

STEVEN ISSERLIS

Zankel Hall in NEW YORK

Subduing Ravel's Challenging Trio

by ANTHONY TOMMASINI
Published: March 21, 2010

Not many composers around right now — at least among those who are writing audacious operas and symphonic works for major international institutions — are also capable of playing the challenging piano part of Ravel's Trio in A minor. The English composer Thomas Adès is, as he proved on Friday night at Zankel Hall in a chamber music program with two brilliant British colleagues: the violinist Anthony Marwood and the cellist Steven Isserlis.

This intriguing program found musical resonances among works by Janacek, Liszt, Poulenc, Ravel and Mr. Adès. Although several of the scores had difficult piano parts, most pianists would place the Ravel trio near the top of the list of the most technically challenging chamber works. It is not just the profusion of notes but also the awkwardness of the piano writing that makes it so difficult.

Many chamber players luxuriate in the glossy textures, slick brilliance and Impressionistic colorings of this 1914 piece. But Mr. Adès and his like-minded colleagues took a cooler, drier, more thematic and crisply rhythmic approach. From the first statement of the opening theme in the piano, Mr. Adès played with a blend of clarity and sensitivity that made the elusive music all the more mysterious. He voiced Ravel's thick chords so that the strangeness of the harmonies came through.

When Mr. Marwood and Mr. Isserlis took up that theme, their sound was focused yet spectral and haunting. This refreshingly unvoluptuous take on the piece continued in the incisive, spiky account of the macabre, scherzolike second movement and the almost medieval austerity the players brought to the subdued and inexorably slow Passacaille. While the finale had the requisite whirlwind energy, the crunchy, incisive playing never allowed the music to sound flashy.

Mr. Marwood and Mr. Adès began the program with an engrossing account of Janacek's Sonata for Violin and Piano, composed about the same time as the Ravel, an unconventional and defiantly episodic work full of fractured folklike melodies and

out-of-focus harmonies. Mr. Isserlis and Mr. Adès gave a scintillating, unsentimental performance of Poulenc's Sonata for Cello and Piano and searching accounts of grimly beautiful Liszt works, "Romance Oubliée" and "La Lugubre Gondola," which show Liszt in his most harmonically radical vein.

The program's centerpiece was the American premiere of Mr. Adès's "Lieux Retrouvés" for cello and piano, composed last year. The four movements evoke, though only elliptically, the waters, the mountains, the fields and, finally, the city. But the purely musical elements of the work are what grabbed me: the rippling figures for piano and cello that spin out in crazed, cyclic riffs; the crystalline piano harmonies that sound as if wind were rustling the chimes in a pagoda; the feisty, industrialized propulsive bursts in the finale.

The audience responded with a prolonged ovation for this bold new piece. Mr. Adès, who will conduct a concert in Zankel Hall and play a solo piano recital in [Carnegie Hall](#) this week, may be the most accomplished overall musician before the public today.