



VASILISA THE BEAUTIFUL AT THE HUT OF BABA YAGA (1899), BY IVAN BILIBIN

This illustration was submitted by Carl Schimmel as an accompaniment for his new work, *Vasilissa the Invincible*. The artist, Ivan Bilibin (1876–1942), was an illustrator and stage designer who was inspired by Slavic folklore. Born in a suburb of St. Petersburg, Bilibin was educated at the Anton Azbe Art School in Munich, Germany and his art was heavily influenced by Art Nouveau, the German satirical journal *Simplicissimus*, Russian village architecture, as well as the Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Bilibin rose to fame upon the release of his illustrations of Russian fairy tales in 1899, which included this image of Vasilisa.

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 3, 2018 ■ 7:30 P.M.
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND FINE ARTS CENTER CONCERT HALL

A FAIRY TALE

SPONSORED BY SAM AND LYNDIE ERSAN

SCHIMMEL *Vasilissa the Invincible: Quartet for Piano, Violin, Viola, and Cello*
World Premiere of a Festival Commission

Vasilissa, Beloved
Vasilissa, Avenged

CLAROSA PIANO QUARTET ▶
NATALIE ZHU, PIANO
JULIETTE KANG, VIOLIN
CHE-HUNG CHEN, VIOLA
CLANCY NEWMAN, CELLO

GNATTALI *Sonata for Guitar and Cello*

Allegro comodo
Adagio
Con spirito

GUITAR: JASON VIEAUX
CELLO: CLANCY NEWMAN

SCHUMANN *Piano Trio No. 3 in G Minor, Op. 110*

Bewegt, doch nicht zu rasch
Ziemlich langsam
Rasch
Kräftig, mit Humor

PIANO: REIKO UCHIDA
VIOLIN: ARA GREGORIAN
CELLO: RAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

INTERMISSION

ENESCU *Octet for Strings in C Major, Op. 7*

Très modéré
Très fougueux
Lentement
Mouvement de valse bien rythmée

VIOLINS: JULIETTE KANG, ZACH DEPUE, HYE-JIN KIM
AND AYANO NINOMIYA

VIOLAS: MELISSA REARDON AND CHE-HUNG CHEN

CELLOS: JONATHAN KAROLY AND RAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

Vasilissa the Invincible: Quartet for Piano, Violin, Viola, and Cello ***World Premiere of a Kingston Chamber Music Festival Commission***

CARL SCHIMMEL (B. 1975)

Praised by *The New York Times* as “vivid and dramatic,” the music of composer Carl Schimmel is often humorous and dense with literary and musical references. His many awards include a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship, the Bearn Prize, and the 2017 Goddard Lieberman Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His works have been performed in Carnegie Hall’s Weill Hall, Severance Hall in Cleveland, St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, and at other venues throughout the world by ensembles such as the Minnesota Orchestra, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra. A graduate of Duke University, the Yale School of Music, and Case Western Reserve University, he is Associate Professor of Music at Illinois State University.

Schimmel was raised in Wakefield, R.I., and graduated valedictorian of South Kingstown High School in 1993. He took music lessons at the University of Rhode Island (piano with Dr. Donald Rankin and composition with Dr. Geoffrey Gibbs) and was a member of the state math team, a violinist in the Rhode Island Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, and winner of the state spelling bee in sixth grade. His other accomplishments in South County include making Awful Awfuls at Newport Creamery and delivering Tony’s Pizza during summers in the late 1990s.

The Kingston Chamber Music Festival commissioned *Vasilissa the Invincible* for its premiere performance by the Clarosa Piano Quartet. In the following commentary Schimmel describes sources of inquiry and inspiration underlying his composition.

In 2016, I began to explore the possibility that the emotionality and frequent shifts of mood in my compositions derive from my interest not only in character and personality in music, but in these aspects of the literary arts, and in narrative form in particular. My early research on theories of narrative focused particularly on the structural analysis of folktales. I recalled how, when I was a boy growing up in Rhode Island, there was a year or two in which I was keenly interested in the folktale collections of Ruth Manning-Sanders (illustrated by Robin Jacques). Her collection A Book of Enchantments and Curses included her telling of Vasilissa Most Lovely (known also as Vasilissa the Lovely or Vasilissa the Beautiful). One of the most iconic of Russian folktales, Vasilissa Most Lovely resembles the classic Cinderella story in that the heroine is a good and innocent girl who, mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters, triumphs in the end. But while some versions of Vasilissa Most Lovely do end with a wedding to the Tsar, the marriage functions as a kind of epilogue to the main tale, which can be summarized as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a good and beautiful young girl known as Vasilissa the Lovely. She had a happy childhood until her mother fell gravely ill. On her deathbed, Vasilissa’s mother gave her a magical doll which would help Vasilissa if ever she were in need; she had only to give it a little to eat and a little to drink. Her mother soon died, and after a time, Vasilissa’s father remarried. The new wife and Vasilissa’s two stepsisters were very cruel to her, and when the father left town on business they devised a plan to get rid of her by sending Vasilissa to fetch a light from the witch Baba Yaga. On her way through the forest to Baba Yaga’s hut, three mysterious horsemen rode past her (the first dressed in white, the second in red, and the third in black). At night, she came to a house that stood on chicken legs and was surrounded by a fence made of human bones, the posts mounted with skulls,

