THURSDAY, MARCH 16, AT 7 PM | FRIDAY, MARCH 17, AT 8 PM | SATURDAY, MARCH 18, AT 2 & 8 PM

NASHVILLE SYMPHONY
GIANCARLO GUERRERO, conductor
EDGAR MEYER, double bass

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
“Ibéria,” No. 2 from Images
   I. Par les rues et par les chemins
       [Through Streets and Lanes]
   II. Les parfums de la nuit
       [The Fragrances of the Night]
   III. Le matin d’un jour de fête
       [Morning of a Feast-Day]

EDGAR MEYER
New Piece for Orchestra
World premiere | Nashville Symphony commission

INTERMISSION

GIOVANNI BOTTESINI
Concerto for Double Bass No. 2 in B Minor
   Allegro
   Andante
   Allegro

MAURICE RAVEL
Boléro

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

This concert is presented in honor of Tennessee Arts Commission’s 50th anniversary

OFFICIAL PARTNER

This weekend’s performances of Ravel’s Boléro are made possible in part by Mrs. Lillian Bradford, in memory of James C. Bradford, Jr.

Proud to conduct a partnership with the Nashville Symphony to make our community a better place to live and work.
TONIGHT’S CONCERT

AT A GLANCE

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Ibéria, from Images

• French composer Claude Debussy opened up entirely new possibilities for classical music by rethinking form and harmony. In style and feel, his work is comparable to that of the French Impressionist painters, and his influence can still be heard in contemporary electronic and ambient music.

• Part of Debussy’s Images trilogy, Ibéria was intended as a musical portrait of Spain — even though the composer had only traveled there once, for a day. The piece captures three different times of day in a Spanish village, from the bustle of the afternoon, to the sensuousness of the night, to the morning of a festive town celebration.

EDGAR MEYER

New Piece for Orchestra

• The world’s foremost double bass soloist, Edgar Meyer has a long history with the Nashville Symphony. In addition to performing as a member of the ensemble in the early 1980s, he made his first solo appearance with the orchestra in 1986, performing Bottesini’s Double Bass Concerto No. 2.

• Meyer’s new work is his first-ever orchestral piece without a soloist. His previous works have largely been showcases for his own talents as a soloist, as well as renowned collaborators including Yo-Yo Ma and Joshua Bell.

GIOVANNI BOTTESSINI

Concerto No. 2 in B minor for Double Bass

• Nineteenth century composer and double bassist Bottesini helped pave the way for Edgar Meyer. As a virtuoso composer-performer, he elevated the status of the double bass, which wasn’t typically known as a solo instrument. He came to be known as “the Paganini of the double bass.”

• Composed in 1845, the Concerto No. 2 is a representative work that highlights both the melodic and rhythmic qualities of the double bass. The piece has been championed by Meyer, who wrote two extended cadenzas for his performance.

MAURICE RAVEL

Boléro

• Ravel’s Boléro draws on this French composer’s Spanish roots — his mother was of Basque heritage and spent part of her life in Spain. The work was originally written as the score for a ballet depicting a flamenco dancer performing for an excitable crowd of tavern drinkers.

• Driven by a snare drum rhythm and a hypnotically winding melody, the piece was utterly unlike anything else at the time it was written. Because the piece is so insistent in its repetition, modern-day researchers have speculated that Boléro could have been a product of Ravel’s deteriorating mental condition. He began to experience health problems around the time he was composing this work, and he would die less than a decade later, after exploratory brain surgery.

CLAUSE DEBUSSY

Born on August 22, 1862, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France; died on March 25, 1918, in Paris

Composed: 1905–08

First performance: February 20, 1910, with Gabriel Pierné conducting the Orchestre Colonne at the Châtelet Theater in Paris

First Nashville Symphony performance: January 17 & 18, 1977, with Michael Charry

Estimated length: 20 minutes

What to Listen For

Like Monet’s paintings depicting the façade of Rouen’s Cathedral at different times of the day, Debussy creates tableaux of a Spanish village at contrasting moments. The first of Ibéria’s three movements, “In the Streets and Lanes” begins with the bustle and heat of an afternoon; energetic rhythms and clacking castanets set the music in motion.

Evoking street musicians, the clarinets entertain with a sinuous tune that has a spirit of improvisation, its ending phrase a striking anticipation of the melody of Ravel’s Boléro. Fanfares from horns and then trumpets announce the passing of some important personage. Debussy pulls us into a lane for a quieter perspective on the scene. As the oboes take up the clarinets’ opening melody, the crowd seems to press even more closely until the music magically fades to a quiet close.

