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Program Notes for Gabriel Fauré's Violin Sonata No.1 in A Major, Op. 13, Ernest Chausson's Poéme, Op. 25, and Sergei Prokofiev's Violin Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 80

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By

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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
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Abstract

The following program notes were written in preparation for a public recital held on May 13, 2023. The program included Gabriel Fauré's Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Major, Op. 13, Ernest Chausson's *Poéme*, Op. 25, and Sergei Prokofiev's Violin Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 80.

Table of Contents

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Sonata No. 1 in A Major, Op. 13

Gabriel Fauré showed musical promise from a young age, so his father sent him to the Ecole Niedermeyer in Paris, a three-day journey from his hometown of Pamiers, to be trained as a choirmaster. During his eleven years at the school, Fauré studied organ, piano, and composition with an emphasis on church music. It was his piano instructor Camille Saint-Saëns who introduced young Fauré to the contemporary works of Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner. With the help of Saint-Saëns, Fauré obtained several church organist appointments throughout Paris. During the Franco-Prussian War, he enlisted in the First Light Infantry Regiment of the Imperial Guard. Following the end of the war, he joined a group of young French composers and musicians to form the Société Nationale de Musique, which sought to promote French music and a national music identity. Other founding members included Saint-Saëns, César Franck, Théodore Dubois, Henri Duparc, Ernest Guiraud, Jules Massenet, and Paul Taffanel.

In 1872 Saint-Saëns introduced Fauré to the influential vocalist Pauline Viradot and her daughter Marianne, with whom Fauré fell in love. After years of courtship, in 1877 Marianne finally agreed to his proposal of marriage. However, frightened by the intense and obsessive nature of Fauré's emotions, she soon broke off the engagement. Heartbroken Fauré plunged into one of his frequent periods of depression. His marriage to Marie Frémiet in 1883 also proved to be emotionally unbalanced, but they soon had two sons. To support his family, Fauré taught composition at the Paris Conservatoire from 1896 until his promotion to director of the

Conservatoire in 1905. Struggling with increasing deafness and auditory distortion, he retired at the age of seventy-five to dedicate his remaining years to composition.

Primarily an organist, choirmaster, and teacher, Fauré was forced to limit his composing to summer breaks. Much of his music was considered too complex and modern to receive significant recognition until the latter part of his life. Despite his extreme internal emotions, Fauré outwardly appeared modest, reserved, and timid. He relied heavily upon his friends and acquaintances to promote his work and encourage further composition.

Fauré's Sonata No. 1 in A Major was mostly composed during the summer of 1875, in Sainte-Adresse at the summer house of Camille and Marie Clerc and completed in 1876. The rapid completion of this sonata was likely due to Marie Clerc's motherly scolding of Fauré's laziness and her encouragement of his progress. In respect to idiomatic writing for violin, Fauré sought the advice of Belgian violinist Hubert Léonard, a friend of the Clercs. Under the persuasion of Camille Clerc, Breitkopf and Härtel agreed to publish Fauré's sonata but refused to pay royalties. Nonetheless, Fauré was happy to sell the rights to the sonata to have the prestige of his work appear in their catalogue. While the work's dedicatee was violinist Paul Viradot, brother of Marianne Viradot, another violinist−Marie Tayau−and Fauré himself gave the first performance in 1877. Following the premiere Saint-Saëns noted "everything in this sonata seduces: the novelty of its forms, its tonal explorations and original sonorities, its use of unsuspected rhythms…even its most striking audacities are completely natural."

The first movement opens with a fresh and ecstatic melody with almost immediate tonal explorations that propel the music forward. The broken octaves, used in all movements but the second, were recommended to Fauré by Léonard as a means of virtuosity. The tender and

melancholic second movement suggests a story of unrequited love. The following movement is a playful and lively scherzo full of changing meters and overlapping melodic ideas. Debussy and Ravel later looked to this scherzo as a prototype for their own scherzo movements. In the finale the ecstasy from the beginning of the piece returns with a youthful innocence as melodies flow through repetitive syncopated rhythms. A conversation ensues between voices and ends with a playful scurry of notes finished by three united and harmonious chords.

