Out of the Depths
Saturday, March 16, 2019 • 7:30 p.m.
First Free Methodist Church

Orchestra Seattle
Seattle Chamber Singers
William White, conductor

LILI BOULANGER (1893–1918)
Psaume CXXIX (“Ils m’ont assez opprimé dès ma jeunesse”)

LILI BOULANGER
Psaume CXXX (“Du fond de l’abîme”)

Laura Beckel Thoreson, mezzo-soprano

— intermission —

CÉSAR FRANCK (1822–1890)
Symphony in D minor, FWV 48

Lento — Allegro non troppo — Lento
Allegretto
Allegro non troppo — Più lento — Tempo I

Tonight’s performances of music by Lili Boulanger made possible in part by a grant from Women’s Philharmonic Advocacy.

Please silence cell phones and other electronics, and refrain from the use of cameras and recording devices during the performance.

Special thanks to First Free Methodist Church and Ron Haight for all of their assistance in making OSSCS’s 49th season possible.

Refreshments will be available in the Fine Center during intermission.
The legacy of Lili Boulanger is intertwined deeply with the composer Lili Boulanger (1893–1918) was an icon of the early part of the 20th century. The Boulanger family was something like musical aristocracy in 19th-century Paris. Lili Boulanger’s grandfather taught at the famed Paris Conservatory, and her father Ernest was a well-known opera composer in his time, as well as a winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome for composition — a competition also won by numerous other luminaries of the French classical-music world, including Hector Berlioz, Georges Bizet and Claude Debussy.

Lili Boulanger and her older sister Nadia both studied composition at the Paris Conservatory, a rare and notable undertaking for women at the time. In their careers, both sisters struggled against the constraints of gender expectations of the era. Nadia competed unsuccessfully for the Prix de Rome several times, but favoritism and noted misogyny of the judges thwarted her efforts. Lili later won the competition in 1913, the first woman to do so in the category of music composition. During the month-long competition and in subsequent press coverage, she took pains to present herself in a specifically feminine and non-threatening, even childlike, manner. This image, cultivated from the archetype of the femme fragile popular in art and literature of the time, would follow Boulanger through her short career, and be reinforced by music critics after her death in 1918 from complications of Crohn’s Disease.

The appeal of Boulanger’s music, 100 years after her death, is still manifest. Her compositions hint at different spiritualism in general. She frequently chose to set biblical or religiously oriented texts, as well as texts by French symbolist writers that reflect themes of sadness and loss, and the inexpressible mysteries of the universe and of the human soul. Her music is thus both intimate and immense, centered in the physical world but also transcendent of it.

Boulanger deftly employed avant-garde techniques to capture the ineffable qualities of religious rites through music in a way that few of her contemporaries did. Grounded in Catholic choral traditions, Boulanger often set text in a style similar to Gregorian chant, and her music always upholds the clarity of the words. Her musical language is comparable to Claude Debussy’s, through her preference for traditional church modes over major or minor scale tones, voices moving in parallel motion, unresolved chords, and frequently repeated melodic and rhythmic motives. Boulanger was a masterful orchestrator, combining vocal and instrumental lines to create ethereal and otherworldly tone colors. Her music never sounds atonal. Instead, she elicited a deeply felt religious sentiment, timeless and tinged with mysticism, a spiritual contrast to — and enhancement of — the symbolist aesthetic of her era.

The appeal of Boulanger’s music, 100 years after her death, is still manifest. Her compositions hint at different possibilities for the future of classical music, beyond the coldly rational rigor of serialism and atonality that reigned for much of the 20th century. Her musical evocations of spiritual anxiety and uncertainty speak to the disconnection and dissonance of our modern world as much as they resonated in the decade of the First World War. The scope of her compositions is remarkable, demonstrating substantial skill and insight beyond the 24 years she lived.

Mary Moran is author of The Choral Psalm Settings of Lili Boulanger: A Cultural and Historical Perspective of Psalms 24, 129 and 130.