Debussy seems intent on reaching all our senses through this music. The middle movement — “The Night’s Perfumes” — is a nocturne, “slow and dreamy” and sensuously veiled, like his earlier Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. This is a textbook example of Debussy’s extraordinary manipulation of orchestral color: from the delicately waited oboe’s melody, divided strings, and hallucinatory celesta to the shifting densities of sound that indicate distant recollections of the day. Toward the end, soft bells hint at the return of day, leading without pause into the final movement.

“A Festival Morning” dispels the languorous dream state as the bells now ring out. Debussy transforms the whole string section into a joyful guitar, and their intensely rhythmic theme provides a marching background for the procession of colorful solo episodes. With a final surge, Debussy gives us a parting snapshot of the town’s shared celebration.

Ibéria is scored for 2 piccolos, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, 2 harps, and strings.

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New Piece for Orchestra

**Composed:** 2016-17

**First performance:** With these performances the Nashville Symphony gives the world premiere.

**Estimated length:** 18 minutes

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**What to Listen For**

The new piece unfolds as a pair of interrelated movements of about the same length, which are bridged by a shorter interlude of contrasting material. The core musical idea is heard at the outset, against a restless pulsation in the strings: a fidgety motif of alternating minor thirds that gradually climb the scale. Alternating thirds fuel the second part as well, but there the rhythmic identity is recognizably distinct and the harmonic context becomes more diatonic.

Meyer varies these ideas by contrasting timbres or orchestral sections and by the processes that are the woof and warp of Bach’s music: slowing down, speeding up, turning ideas upside down (thirds into sixths, for example), and presenting them in overlapping statements (“canons”) — all the while “continuing” the musical argument.

Meyer elaborates further about the main material of the two larger sections: “I cannot think of a simpler way to cover all 12 notes than minor thirds rising or falling by whole steps, outside of playing a chromatic scale.”

In the interlude, the strings and the woodwinds play a three-part canon, and there is also a notable trumpet solo. The composer explains that these utilize “a symmetric six-note scale. By limiting the music to six notes instead of 12, as in the framing sections, the interlude has a different sound. One might say a ‘thinner’ sound.”

In the final section, Meyer resorts to diatonic thirds, which he describes as “almost like a compromise between the more harmonically dense opening music and the interlude. When more harmonic richness is needed, the symmetric chromatic minor thirds continue to be used, but the simpler-sounding diatonic thirds allow for quicker, more purely rhythmic music.”

Following an abrupt pause about four minutes from the end, the clarinets take up a melody that has only been hinted at before, extending it into a full statement.

Extra-musical inspiration does not figure much in the piece, according to the composer, though he adds: “I often envisioned the orchestra playing in concert. And I do not think of a section as happy or sad. The piece is conceived as an emotional journey, but not one that I can put in words.”

Meyer’s new piece is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, 3 percussionists, and strings.
Edgar Meyer has become a champion of this work and prepared the arrangement we hear in this performance — writing two extended cadenzas of his own. Aside from the unusual emergence of the double bass into the solo spotlight, the B minor Concerto is in the typical three-movement format and features a straightforward, melody-centered language.

The Allegro moderato opens with a dramatic flourish as the string ensemble opens the curtain for the double bass to enter and proclaim the main theme. It’s up to the performer to phrase this material in a way that brings out the personality not only of the musical argument, but of the instrument as well. In the Andante the double bass emerges as an eloquent singer, entrusted with an extended aria while the other strings play with mutes. Still another personality emerges in the animated Allegro finale, which is propelled by a rhythmic pattern suggesting a proud polonaise.

In addition to solo double bass, the Concerto is scored for string orchestra.

MAURICE RAVEL

Born on March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France; died on December 28, 1937, in Paris

Boléro

Composed: 1928
First performance: November 22, 1928, at the Paris Opera, with Walther Straram conducting
First Nashville Symphony performance: April 17 & 18, 1961, with music director Willis Page
Estimated length: 16 minutes

Together with his colleague Debussy, Maurice Ravel shared a long-standing fascination with Spanish themes. Of Basque origin, his mother had spent many years in Spain and instilled in her son an enthusiasm for Spanish culture. In Boléro, a work dating from the end of his career, this love of Spanish themes converges with Ravel’s ongoing preoccupation with the dance. Like several of his best-known works, Boléro began life as a ballet but went on to become even more familiar in the concert hall — and of course in film scores and elsewhere in popular culture.

Boléro was written for Ida Rubinstein, a celebrity ballerina formerly with the Paris-based Ballets Russes — the dance company that had commissioned Stravinsky’s revolutionary ballets. Rubinstein asked Ravel to orchestrate a pre-existing set of piano pieces on Spanish themes composed by Isaac Albéniz. Copyright issues got in the way, and Ravel decided to craft an entirely new score.

