



# PROGRAM NOTES

## For the Love of Chamber Music

Dover Quartet

Franklin and Diana Cohen, Roman Rabinovich

April 5, 2022 – 7:30 p.m.

*Maltz Performing Arts Center*

### **Trio in E-flat major, K. 498 (“Kegelstatt”)**

#### **Wolfgang Amadè Mozart**

*Born: Salzburg, 1756*

*Died: Vienna, 1791*

*Composed: 1786*

This trio owes its nickname *Kegelstatt* (“Bowling Alley”) to a simple mistake. It was the manuscript of another piece on which someone (not Mozart) scrawled the words “Wien den 27.t Julius 1786 untern Kegelscheiben” (“Vienna, 27th July 1786 while playing skittles”). That piece, a set of twelve brief duos for horns, is a much less ambitious composition than the present trio, which is exceptional for several reasons. It is more than likely that even Mozart would have had to give it his undivided attention.

Its instrumentation alone makes this work unique. The choice of clarinet, viola and piano was inspired by Mozart's friendship with clarinetist Anton Stadler, and by his gifted piano student Franziska von Jacquin. The composer himself played the viola, when the new work was unveiled at a private musical evening in the Jacquin home. Earlier in his life, Mozart had been an accomplished violinist, serving as concertmaster in the Archbishop's orchestra in Salzburg, but after his move to Vienna, he

clearly preferred the lower instrument.

Another exceptional feature of the work is its opening movement, an Andante instead of the Allegro one might have expected. The themes are arranged in a regular sonata form, but contrast between the themes is minimized, and a gentle, lyrical mood prevails throughout. A characteristic five-note ornamental turn plays an important role in the movement, and Mozart exploits it in a variety of ways, as when the three instruments pass it back and forth in playful imitation.

Next comes a stately and graceful minuet, with a central Trio section in the minor mode, filled with exquisite chromatic harmonies and a particularly active viola part in fast triplets that the piano takes over as well.

The last movement is a leisurely rondo, in which each of the three players gets plenty of opportunities to shine in virtuosic passages or beautiful *cantabile* melodies.

## String Quartet in F major

### Maurice Ravel

*Born: Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France, 1875*

*Died: Paris, 1937*

*Composed: 1902-03*

Ravel was twenty-seven years old when he wrote his only string quartet. He was still, at least nominally, a student, as he was auditing Gabriel Fauré's composition class at the Paris Conservatoire. But he had been active as composer for years, with numerous public performances behind him. He had failed, however, to win a prize from the Conservatoire, which was a condition for graduation. In particular, the prestigious Prix de Rome continued to elude Ravel, who was eliminated from the contest no fewer than five times. This situation became more and more ludicrous and it finally led to a much-publicized scandal in 1905. The director of the Conservatoire had to resign, and Ravel confirmed his status as one of the leading French composers of his generation, in fact the only one whose work could be compared to that of Claude Debussy.

Ravel's string quartet—dedicated “to my dear master Gabriel Fauré”—is clearly modeled on Debussy's celebrated *Quatuor* from 1893, yet Ravel displays a sense of color and melody that is all his own. To both composers, the string quartet as a medium suggested—in fact, demanded—adherence to classical tradition. Yet nothing was farther from them than academicism of any kind. The defining moment of both works is precisely the tension that exists between the classical forms and a positively non-classical sensitivity that is manifest at every turn.

Melody, harmony and rhythm are usually thought of as the most important ingredients of music. Ravel's string quartet, written at the beginning of the 20th century, was nothing less than prophetic in the way it added a fourth element, *sound*, as a factor of

equal importance. The alternation of playing techniques (*pizzicato*, *con sordino*, *arpeggio*, bow on the fingerboard) is as crucial to the unfolding of the piece as the alternation of themes. Their succession, especially in the second and third movements, creates a musical form of its own, entirely non-traditional this time.

In the first movement, classical sonata form—a legacy that reached Ravel through the intermediary of Fauré—is realized with great clarity and ingenuity. Note the characteristic *pianissimo rallentando* (extremely soft and slow playing) at the end of the movement, similar to the analogous moment in Ravel's Piano Trio of 1914. (On the other hand, the opening movement of Debussy's string quartet ends with a loud and fast coda.)

