

Enescu's *Piano Trio in A minor* and its American Debut

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This paper was presented at The George Enescu International Musicology Symposium, Bucharest, Romania, September 24-25, 2001.

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In March of 1916 George Enescu put on paper a draft of his *Piano Trio in A minor*. The 1916 time frame, the nature of the draft itself, and the unusual location at which Enescu accomplished this work lead to some interesting questions, to which I will return shortly.

In August of 1997 composer Pascal Bentoiu completed a performing edition of the work, which received its premiere in October of 2000 on a tour of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. The performers were violinist Sherban Lupu, cellist Parry Karp, and pianist Howard Karp. At Central College in Pella, Iowa, and at the University of Wisconsin in Madison the work was presented as part of an all-Enescu recital, which included the participation of Lory Wallfisch as well as the performers just mentioned. The final performance of the *Trio* on this United States tour took place at the University of Illinois as part of a three-day festival and symposium commemorating the 50th anniversary of Enescu's 1950 residency there. Since its American premiere the *Trio* has received several performances elsewhere, including a performance during this current festival by the "Pro Arte" Trio.

Certainly the maiden voyage of the Bentoiu edition of the *Trio*, in the hands of Sherban Lupu, Parry Karp, and Howard Karp, was a lovingly prepared and highly auspicious one. Sherban Lupu's remarkable affinity for Enescu is well known. His lecture on Enescu's violin teaching and on the interpretation of Enescu's violin music during last October's University of Illinois festival and symposium was inspirational. Incidentally, in the August 2001 issue of *Gramophone* Robert Cowan offers a stunningly enthusiastic review of the Electrecord double CD release of Enescu works for violin and piano, performed by Sherban Lupu and Valentin Gheorghiu, and the Corneliu Țăranu completion of Enescu's *Caprice Roumain*, also with Lupu and the George Enescu Philharmonic of Bucharest under the direction of Cristian Mandeal. One hopes for a wide distribution of this outstanding recording, and that its success may lead to another CD from Lupu, which would include the *Trio in A minor*.

Howard and Parry Karp, who are father and son, came to Enescu by way of the *Second Sonata for Cello and Piano*. Having discovered the score many years ago in a music shop, they made several attempts to learn and prepare the work, only to be forced to put it aside due to its difficulty and their lack of time. Finally, convinced of the great worth of the piece and determined to work their way through it, they devoted an entire summer to its study and practice, ultimately presenting it at the University of Wisconsin, then again at the 1997 Iowa Enescu festival, and most recently as part of last October's all-Enescu recital. So rewarding was this experience for Howard Karp that he recently undertook a

study of the Enescu *First Piano Sonata*, and included it also in last October's program. It was through listening to the recording of the Karps' performance at the 1997 festival that Maestro Bentoïu became sufficiently familiar with their playing to feel comfortable entrusting to them the premiere of the *Trio*.

The *Trio in A minor* was the focal point around which grew all the other components of the October 2000 Enescu event in the American Midwest. Support came from many sources: Central College; the University of Wisconsin at Madison; the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; the Iowa Arts Council; the University of Illinois Russian and East European Center; Professional Bi-Cultural Development Associates, Inc., Patricia Brady-Danzig, Music Director; Friends of Central Arts; the Pella Arts Council; TVR 2 of Romanian Television; as well as numerous individuals who provided housing, transportation, and meals for the festival's many guests. Copies of all the festival programs, listing all of the 16 Enescu works performed and the names of the many performers, are appended to this paper. It is of great significance, I feel, that this premiere tour of the *Trio* provided the inspiration and incentive for Sherban Lupu to coordinate an impressive three-day homage to Enescu at the University of Illinois, where some of Enescu's most important activities as a teacher took place. Incidentally, two of the three Illinois concerts and all of the symposium presentations took place in Smith Hall, where Enescu conducted and played during his 1949 and 1950 residencies. Photos of Enescu from the University's archives were displayed, and first-hand memories of Enescu were shared by individuals who knew him personally (Austin McDowell,¹ Robert Zarbock,² and Lory Wallfisch). These reminiscences have been preserved on video tape to become part of the permanent record.

