

LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET

Program Note

By Bill Barclay

Both born 150 years ago in 1875, Rainer Maria Rilke and Maurice Ravel bridge the romantic and modernist worlds like few others. At the height of Belle Époque Paris with its world fairs, its famous nexus of mold-breaking artists and its nascent globalism, these two visionaries began their masterpieces in the exact same months, just miles apart, in 1903. Ravel's single string quartet and Rilke's correspondence with aspiring poet, Franz Kappus are watermarks of true greatness. They were each, astonishingly, only 28 years old.

I created this project after an acquaintance put Rilke's book into my hands during the pandemic. She wanted me to have it, revealing the stack of copies of the same book in the corner. I protested: I already possess and cherish it. NO, she said, look at the cover. What had I missed? A new edition that includes the letters *from the young poet*? I was aghast - I had not heard the news of the discovery - and I read it immediately. Some 115 years after they were written, Franz Kappus' letters to Rilke were discovered in 2020 in the Rilke archive near Stuttgart. The man who had astonishingly written some 14,000 letters of his own (that's more than one per day of his entire adult life), had safely retained Kappus's fanmail as he arduously traversed Europe, seeking better health and peace. How deeply touching. This literary discovery was smothered in Covid news, which is why it is likely news to you, dear reader. As I read the whole correspondence for the first time, Rilke's famous advice became a dialogue. I simply had to adapt this material somehow.

For those of you who treasure Rilke's letters, as I do, there is a vital ingredient that makes them work - space. One does not read this book cover to cover in a single sitting. In performance, something must stand in for this space to allow his wisdom time to find its home in the body.

To know Rilke is to tattoo a phrase of his somewhere you can read it. Similar fervor follows Ravel: a friend remarked to me last month that he found life without Ravel "unimaginable." To know him is to feel his eglantine roots gently wrapped around your heart. It was hardly a surprise to discover that they are precise contemporaries. Their anniversaries are this year, 2025, (alongside Carl Jung, Thomas Mann, and Fritz Kreisler). So what could these two twinned geniuses tell us about our modern minds - and our metastasizing neuroses - today?

The new addition of Kappus' psychology begged a musical response to balance the family photo. Debussy also wrote only a single quartet, and it too is a masterpiece in the repertoire. His mentorship of Ravel is obvious on a first listen of the two quartets together (most easily heard in the two pizzicato movements). Debussy was 13 years older than Ravel, while Rilke was 8 years older than Kappus. And so this new production was born - four artists, in the vigor of their visionary youth, drawn out by two fraternal mentorships. These four artists are embodied in the form of the string quartet itself. But although this performance may speak to the grand emergence of *fin de siècle* modernism catalyzed by its titanic artists, we strive to present an idiosyncratic snapshot here: one that in its intimate particulars reveals the deeply personal.

This is to say, if you adhere closely, dear solitary poet, it will reveal YOU.

Bill Barclay