The second movement of Ravel's quartet is based on the contrast between two themes of opposite character: one *pizzicato* [plucked], and one *bien chanté* [“sing out!”], with bow. Again, it seems that the movement looks into the future (ahead to Ravel's Piano Trio of 1914) rather than into the past (back to the Debussy quartet). The middle section, in which all four instruments use mutes, is an expressive slow movement in miniature, with subtle variations on both scherzo themes.

The unique beauty of the third movement evolves by fits and starts, as it were, through the sometimes abrupt juxtaposition of segments in different tempos, keys, and meters. An expressive melody, whose primary exponent is the viola, is interrupted by memories of the first movement's opening theme. After a more animated middle section, culminating in a

passionate outburst, the initial slow tempo returns with its delicate harmonies.

The last movement is based on an *ostinato* (“stubbornly” returning pattern) in an asymmetrical 5/8 meter. After a while, this *ostinato* yields to a more regular 3/4 which, once more, contains echoes of the

## **Concert, Op. 21** **Ernest Chausson**

*Born: Paris, 1855*

*Died: Limay, Yvelines, France, 1899*

*Composed: 1891*

Ernest Chausson’s home, at 22 Boulevard de Courcelles in Paris, was always open to artists, poets, and musicians. The list of his regular guests reads like a Who’s Who of French culture: the leading impressionist painters Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas, the writers André Gide and Colette, the composers César Franck, Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy could all be seen at Chausson’s soirées. (One great absent was Camille Saint-Saëns, the arch-rival of Chausson’s teacher Franck.)

The host, himself a composer, had inherited a fortune (his father, a contractor, had worked on Baron Haussmann’s extensive construction projects which had transformed Paris into a modern city). He could devote himself to composition and to the collection of paintings by his numerous artist friends. The two main influences on Chausson as a composer were Franck and Wagner; in his best works he was able to combine the Wagnerian harmonic idiom with a genuinely French sensitivity.

Chausson’s *Concert*, Op. 21, can be best described as the fusion of a sonata for violin and piano with a string quartet. It was inspired by the artistry of Eugène Ysaÿe who later became the dedicatee of Chausson’s most famous work, the *Poème*. The great Belgian violinist gave the first performance of *Concert*, with five

first movement. A different musical character—the first aggressive, the second more lyrical—corresponds to each of these two meters. Their contrast carries the movement forward, right up to the singularly forceful conclusion.

colleagues, in Brussels on March 4, 1892.

From his teacher César Franck, Chausson had learned the idea of “cyclic” construction, which means that the same melodic idea may return from one movement to the next. More specifically, Chausson followed the example of Franck’s Symphony in D minor (1888), which begins with a three-note motto, carried over from the slow introduction into the fast tempo. Chausson’s three-note motto does exactly the same, generating a passionately Romantic opening movement. Forceful and soft-spoken movements alternate, sometimes with startling abruptness, in this movement where the three-note motto is never absent for too long.

The second movement is a tender “Sicilienne” in which the familiar 6/8 rhythm of the siciliano is combined with a melody that goes back and forth between two notes, giving the work a certain rocking quality--almost like a lullaby. Through motivic development, the theme gathers considerable momentum and is eventually taken up *forte* by the entire ensemble, though the ending is, once again, soft and subdued. The “Sicilienne,” marked *Pas vite* (“Not fast”), plays the role of a lyrical intermezzo, a movement type that, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often replaced the scherzo in multi-movement

works.

The third-movement *Grave* is the emotional center of the *Concert*. In the long and exceedingly tender opening duo between the violin and the piano, we may recognize the two-note oscillation from the previous movement. The string quartet enters to amplify the texture as the movement's principal melody is introduced. All six instruments play this melody in a heroic manner at the climactic moment, followed by a brief and gentle coda.

The last movement begins tempestuously in the "dramatic" key of D minor, continues in a more lyrical vein, traversing many keys and, after a staggering development, culminates in a *fortissimo* return of the third movement's main melody. This is another Franckian strategy, recalling

the last movement of Franck's Violin Sonata (which had also been premiered by Ysaÿe in 1886). The finale of that sonata similarly incorporates a quote from its preceding slow movement.

In a way, the *Concert* as a whole is indebted to Franck's Piano Quintet of 1879 (to the scoring of which he added merely, but very significantly, a solo violin). One is tempted to call the entire *Concert* an homage to Franck, who passed away the year before Chausson's composition was written. Yet the *Concert* is by no means a derivative work: its novel combination of instrumental forces, used in such a brilliant way, is the sign of a highly original concept that makes it unique in the entire chamber music repertory.

-Peter Laki

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*Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.*