For more information about the life and music of Lili Boulanger, please visit: www.osscs.org/lili
Mezzo-soprano Laura Beckel Thoreson, praised by Oregon ArtsWatch as “one of the loveliest voices in the Northwest,” enjoys a singing career spanning opera, oratorio, recital and ensemble performances. She has appeared as a solo artist with Portland Opera, Eugene Opera, Utah Festival Opera, Indianapolis Opera, Augusta Opera, Early Music Vancouver, Oregon Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony and Cincinnati Symphony, among others. An avid proponent of both early and new music, Ms. Thoreson frequently participates in world-premiere performances and appears on Billboard Top Ten recordings. Upcoming and recent engagements include Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater with the Ensemble of Oregon, Pluviosité by Northwest composer Stacey Phillips, Bernstein’s “Jeremiah” Symphony with Portland Youth Philharmonic, Mendelssohn’s Elijah with Willamette Master Chorus, Mahler’s Symphony No. 4 with Oregon Sinfonietta, Rossini’s La Cenerentola with Portland Opera, and Handel’s Messiah with Portland Baroque Orchestra, the Naples (Florida) Philharmonic and OSSCS. A native of Vancouver, Washington, and a graduate of Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music, Ms. Thoreson currently teaches at Clark College.

As we’ve traversed this season, I’ve marveled at the individuality of Boulanger’s musical voice, and how she achieved such maturity at such a young age. But it’s also clear that she was influenced by the great composers of her day, César Franck in particular. One can point to many elements of Franck’s Symphony in D minor that showed up in Boulanger’s Du fond de l’abîme: the shadowy opening in the lower strings, the shimmering textures created by harps and pizzicati, and perhaps most of all, the reverence for church music via chant melodies and organ textures. But whereas Franck was a Romantic through and through, Boulanger’s approach was more modern, and some might say “realistic”—she starts us off in the depths and never fully allows us to transcend them.

Franck, on the other hand, was writing squarely in the tradition of Beethoven and Schumann. Over the course of his symphony, he charts a familiar course from minor to major (per aspera ad astra as the Latin saying goes, “from struggle to the stars”). His symphony ends on a note of triumph, the musical themes having overcome their obstacles, and while we might not always get such satisfaction in real life, it makes for a hell of a way to end a concert.

Lili Boulanger
Psalm CXXIX

Marie-Juliette Olga (“Lili”) Boulanger was born August 21, 1893, in Paris, and died at Mézy-sur-Seine on March 15, 1918. She began sketching this work as early as 1913, completing it in 1916. Henri Büsser conducted the first performance in Paris on June 9, 1921. In addition to chorus, the score calls for triple woodwinds (including piccolo, English horn, bass clarinet and sarrusophone), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, celesta and strings.

As a result of her winning the Prix de Rome in 1913, Lili Boulanger was awarded an extended stay at the Villa Medici in Rome (along with a monthly stipend), but illness cut short her initial trip to Italy. Health issues and her efforts in support of students from the Paris Conservatoire fighting in World War I curtailed her composing efforts for a time, but during the first half of 1916 she was able to return to Rome, where she composed settings of Psalm 24 (performed by OSSCS in October) and Psalm 129 (heard this evening). “In them,” notes Boulanger biographer Léonie Rosenstiel, “she poured out her anguish and torment” over her bedridden condition. “Even the opening words of Psalm 129 (‘They have oppressed me, since I was young’) seem to mirror the tone of her letters” to her close friend Miki Piré. Caroline Potter points out that both psalm settings “combine straightforward melody lines . . . with harmonically adventurous accompaniment.”

The 30-bar orchestral introduction, emphasizing dark woodwind and brass textures, begins with parallel-ninth chords that, according to Rosenstiel, “foreshadow Honeg-
Lili Boulanger
Psalm CXXX

Boulanger completed this work in 1917. Henri Büsser conducted the first performance in Paris on January 17, 1923. In addition to solo alto and chorus, the score calls for triple woodwinds (including piccolo, English horn, bass clarinet and contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, organ, celesta and strings.