Enescu made his draft of the *Trio* while staying at the Sanatorium "Elisabetha" in Bucharest. According to Noel Malcolm, Enescu was ill around this time.³ Carmen Sylva had died on March 3. The First World War was raging. Among other works with which Enescu was occupied at the time, or which he had just recently completed, were the *Pièces impromptues*, *Three Songs on Poems by Fernand Gregh*, the unfinished cantata *Strigoi* and a *Symphony in F minor for Baritone, Chorus, and Orchestra on Words of Psalm 86*, of which only ten pages are known to exist, and which was apparently an early version of the beginning portion of what was eventually to become the *Third Symphony*. Most likely, too, he was engaged, if only marginally, with *Oedipe*. Upon listening to the *Trio*, one would not be likely to suppose that it was conceived at such a time as this.

Perhaps rather, as Pascal Bentoïu has conjectured, Enescu did not actually conceive the *Trio* in 1916, but simply checked himself into the sanatorium in order to get some rest and, at the same time, put on paper a work that he had completed in his head at an earlier time. Maestro Bentoïu has pointed out that the draft of the *Trio*, a work of considerable complexity, appears to have been *copied down* rather than composed during this 1916

¹ Former Director of the School of Music, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

² Graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who was a student during George Enescu's 1950 residency.

³ Noel Malcolm, *George Enescu – His Life and Music*, pg. 117.

retreat, on account of the free and unhesitating hand with which it was set down, and due also to its being remarkably free of erasures. True *sketches* by Enescu, on the other hand, are full of such erasures, marginal notes, and so forth. Perhaps the committing to paper of the *Trio* brought Enescu some relief from the stresses of 1916, and an occasion to revisit a style of musical creation which by this time he had left far behind.

Perhaps it should be pointed out here that every note of the *Trio* was written by Enescu, with the sole exception of one glissando measure of the piano part where Maestro Benteoiu had to fill in a few specific pitches. The editing provided by Enescu, however, was minimal, to say the least. To decipher the manuscript and provide the necessary technical and expressive instructions was a task which kept Benteoiu occupied for seven months.

On the basis of an earlier edition of the *Trio* by pianist and musicologist Hilda Jerea, Noel Malcolm describes the piece as a transitional work, the outer movements reflecting a carrying forward of the style of the *First Piano Quartet* (1910) into the harmonic world of the *Third Symphony*. In the middle movement he perceives the spirit of some of the pieces in the *Third Piano Suite* (*Pièces impromptues*). While the work may indeed embody certain transitional qualities, to me the mood of the *Trio* does not suggest the Enescu of 1916. In its youthful exuberance, in its expansiveness and optimism, in the way it proclaims Enescu the Extrovert, and in its spring-like freshness, the *Trio* recalls to me most nearly the mood of the 1906 *Dixtuor*.

Since many of you, perhaps most of you, are not likely to have had the opportunity to hear the *Trio* before now, I would like to play for you a short excerpt from the recording of the Pella performance which, I think, gives a good sense of the buoyancy and rhythmic freedom which characterize so much of the work. The captivating metric ambiguity is accomplished almost solely within the confines of *alla breve*; only six measures digress from the predominant 2/2. You may note a foretaste of the *Carillon Nocturne* in the bell-like descending fourths which characterize the principal motive.

[Recording of excerpt, *Vivace amabile*, from third movement]

You can tell from the enthusiastic and sustained applause what a favorable impression the work made upon the audience. As Mihai Cosma remarked in his press review, the *Trio* "won the audience's heart."

Ultimately, the details as to the origin of the *Trio*, and whether it was conceived in 1916 or a decade earlier, are not so important. What *is* important is that the work was composed in the first place, and, secondly, that Pascal Benteoiu possessed the skills, the profound understanding of Enescu, and the desire to bring into existence this new performing edition. We have, I believe, in this *Trio in A minor* a masterpiece. It is gratifying, but not at all surprising to me, that other ensembles are taking up the piece. It is a significant addition to the body of Enescu's works. One might even say that to a certain extent it fills a gap between Enescu's works of the first decade of the twentieth

century and those of the First World War period. I both hope and expect that the *Trio in A minor*, this "bouquet of flowers" (in the words of Pascal Bentoiu), will become an enduring addition to the piano trio repertoire.

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