suite has become far more popular than the complete ballet.

Synopsis: *Pulcinella*, a traditional hero of Neapolitan *commedia dell'arte*, has become the darling of the local girls. Their fiancés devise a plot to kill him, but Pulcinella fools them with a look-alike who feigns death and is “revived” by Pulcinella. The fiancés return once again in anger, but Pulcinella arranges for everyone to be married, deciding to marry Pimpinella so he can join in the happy ending.

About Igor Stravinsky: Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) was born near St. Petersburg. He was a musical child and a diligent student, but gave little hint of his future as one of the world’s most controversial composers. On the advice of his parents, he studied law, viewing law as a safer bet than a life in music. In 1903, an encounter with Rimsky-Korsakov changed his life. Studying with Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky resolved to become a composer—against Rimsky-Korsakov’s advice!

It was Serge Diaghilev, the famed choreographer and impresario, who launched Stravinsky’s career after hearing *Scherzo fantastique* and *Feu d’artifice* at a St. Petersburg concert in 1909. The first commission was *The Firebird*, launching Stravinsky to overnight fame. Next came the daring and complex *Petrouchka*, and then the riot-inducing *Rite of Spring*. Within three commissions, Stravinsky had gone from mere fame to a reputation as the controversial crown prince of the avant-garde.

During World War I, Stravinsky sought refuge in Switzerland. Lean times obliged him to write for small ensembles, and Stravinsky described this period as his “final break with the Russian orchestral school.” At the close of the war, he moved to Paris; all of his property in Russia had been confiscated and the Communist government blocked Stravinsky’s royalties. Still receiving commissions from Diaghilev, Stravinsky embarked on a new, neo-Classical phase with *Pulcinella*. All of his remaining works would have a classical sense of clarity and elegance.

After the deaths of his wife and daughter from tuberculosis, and with clear indications of World War II on the horizon, Stravinsky opted to move to the United States in 1939. He had already won a commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitsky, but Stravinsky chose to settle in Hollywood, where a large number of European artists (including composer Arnold Schoenberg) had already settled. The 1940s saw masterpieces like *Symphony in C* and *The Rake’s Progress* and a dramatic turn to serialism. Despite this radical change, Stravinsky’s name and reputation guaranteed every work multiple performances and a recording.

In his last decade, Stravinsky achieved a surprising degree of celebrity, being feted by the Pope, the Kennedys, and, in a highly publicized return to Russia in 1962, by Nikita Khrushchev. Stravinsky died in New York on April 6, 1971. He was buried, at his own request, near his friend Diaghilev on Venice’s cemetery island of San Michele.