Lili Boulanger’s setting of Psalm 130 is her most ambitious choral-orchestral work, and the longest of her post–Prix de Rome compositions aside from the song cycle Clairières dans le ciel for tenor and piano. Surprisingly, the actual text of Psalm 130 is roughly the same length as that of Psalm 129. Her sketches reveal that the work was originally intended to be substantially shorter, but along the way she added orchestral episodes while repeating sections of text. Exactly when Boulanger began thinking about setting Psalm 130 remains unclear, but it likely predates her sketches for Psalms 24 and 129.

She dedicated Du fond de l’abîme (“Out of the depths”) to her father (“à la mémoire de mon cher Papa”), who had died when she was six. Psalm 130 is a prayer for the dead, leading Caroline Potter to theorize that the composer may have planned for it to be part of a Requiem mass, although others dispute this theory.

Reviewing a February 1923 performance of Du fond de l’abîme, composer Florent Schmitt (who had created a remarkable setting of Psalm 47 in 1904), wrote: “Coming from the mysteries of the abyss, a song rises slowly, the choirs staged parallel to the orchestra, whose music successively emerges little by little to reach the most desperate violence.”

The work opens quite literally in the depths of the orchestra, with tuba and cellos yielding to a rising contrabassoon motive that eventually passes upward through the orchestra. (Léonie Rosenstiel likens this passage to the opening bars of Ravel’s La valse and Concerto for the Left Hand, both composed years later). An impassioned dialogue between first and second violins leads to a dramatic dotted trumpet figure. All of this material will recur throughout the work.

After reaching a climax, the orchestra descends back into the depths, setting the stage for the initial choral entry, evoking plainsong chant and built on a half-step interval (“denoting fear”). “After the voices join into a contrapuntal texture,” writes Rosenstiel, “they regroup and end the section in aggressive homophony.” A brief orchestral interlude leads to a faster section in which altos and basses reprise the dotted trumpet motive.

An increasingly urgent instrumental passage featuring material from the opening leads to an impassioned choral-orchestral outburst that subsides as the soloist introduces a new melody (“Si tu prends garde aux péchés”). The pace quickens and builds once again as the chorus returns. Instrumental solos over harp arpeggios set the stage for another solo passage (“Mais la clémence est en toi”). The chorus returns briefly as the mood lightens somewhat and a solo tenor from the chorus joins the alto soloist (“Car en Jahu est la miséricorde”).

Just at the point when listeners might suspect that Boulanger is heading toward an uplifting, hopeful conclusion, the mood plunges once again into despair with a return of the “out of the depths” motive, concluding (as the work began) in B♭ minor.

César Franck
Symphony in D minor

César-Auguste-Jean-Guillaume-Hubert Franck was born December 10, 1822, in Liège, and died in Paris on November 8, 1890. He composed this symphony between 1886 and 1888. Jules Garcin conducted the first performance on February 17, 1889, at the Paris Conservatoire. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds (plus English horn and bass clarinet), 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, harp and strings.

Born to a German mother and a French–Flemish father in what is now Belgium (but at the time was part of the Netherlands), César Franck exhibited early pianistic talents that his father encouraged (and, one might say, exploited). Young César enrolled in the local conservatory at age seven and embarked on his first concert tour four years later. In 1835, the Franck family moved to Paris so that César could
study at the Conservatoire, where he took up an interest in composition that his father dissuaded, preventing César from entering the Prix de Rome competition. (On another concert tour at age 20, Franck met Franz Liszt, who encouraged his interest in composition.)

Despite his father’s attempts to mold him into a piano virtuoso, Franck won renown as an organist, both for his playing and for his improvisations at the keyboard. Later in life he turned to teaching: Vincent d’Indy and Ernest Chausson were among his many devoted students. Although he composed vocal, sacred, keyboard and chamber music throughout his life, Franck created his most celebrated works — including much of his orchestral music — during his final decade or so: a piano quartet, the A-major violin sonata, the thrilling tone poem Le Chasseur maudit (“The Accursed Huntsman”), the Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra, Psyché for chorus and orchestra, and — by far his most famous composition — the Symphony in D minor.