their eye sockets aglow. At this moment, a wind arose, and Baba Yaga flew down through the woods in a mortar, whereupon Vasilissa explained that she needed a light for her family; the witch commanded her to care for her hut by performing three impossible tasks, under threat of death. With the help of the magical doll, Vasilissa succeeded, and when the witch asked her how she was able to complete the tasks, the girl answered “by my mother’s blessing.” Because Vasilissa had the blessing of her mother, Baba Yaga threw her out of the hut, sending her home with a skull-lantern full of burning coals as promised. Vasilissa went back through the dark wood, and again the three horsemen passed her as dawn turned to day and day turned to night, and upon her arrival, the eye-sockets of the skull-lantern blazed so fiercely that they burned the stepmother and stepsisters until nothing was left of them but a pile of ashes.

To me, there are several intriguing aspects to Vasilissa Most Lovely. One is that all of the main characters are female — the father is mentioned only in passing, and in fact it is his absence which initiates the action. Another is its shockingly brutal ending, a conclusion which may to some extent be satisfying but cannot be considered “happy.” A third intriguing aspect is that the evil witch is in fact Vasilissa’s helper, and that evil is punished by evil, while good is simply the messenger. Fourth, and related to this plot point, Vasilissa does not do anything truly heroic, and she does nothing of her own accord — in most versions I have read she is not even described as brave, she is simply good (and beautiful). The source of her strength (and arguably the true protagonist) is the little doll which has been given to her by her mother — her mother’s “blessing.”

It is interesting to consider that Vasilissa’s goodness and strength are gifts from her loving parent, that this grotesque and bizarre fairy tale functions also as an allegory about how a parent’s love (or “blessing”) can cultivate in a child the resilience and integrity needed to overcome even the most daunting obstacles. This interpretation resonated with me as a parent, and it seemed to me that to derive the new work from this unusual folktale might be appropriate, given that the Clarosa Quartet takes its name from the children of the principal players in the ensemble. And because Vasilissa’s most important character traits in the story are her strength and resilience, I did not entitle the piece Vasilissa Most Lovely but rather Vasilissa the Invincible.

The first movement captures the essence of Vasilissa and depicts the prologue of the fairy tale, the bestowal of the doll and the mother’s death. The second movement depicts the remainder of the fairy tale, from the introduction of the stepmother and stepsisters to their eventual destruction. There are themes for all of the main characters of the story, including the eerie emergence and disappearance of the mysterious galloping horsemen.

— Carl Schimmel

Sonata for Guitar and Cello

RADAMÉS GNATTALI (1906–1988)

The Brazilian composer Gnattali was born into a very musical family of Italian origin who had moved to Brazil late in the 19th century and demonstrated their passion for Verdi’s music by naming three of their children after characters in his operas. (The other two were Aida and Ernani.) Radamès learned the piano and violin; by the age of nine he conducted a children’s orchestra in arrangements of his own. After that he learned to play the guitar and a smaller four-stringed relative, the cavaquinho. And only then, at age 14, did he begin formal study at a school of music. His piano playing was such as to suggest a professional career, but owing to lack of money, he returned to his home town and played both piano and violin in a quartet.

In the 1930s he began a career in Rio involving both classical and popular sides of music, along with work on radio and for recording. Joining the *Rádio nacional* upon its founding in 1936, he served for three decades as a conductor and arranger of popular music. This position had a lot to do with a career that took part equally in both classical and popular musical traditions. He liked to blend them, so that he would arrange sambas with the instruments of a classical orchestra or introduce into his own original chamber music instruments like the guitar or cavaquinho, which had mostly been relegated to folk traditions. The Sonata for Guitar and Cello shows this fusion of style, as well as the attractive contrast between the mellow, lyric singing tone of the cello and the color and rhythmic ping of the guitar, an effective mix of the diverse parts of his musical life.