The scenario: a female flamenco dancer in a Spanish tavern is lustfully cheered by a crowd. She leaps onto a table and dances with mounting passion as the men are driven into a state of excitement by her performance. In contrast to Ravel’s classically themed, large-scale ballet Daphnis et Chloé or his episodic dance suite illustrating fairy-tales from Mother Goose, Rubinstein’s idea was to focus attention on a single dancer, evoking an atmosphere reminiscent in some ways of Carmen.

According to the Ravel scholar René Chalupt, the composer actually concocted an alternative scenario set in front of a factory that involved workers who pour forth to dance to its industrial rhythms — this is the source of the relentless mechanical rhythm we hear in the score.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The stark simplicity of the narrative finds its musical correspondence in the hypnotic rhythm pattern of the traditional bolero: a subconscious reminder not only of Ravel’s Basque mother, but also, perhaps, of the precision-engineered discipline displayed by his father, a Swiss inventor. The Andalusian bolero consists of two measures in triple meter at a moderate tempo. This is repeated by the snare drum throughout the piece — one of the two repetitive elements around which Ravel structures the piece.

The second defining element is, of course, the Boléro melody itself. Laid out in two sections (each repeated), the melody unwinds like a charmed snake. Ravel assigns the theme to a slowly varying array of instrumental groups from among his unusually large orchestra, starting with a solo flute and passing from solo instruments to larger choirs. Through all its repetitions, Boléro emerges as a radical variation on the idea of variation itself. The melody remains the same, but the colorations, textures, and intensity change.

Boléro’s ever-familiarity can make it hard to appreciate just how avant-garde were several aspects of Ravel’s conception here. Contemporary even speculated as whether this music was evidence of insanity. One radical aspect is the single-minded monomania of the repetition, which looks ahead to Steve Reich’s brand of Minimalism. Another is the complete absence of thematic development. Yet the piece seems to grow. Ravel structures Boléro as a slowly building crescendo. Moreover, the constant shifting of tone colors against the rigid rhythmic pattern generates a sense of tension that, at the climax, is finally released in a chaotic sonic explosion. No wonder that, despite its experimentalism, Boléro quickly became a hit.

Ravel scores Boléro for a large orchestra consisting of piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes (2nd doubling oboe d’amore), English horn, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, piccolo trumpet, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 saxophones, timpani, snare drums, cymbals, tam-tam, celesta, harp, and strings.

— Thomas May, the Nashville Symphony’s program annotator, is a writer and translator who covers classical and contemporary music. He blogs at memeteria.com.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Edgar Meyer

double bass

In demand as both a performer and a composer, Edgar Meyer has formed a role in the music world unlike any other. Hailed by The New Yorker as “the most remarkable virtuoso in the relatively un-chronicled history of his instrument,” Meyer possesses unparalleled technique and musicianship, combined with a gift for composition. His uniqueness in the field was recognized by a MacArthur Award in 2002.

As a solo classical bassist, Meyer can be heard on a concerto album with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra conducted by Hugh Wolff featuring Bottesini’s Gran Duo with Joshua Bell, Meyer’s own Double Concerto for Bass and Cello with Yo-Yo Ma, Bottesini’s Bass Concerto No. 2, and Meyer’s own Concerto in D for Bass. He has also recorded an album featuring three of Bach’s Unaccompanied Suites for Cello. In 2006, he released a self-titled solo recording on which he wrote and recorded all of the music, incorporating piano, guitar, mandolin, Dobro, banjo, gamba, and double bass. In 2011 Meyer joined cellist Yo-Yo Ma, mandolinist Chris Thile, and fiddler Stuart Duncan for the Sony Masterworks recording The Goat Rodeo Sessions, which was awarded the 2012 GRAMMY® Award for Best Folk Album.

One of Meyer’s most recent compositions is the Double Concerto for Double Bass and Violin, which received its world premiere July 2012 with Joshua Bell at the Tanglewood Music Festival with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In the 2011/12 season, Meyer was composer in residence with the Alabama Symphony, where he premiered his third concerto for bass and orchestra.

Other compositions of Meyer’s include a violin/piano work performed by Joshua Bell at New York’s Lincoln Center, a quintet for bass and string quartet premiered with the Emerson String Quartet and recorded on Deutsche Grammophon, and a violin concerto written for Hilary Hahn.

Meyer began studying bass at age 5 under the instruction of his father and continued to study with Stuart Sankey. In 1994 he received the Avery Fisher Career Grant, and in 2000 he became the only bassist to receive the Avery Fisher Prize. Currently, he is Visiting Professor of Double Bass at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.