During his student days in Paris, Franck had composed a symphony (very much in the Classical mold) that was performed in 1841 but is now lost. Had it not been for his students pressuring him to write a mature work in this form, Franck’s Symphony in D minor may never have come about. In three movements, it is, as Phillip Hutscher writes, “not so much a work in the tradition of Beethoven as a hybrid characteristic of Franck, combining elements of both symphony and symphonic poem in a thematically unified whole.” (When asked if the symphony had a program, Franck replied: “No, it’s music, simply music,” although he did admit to thinking, “very vaguely, of an ancient procession” when composing the opening of the slow movement.)

Nevertheless, Beethoven’s influence can be detected in other ways. “The finale takes up all the themes again, as in [Beethoven’s] Ninth,” Franck wrote. “They do not return as quotations, however; I have elaborated them and given them the role of new elements.” And, as Richard Taruskin has asserted, Franck’s symphony “mine[s] the legacy of the late Beethoven quartets. The unusual form of the first movement, in which the initial slow section . . . alternates with the ensuing allegro throughout the movement,” emulating Beethoven’s Op. 127 and Op. 130 quartets. Most notably, the first three notes of Franck’s symphony quote the “Muß es sein” (“Must it be?”) motive of Beethoven’s final quartet, Op. 135, previously borrowed by Liszt in Les préludes.

Due to Parisian musical politics, critical reaction to the symphony seems to have been predetermined. Charles Lamoureux declined to perform the work with his orchestra at the Théâtre du Château d’Eau, relegating the premiere to the orchestra at the Conservatoire, albeit “quite against the wish of most of its members,” according to d’Indy, who credited “the benevolent obstinacy of the conductor, Jules Garcin.” Critic Camille Bellaigue decried the symphony’s “ardid and gray” melodies “devoid of grace or charm” and “destined to vanish at once.” Composer Charles Gounod complained of “incompetence pushed to dogmatic lengths,” while d’Indy reported “the subscribers could make neither head nor tail of it, and the musical authorities were in much the same position.” In his biography of Franck, d’Indy even claimed that Ambroise Thomas, the director of the Conservatoire, had posited: “Just name a single symphony by Haydn or Beethoven that uses the English horn! There, you see: Your Franck’s music may be whatever you please, but it will certainly never be a symphony!” Thomas seemed to forget the unforgettable English horn solo in Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique, along with Haydn’s Symphony No. 22, which calls for not one, but two English horns. Then again, d’Indy may have been an unreliable narrator, as he also backdated the composition of Franck’s symphony to avoid claims that it had been influenced by Saint-Saëns’ Organ Symphony. (Had social media been in existence in 1889 Paris, one can only imagine the Twitter battles involving @realcharlesgounod and @dIndy1851.)

When asked by his family about his impression of the premiere, Franck simply replied, “Oh, it sounded well, just as I thought it would.” Shortly after his death the following year, the symphony managed to rise above the circumstances of its premiere and by the early decades of the 20th century became a staple of concert programs throughout Europe and the United States. Curiously, in more recent years its presence in the concert hall has dwindled significantly. Reviewing a 2012 performance by Riccardo Muti and the Chicago Symphony at Carnegie Hall (only the fourth performance there since 1988, despite the fact that the work has been played seven or eight times per season in that venue during the 1920s and 1930s), Alex Ross wondered “how a composer like Franck can be touted as the heir to Beethoven in one generation and dropped as a creaky relic in the next. The canon, ostensibly static, never stops evolving.”