Piano Trio No. 3 in G Minor, Op. 110

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)

It is difficult to find a serious evaluation of this, the least often performed of Schumann's piano trios. And it is all too easy to find writers — especially a generation or more ago — who claim to find in the work only signs of Schumann's mental decay. Because we know about the composer's tragic mental decline and hospitalization, and because much of his music is highly personal, even sometimes oddly bizarre, it has been tempting to consider these characteristics as somehow foreshadowing the disaster. Yet the years from 1850 to 1854, the last before he was put into a mental hospital for his own protection, were filled with vigorous activity on many fascinating compositions. Some 50 works were completed in less than four years, and many of these were substantial, multi-movement compositions. And, as was usually the case when he felt well, Schumann composed at top speed, often finishing large, elaborate compositions in a few weeks or a month. One of the prominent features of his late music was a return to the poetic and sometimes esoteric qualities of his early works of the 1830s, works that were regarded as bizarre and ultra-modern at the time. A recurrence of these approaches suggests that late Schumann is closer to early Schumann than we've allowed ourselves to believe. An open-minded hearing of many of the late works reveals that his remarkable originality has not waned.

On Sept. 2, 1850, Schumann and his family arrived in Düsseldorf, where he was to be the conductor, and where he was warmly feted. The first year was notably successful in this capacity, the second year less so. But both years saw the completion of a large amount of new music. In just the two-month period from September to November 1851, he completed two violin sonatas sandwiched around the present piano trio, as well as some smaller works. Schumann noted that he had “trio thoughts” on Oct. 2, 1851. His third and final piano trio was finished by the end of the month.

Each of the four movements of the Trio has its own expressive character, but a melodic gesture that appears in the violin at the very beginning of the piece reappears in slightly varied form often throughout. It begins low, shoots up in an arpeggiation of the chord, then descends in a similar arpeggiation on a different harmony. The up-and-down gesture seems to be a unifying factor in the work.

The opening movement (Bewegt, doch nicht zu rasch [“Moving, but not too fast”]) begins with turbulent, surging gestures in 6/8 time. The principal motif mentioned above appears not only in the first theme, but also in the transition and as an accompaniment in the second theme. A hint at a fugato (with a pizzicato theme) eventually brings about a somewhat concealed return to the recapitulation (a device that Brahms evidently learned from Schumann). After a faster coda, the movement dies away in a few tense lingering phrases. The slow movement, in E-flat major, begins with long, soaring, decorated melodies in the two stringed instruments, while the piano offers a rhythmic accompaniment in chordal sonorities. The somewhat faster middle section is rhythmically very abrupt and assertive, but it eventually grows calmer for a return to the original tempo and the lyrical opening material.

The scherzo, simply marked Rasch (“Quickly”), is in C-minor marked by curious rhythmic shifts from off-the-beat stresses. The first of two trios (slightly slower and moving to the major) has a long-phrased theme in the strings that recalls the opening movement of the piece. After a restatement of the scherzo, a new trio, in A-flat major, plays with dotted rhythms in a march character placed against flowing triplets. A final statement of the scherzo material ends the movement in an urgent final phrase. The last movement (Kräftig mit Humor [“Powerful, with humor”]) is laid out in the manner of a full-scale sonata form, though the various parts are often sectional, quite independent in character, like the colors in a mosaic. This is a familiar type of construction for Schumann, one that was already a feature of his *Noveletten*, Opus 21, of 1838. The piano writing, too, is whimsical and complex, a style that Schumann seemed to have abandoned after the *Noveletten*, but it returns here, an indication, in the view of Schumann biographer John Daverio, that in his last stage he was drawing again on his “Davidsbündler” style — the music that he created for his (mythical) League of David Against the Philistines. With warmth, energy, and humor, Schumann brings this last trio to an end by surging to an almost symphonic close.

Octet for Strings in C Major, Op. 7

GEORGES ENESCU (1881–1955)

Georges Enesco (to give the form of his name perhaps best known internationally — he was born George Enescu, and that is how he remains known in his native Romania) led several double lives: as a Romanian nationalist composer who was also very active on the international scene (as witness the two forms of his name), and as a very gifted composer who was also a performer of extraordinary ability, to such a degree that his career in the public eye made it difficult for him to find time to create. He began to play the violin at four (studying with a gypsy violinist), displaying such talent for the instrument that he entered the Vienna Conservatory at seven. There he studied violin with Joseph Hellmesberger and theory with Robert Fuchs; by the age of 11 he had taken first prizes in both violin and harmony. In 1894 he moved on to Paris, where he studied composition with Fauré and Massenet, winning another first prize in violin at age 18, and also gaining considerable proficiency as a cellist, organist, and pianist. Many years later — on the 60th anniversary of his concert debut at age eight — he gave a concert in New York during which he performed as violinist, pianist, conductor, and composer!

