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Jean Françaix (1912-1997) *Divertissement* (1933)

Allegretto giocoso

Scherzo. Vivo

Andante. Lento

Finale. Prestissimo

Jean Françaix was the precocious child of musical parents: his father Alfred was a composer and the director of the Le Mans Conservatoire, and his mother sang and taught singing. The child's abilities were recognised by Ravel who advised his father, '*Among the child's gifts I observe above all the most fruitful an artist can possess, that of curiosity: you must not stifle these precious gifts now or ever, or risk letting this young sensibility wither.*' His first composition, aged 10, was submitted for publication to Editions Sénart where one of the review panel spotted it and steered the young Françaix towards Nadia Boulanger who both taught him composition and premiered several of his works.

He excelled as a pianist and composed tirelessly well into old age, producing many chamber works for unusual combinations of instruments. His style used classical forms with the eclectic charm and grace of the French tradition; not for him the *avant garde* rigours of Boulez! For example, of his sparkling 1932 Concertino for piano and orchestra, Heinrich Strobel, the musicologist and occasional cookery writer said: '*After so much problematic or laboured music, this Concertino was like fresh water, rushing from a spring with the gracious spontaneity of all that is natural.*' An on-line reviewer of the only CD set to feature today's *Divertissement* has a more Starbuckian culinary take on Françaix: '*[He] is the pumpkin spice latte of 20th century composers: ... his music is sweet, satisfying, and pleasantly warm; it's spicy without being bitter, and it's flavourful without being overpowering.*' Enjoy!

Tonight's *Divertissement* was written in 1933 and rearranged for string trio and orchestra in 1935. Françaix's writing for the piano has Debussy's lightness, combined with elements from jazz and folk music. As with Mozart, Françaix often opposes the piano to the three strings as a whole. You can hear this at the beginning of the first movement, and particularly in the *Scherzo*. The middle section of the *Scherzo* is for strings alone, and strings and piano are again treated separately at the beginning of the *Andante* with its mysteriously muted strings. The very fast *Finale* shows off the players' technique with rapid scales, strong rhythms which contrast with long melodies, and special sound effects such as *glissandi* in the middle cadenza-like part of the movement. The *Finale* brings this rarely played piece to a colourful and virtuosic end.

Programme note by Chris Darwin, with thanks to Philip Graham.