While noting that “Franck’s variation technique can come across as schematic, as if the score had a music-appreciation lecture built into it,” Ross asserts that “all that motivic riveting and welding makes for a structure of tensile strength. Right at the start, the symphony’s fateful three-note motto has the action of a turning screw, its intervals widening by degrees.” Program notes approved by Franck for the work’s premiere (and translated for the first New York Philharmonic performance some two decades later) detail how this slow introduction “leads into the allegro, or first movement proper, of an energetic and ardent character.” But not for long, as “the theme of the introduction returns in a new key, after which the development of the principal theme of the movement is resumed. This leads to the appearance of a new theme, which is immediately followed by a third. This third theme is much employed in the ensuing working-out section and also in the finale. After the second part of the movement a return is made to the first theme, that of the introduction, now given out fortissimo and in canonical imitation. The theme of the Allegro is then resumed and leads to the conclusion of the first division of the symphony.

“The second movement begins with pizzicato chords for the string orchestra and harp, which do not give out the melodic theme, however. This theme, of a sweet and melancholic character, is presented by the English horn. The first
period is completed by the clarinet, the horn and the flute, after which the violins announce a new theme. After some modulation this period comes to a close. The English horn and various wind instruments now take up again some fragments of the first motive in B♭ minor, after which we arrive at a new part, which is a complete composition itself — in the style of a scherzo — a very sprightly and sweet episode.

Franck does not quicken the tempo for this “scherzo” passage but merely has the violins play more notes in each bar, allowing him to later superimpose this new theme on top of the English horn melody.

“The third movement opens with a phrase of a clear and almost brilliant nature, which contrasts strongly with the rather somber and melancholy sentiment of the two preceding movements. Later a new theme is announced in the brasses and finally a third in the cellos and basses. The opening theme of the second movement now reappears, accompanied by a figure in triplets. After a development of the themes of the finale there is a slowing of the tempo and a fragment of the somber third theme of the finale is heard. There is more development of these themes and finally in the coda the opening theme of the finale is heard, rounded by the principal themes of the first movement.”

Reflecting on his Symphony in D minor, Franck declared: “I risked a great deal, but the next time I shall risk even more.” Alas, the symphony would be Franck’s final orchestral work.

— Jeff Eldridge

Vocal Texts and Translations

Psaume CXXIX

Ils m’ont assez opprimé dès ma jeunesse — qu’Israël le dise!
Ils m’ont assez opprimé dès ma jeunesse,
mais ils ne m’ont pas vaincu.
Des laboureurs ont labouré mon dos,
ils y ont tracé de longs sillons.
L’Éternel est juste:
Il a coupé les cordes des méchants.
Qu’ils soient confondus et qu’ils reculent,
tous ceux qui haïssent Sion.
Qu’ils soient comme l’herbe des toits,
qui sèche avant qu’on l’arrache.
Le laboureur n’en remplit point sa main,
 celui qui lie les gerbes n’en charge point son bras,
et les passants ne disent point:
« Que la bénédiction de l’Éternel soit avec vous!
Nous vous bénissions au nom de l’Éternel! »

Psalm 129

They have sorely oppressed me since my youth
Let Israel say!
They have sorely oppressed me since my youth,
But they have not vanquished me.
Plowmen have plowed my back,
they have traced large grooves.
The Eternal One is just:
He has cut the cords of the wicked.
Let them be confounded and retreat,
All those who hate Zion!
Let them be like the sod of the roofs,
Which dries before it can be pulled up!
The plowman shall not fill his hand,
He who reaps the sheaves shall not fill his arm,
And the passersby shall not say:
“Let the benediction of the Eternal One be with you
We bless you in the name of the Eternal One.”

Psalm 130

From the bottom of the abyss, I invoke thee Yahweh.
Hear my prayer!
Let your ears be attentive to the stresses of my prayer!
If you take offense at sins,
who then can stand before you, Yahweh?
Clemency is within Yahweh unto one’s reverence.
My soul hopes in Yahweh
I hope, I count upon his word more than
the watchmen of the night hope toward the morning.
Israel hopes in Yahweh,
For within Yahweh lies mercy.
And an abundance of deliverance.
It is he who shall deliver Israel from all her iniquities
Within Yahweh is clemency.
Ah! Yahweh Adonai.

— translation William C. White
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