Far and away Enescu's best-known piece is the first *Romanian Rhapsody* (1904). Its popularity has caused most of the musical world to think of him essentially as a nationalist composer of populist tendencies, but that view only represents a small part of his extraordinarily well-rounded music-making. Stylistically he was a romantic; not surprisingly his music always recalled the color and expressive harmonic richness of music prominent during his Viennese and Parisian training. At the same time, he was willing to experiment, as in the opera *Oedipe*, on which he worked for many years between concert tours, finishing it in 1936, though it was not produced until 1958, after his death; this grand work, regarded by many as one of the greatest operas of the century, explores quarter-tones as an expressive device.

Enescu's output, especially from the early years before his constant touring eroded away most of his time to compose, was prodigious. He had completed three early symphonies (unnumbered and later withdrawn) before he was 17 and had completed a violin concerto and a piano concerto as well as works celebrating his Romanian heritage by the turn of the century, when he composed his Octet in C major. String octets, usually conceived as a medium for two string quartets (sometimes playing in antiphonal opposition to one another, sometimes formed into a single ensemble that verges on the symphonic) had been popular ever since Mendelssohn showed the way with his youthful masterpiece. Spohr had preceded Mendelssohn with works that were essentially double string quartets, but after Mendelssohn, composers tended to think of the ensemble as eight instruments rather than *two times four*. Niels Gade and Joachim Raff both wrote string octets, but the C-major work by the 19-year-old Enescu is probably the most significant contribution to the repertory after Mendelssohn.

Enescu clearly knew a number of epochal romantic works, such as Liszt's Sonata in B minor for piano (itself certainly inspired in part by Schubert's *Wanderer* Fantasy), or the Franck Symphony in D minor, or d'Indy's *Symphony on a French Mountain Air*, which were shaped ostensibly in three or four movements but employed the same musical material in each movement, creating what became known as *cyclic form*. The reshaping of melodic elements and their use as a principal structural element in large forms had gradually come to be thoroughly common in works ranging from single movement pieces of moderate length (such as Liszt's tone poems) to the largest and grandest of musical conceptions (like Wagner's *Ring*). Enescu, too, planned the four movements of his Octet in this cyclic form. The first two musical ideas heard in the piece shape much of its course and return many times in many guises. The four movements are generally self-sufficient (though the finale grows out of the third movement, linked by a transition), yet each also plays a role in an over-arching conception of the whole Octet as projecting a gigantic sonata form, in which the middle movements develop, in various ways, the material heard in the first movement, and these themes return triumphantly transformed in the finale. Though there are breaks between each of the first three movements, none of them ends in the key in which it began, another device that enforces the link between the movements to create a large-scale form.

The first thing heard in the Octet is a somewhat Brahmsian theme, an arpeggiation of the notes of the C-major triad in a characteristic dotted rhythm with a downward leap followed by a leap back up to the starting note. This is the first principal theme, the *major* theme. Soon, though, there are inklings of C minor, and a new idea, based on a neighbor-note figure to the upper half-step, presents a quite different mood, the *minor* theme. The first-time listener to this extended and complex piece will be greatly aided in following the course of the work by remembering these two simple gestures. The first movement presents the *major* theme and the *minor* theme one after the other, then offers a full-scale, assertive treatment of the major theme. Following this, the movement unfolds through a series of bright keys, introducing other material, including a sighing, melting secondary theme.

The second movement (*Très fougueux*, "very violent or impetuous") begins with the *minor* theme presented in a new key, followed by an extensive fugue that grows out of the *major* theme, driven dramatically by its dotted rhythms. This serves as one sort of development of the thematic material from the first movement. The lyrical third movement (*Lentement*) is richly harmonized and songful in its melodic character; much of it grows out of the very first motif of the opening movement with its large leap inverted, so that the second note moves up a third instead of down a sixth. As this movement dies away, Enescu offers a hint of the original version of the opening theme and begins a dark and intense transition, with an extended tremolo, linking the last two movements. Gradually, out of the mystery of the tremolo, a waltz rhythm appears and brings in the opening motif of the major theme. A richly elaborated, vigorous waltz movement follows, finally presenting the main theme in a triumphant apotheosis.

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