

## **Fine Arts Quartet Summer Evenings of Music Festival**

### **Program III - Wednesday, June 24, 2009**

#### **Saint-Saëns, Septet in E-Flat Major, Op. 65**

This work was composed for a well-established chamber music society called La Trompette. Saint-Saëns had been a member for some time, and the group performed works of his as early as 1875. Its director, Emile Lemoine, requested the composer's support toward the goal of putting on performances of ever higher quality, and Saint-Saëns responded with his insistence upon adequate rehearsal time. Lemoine asked him to write a new work for the group, and Saint-Saëns initially declined. But he gave in in January 1880 and wrote the present Septet for the group, which gave it its premiere that December. It was also performed in a 1909 concert that marked the organization's fiftieth anniversary.

The Septet is scored for trumpet and piano with two violins, viola, cello, and bass. As a chamber work for strings with trumpet, it is quite exceptional; none less than George Bernard Shaw, on hearing the work in 1885, expressed his gratitude to Saint-Saëns for this trumpet chamber work, an instrumental combination that he rightly observed had been largely neglected since the late Baroque era. And the inclusion of the trumpet came naturally: La Trompette appropriately used the trumpet as its symbol, and one of its principal players played the instrument.

Characteristic of his age, Saint-Saëns was interested in older music as well as the music of his time. He was particularly interested in the great repertoire of 17th-century France, and in the 1890s created editions of works by such masters as Lully, Rameau, and Charpentier. In this vein, the Septet is based on 17th-century dance types, in the manner of a suite. The opening Prelude is Handelian, military in character, and introduces ideas that pervade the remaining movements (a decidedly nineteenth-century technique). The witty and lyrical Minuet is paired with a Trio section, where the trumpet doubles the strings at times. In the Interlude, Saint-Saëns quotes a French Army bugle call, and the music is mournful and austere. And the lively finale, Gavotte et Final, with its virtuosic piano part, gives all the strings parts important solo roles.

#### **Glinka, Divertimento Brillante in A-Flat Major on Themes from Bellini's *La Sonnambula***

Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka is often viewed as Russia's first great composer, the man who laid the foundation for the vast accomplishments of later Romantic era composers like

Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. As a teenager he studied at a boarding school in St. Petersburg, receiving a general education, and sought violin and piano training outside the school. He took lessons from several teachers, including three piano lessons with John Field. Leaving the school in 1822, he worked for a time in Novospasskoye, where he met orchestral musicians and was exposed to works by Mozart, Beethoven, Cherubini, and others. His health deteriorated, though, and it was suggested to Glinka that he spend some time in Italy in the hope that the climate would help him. And so he took a three-year trip to Italy in 1830 to 1833. He became acquainted with the leading Italian composers of the day, including Bellini and Donizetti, as well as the librettist Romani. He was present for the Milan premieres of Bellini's *La Sonnambula* and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*. As a result of these experiences, melodies from Italian operas came to dominate his works (and his improvisations) during this period, and he composed piano variations on a theme from Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, a Rondo brillante for piano on a theme from Bellini's

*I Capuletti e i Montecchi* in 1831, and the present sextet, based on music from that composer's *La Sonnambula*. Scored for two violins, viola, cello, bass, and piano, the work was composed in 1832 and published that same year in Milan.

### **Mendelssohn, String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 44 No. 2**

In 1836 Mendelssohn met a young lady named Cécile Jeanrenaud while he was in Frankfurt. As they subsequently met again, their love grew, and they were married in March of 1837. As the newlyweds honeymooned in Freiburg, Mendelssohn composed the first of the three string quartets that comprise his Op. 44, the work that would come to be called No. 2 in E minor. The quartet's premiere at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig on November 17 of that same year featured Ferdinand David as first violinist. David, the concertmaster of the Gewandhaus orchestra, would later perform the premiere of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, also in E minor.

The first movement's opening theme belong to the "rocket" tradition, an ascending arpeggio on the home key; Mendelssohn's Octet Op. 20, and many works of the classical period, use a similar approach. The lyrical secondary theme is in G major, and the tonal scheme of the movement is in keeping with classical traditions. The second movement is one of the composer's distinctive scherzos, a quick and brilliant movement that ends softly. In the songlike slow movement, faster accompanimental notes underlie the patiently moving melodic line. The finale maintains the serious air of the minor mode, and although the sun comes out in a substantial episode in the major, the work ends in a serious vein, back in E minor.

by Dr. Timothy Noonan

**Dr. Timothy Noonan** earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at UWM, studying Music History and Literature, and went on to earn his Ph.D. at UW-Madison in 1996. While he works with and teaches the whole spectrum of Western art music, his specialization is in the Classical and Romantic eras, particularly Classical instrumental music, Haydn, Boccherini, and Beethoven. Working in the UWM Music Department since 1996, he currently teaches courses in music history, serves as Graduate Advisor, and coordinates the department's Convocation concert series.