

Oberlin Conservatory to begin year with World War I Festival September 8 & 9

by Daniel Hathaway



“I’ve always loved music from the early 20th century, particularly during World War I,” Oberlin violin professor Sibbi Bernhardsson said in a recent telephone conversation. “And I’m fascinated by the decade after the war, which is more varied than any ten-year period in the 19th century. You have the Second Viennese School, the Russian composers, things that are starting up in America, Modernism, and reactions to this and that. It’s a very rich time.”

Bernhardsson, who joined the Conservatory faculty last year after 17 seasons touring with the Pacifica Quartet, was seized by the idea of marking the 100th Anniversary of the cessation of hostilities, using Oberlin’s deep musical and scholarly resources to explore the music surrounding the Great War. “Looking at the number of great chamber pieces that were written during the era, not only are they all very different, some are clearly about the war while other composers were writing as though there was no war going on at all. This became a fascinating thing to me,” he said.

The violinist broached the idea of a festival with Oberlin musicology professor Charles McGuire early last spring only to discover that McGuire, who is in charge of Oberlin’s Murphy Colloquium, had already been talking with his colleagues about mounting a panel discussion about World War I music. “That seemed fortuitous,” McGuire said in a separate telephone conversation. “It’s always better to plan a scholarly panel if it’s surrounded by great music, and Sibbi’s very enthusiastic — a whirlwind when he sinks his teeth into something.”

Months of planning will result in a two-day festival, “Creative Arts and Music In the Shadow of War,” on Saturday and Sunday, September 8 and 9, a collaboration that will comprise two museum sessions, four concerts and two panel presentations, and will involve some 20 Oberlin faculty musicians and 13 speakers from Oberlin and beyond.



The Festival will get underway on Saturday, with 10:15 and 11:15 sessions led by curator Andrea Gyrody and Oberlin History Professor Leonard Smith at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, which owns Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s iconic *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (1915), as well as a collection of World War I propaganda posters and other artworks of the era.

The opening concert on Saturday at 1:30 pm will feature cellist Darrett Adkins and pianist Angela Cheng in Debussy’s *Cello Sonata* (1915), duo-pianists Alvin Chow and Cheng in Ravel’s *La Valse* (1918), and violinists Sibbi Bernhardsson and David Bowlin, violist Kirsten Docter, cellist Darrett Adkins and pianist Haewon Song in Elgar’s *Piano Quintet* (1918).

McGuire’s 1:00 pm lecture entitled “Through the Eyes of War: From Romantic to Modern” before the first concert will set the tone for the festival. “I’ve been thinking about how modernism comes out in composers like Debussy and Elgar, and even to a certain extent, Ravel,” McGuire said. “World War I was the last Romantic war, the last poets’ war. It was a conflict where chemical and mechanized warfare made a

much bigger splash than before, and in which governments were willing not to worry so much about civilian collateral damage. All that and the idea of total war is very modern, and these three composers give us interesting personal views in their pieces. None of them had a direct experience with the war — Elgar was too old, Ravel was too small in stature, and Debussy was already too sick to serve, but the war pushed them in different artistic directions.”



The musicologist noted that all three had individual compositional crises and stopped composing for a while. “Then Elgar, who was trying to come to terms with an interesting sort of nostalgia which was both escapist and confronted different aspects of the War, started working on the String Quartet, the Piano Quintet, and the Cello Concerto as the war was winding down. Debussy started writing six sonatas for diverse instruments in a very neoclassical French style — a specific anti-German response. And Ravel, who really loved Germanic music and was trying to move on, dropped the idea of a big tone poem that was going to be called *Wien*. After the war, that became *La Valse*.”

A panel presentation on Saturday at 3:30 pm in Stull Recital Hall moderated by McGuire will feature three papers that examine the effects of the War on the home fronts, an idea that sprang from Oberlin emerita professor of musicology Claudia Macdonald’s longterm studies of nation building through music in Montana. Macdonald will speak about “Music, Montana, and the Great War.” Gayle Sherwood Magee, professor of musicology at the University of Illinois, will present “For King and Country: Canadian Nationalism and Songwriting in the First World War.” And

Colin Roust, assistant professor of musicology at the University of Kansas, will examine “World War I through the Eyes of Georges Auric.”

Although Bernhardsson had proposed “a handful of works from the core repertory” for the festival concerts, others previously unknown to him were suggested by the performers themselves. The second concert on Saturday at 8:00 pm in Kulas Recital Hall will include one of those suggested by flutist Alexa Still, Philippe Gaubert’s *Trois Aquarelles* for flute, cello and piano (1915), to be performed by Still, Stuart Pincombe, and Allie Sui. The rest of the program will be devoted to Robert Shannon’s performance of Charles Ives’ *Piano Sonata No. 2 (Concord Sonata)*, (1915), a piece Bernhardsson said enjoys “a monumental cult following.”

Sunday’s events will begin with a 1:00 pm pre-concert lecture in Kulas Recital Hall by Oberlin’s assistant professor of composition Elizabeth Ogonek, followed by a 1:30 performance of works by six period composers. Bernhardsson will join pianist Peter Takács in Leoš Janáček’s *Violin Sonata* (1914), Alexa Still will play Claude Debussy’s *Syrinx for Solo Flute* (1916) and Ferruccio Busoni’s *Albumblatt for Flute and Piano* (1916) with Tony Cho. Three vocal works performed by mezzo-soprano Lorraine Mainz and Cho will include selections from Arthur Foote’s *Three Songs* (1914-1918), and Kurt Weill’s *Ofrah’s Lieder* (1916), and Hanns Eisler’s *Ändere die Welt, sie braucht es* (1930).



The second panel presentation, on Sunday at 3:30 pm in Stull Recital Hall, will take up the question, “Should Music and Art be Viewed through the Lens of Current Affairs?” As Bernhardsson framed the issue, “Ravel’s *La Valse* is clearly about the

War, but what about Elgar's *Piano Quartet*, where monks are turned into trees? Some works require background, but others might well stand on their own." The issue will be debated by Oberlin's composition professor Stephen Hartke, Conservatory Dean Andrea Kalyn, associate conducting professor Raphael Jiménez, assistant professor of Islamic Art History Farshid Emami, associate professor of Middle Eastern History Zeinab Abul-Magd, and University of Toronto lecturer in architectural history Peter Minosh. If the inclusion of non-European scholars seems surprising, Bernhardsson noted that the Middle East might have been even more profoundly affected by the Great War than Europe itself.

The final concert on Sunday at 8:00 pm in Kulas Recital Hall will be preceded by a 7:30 pm lecture by Claudia Macdonald, "Music behind Two Lines." The performance will begin with George Butterworth's settings of poems from A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, a collection carried into the trenches by many an English soldier, sung by baritone Tim LeFebvre with pianist Tony Cho. The program continues with Rebecca Clarke's *Sonata for Viola and Piano* (1918-1919) with Peter Slowik and James Housman, Siegfried Karg-Elert's *Sonata Appassionata for solo flute* played by Alexa Still, and Claude Debussy's *Violin Sonata* with Marilyn McDonald and pianist Robert Shannon.

"The idea is to have a rich and multifaceted way of commemorating the end of World War I," Bernhardsson said. "I'm so excited to see this all come to fruition, and super excited to expose students to this repertoire at the beginning of the school year before everyone becomes overwhelmed."

All events are free and open to the public. See our Calendar Listings for links to live streams of performances.

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