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899): *Poéme,* Op. 25

Ernest Chausson was born into a comfortably affluent childhood in which he could regularly enjoy music, art, and literature in the salons of Paris. Upon his family's request he studied law, but eventually had the opportunity to pursue his love for music through composition studies with Jules Massenet and César Franck at the Paris Conservatoire. The Parisian salons exposed young Chausson to the Romantic music of Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Felix Mendelssohn, but his visits to Germany impressed upon him influences Richard Wagner. He was a member of the Société Nationale de Musique, and he and his wife, Jeanne, hosted their own salons for poets and musicians. Chausson found a peaceful balance between music and time spent with his wife and five children, but tragically died in a bicycle accident at the age of forty-four.

During his short life, Chausson produced works in a wide variety of genres. He painstakingly perfected each piece in hopes of disassociating himself from a reputation as an amateur composer. As a prominent member of the Franck circle, Chausson turned away from extreme Romanticism and followed Franck in his attempts to bring back a style of pure forms in French music. In composing his *Poéme,* Chausson wanted to break from the lengthy concerto to create a work with freer form.

Chausson held a particular interest in Symbolist poets and Russian novelists, of which Ivan Turgenev was one of his favorites. He initially titled *Poéme* (1896) after Turgenev's 1881 short story called "*Le chant de l'amour triumphant*" ("The Song of Love Triumphant"), which involves a love triangle, magic, and a mesmerizing melody. In this story two men, Fabio and

Muzio, both fall in love with a young woman named Valeria. She chooses to marry Fabio, but years later Muzio returns with a violin from the East and a hypnotic and magical melody. At night Valeria and Muzio share the same erotic dreams. One such dream brings Valeria sleepwalking into the garden where Fabio follows and stabs Muzio. When his servant takes Muzio away the next day, Valeria feels that she is with child and asks, "Could it be?" Turgenev was very close with Pauline Viradot, and the questionable fatherhood of her children Claudie and Paul was a popular point of gossip. It is possible that Turgenev's station in the relationship between Pauline Viradot and her husband Louis inspired his story, but another source of inspiration may have been the doomed relationship between Fauré, whose appearance and intensity of emotions resemble Muzio, and Marianne Viradot, whose gentle demeanor resembles Valeria.

Chausson dedicated his *Poéme* to Belgian violinist Eugène Ysäye, who premiered the work and strongly influenced its composition. Ysäye wrote his *Poéme élégique,* Op. 12, dedicated to Fauré, just one year before Chausson wrote his *Poéme.* Both pieces feature haunting melodies, virtuosity, and descending trills at the end of the work. Chausson frequently consulted Ysäye during his compositional process. Chausson created three versions of *Poéme*: one for violin and orchestra, one for violin and piano, and one for violin, piano, and string quartet. Ysäye's final corrections were not published until many years later, so slight variations can be heard between performances. Ysäye and Jeanne Chausson gave an impromptu, sight-read performance at the home of painter Santiago Rusiñol in Sitges, Spain. Isaac Albéniz, present at this all-night musicale, secretly paid Breitkopf and Härtel a generous sum from his own pocket to see the work published and lift Chausson from his own self-doubt.

After a somber introduction by the orchestra or piano, the violin enters with a hauntingly beautiful and mournful melody. Following an orchestral interlude, the violin reenters more strongly with an expressive cadenza. The orchestra rejoins the violin to further unravel the story with soaring melodies. The return of the mournful melody is followed by a long line of trills that resolve to a major chord, perhaps implying a musical question mark.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): Violin Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 80

Sergei Prokofiev grew up as an only child with ample support for his musical interests, and from 1904 to 1914, he studied at the St Petersburg Conservatory. He toured for many years abroad as a performing pianist in the United States and Europe, but he was never satisfied with his success. During his time in Europe, Prokofiev maintained contacts in the newly-founded Soviet Union where his compositional work was frequently featured in articles. Feeling that he had conquered the free world of the West, Prokofiev wanted to challenge his compositional abilities against restrictive Soviet musical aesthetic. With Shostakovich restrained from composition as a political target, Prokofiev found the perfect opportunity to return to the Soviet Union in 1936. Levon Atovmian, an important figure for Soviet composers in areas of editing and publishing, promised Prokofiev a comfortable life and the privilege of retaining his passport, though the government took away the latter in 1938. In the first few years of his return, he cautiously and readily adapted to Soviet standards, which included children's music like *Peter and the Wolf,* Op. 67 (1936) and histories of Russian heroism like *Alexander Nevsky* (1938).

Following the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, Prokofiev, along with many other important Soviet artists, was evacuated from Leningrad and returned to Moscow in 1943. During the war, the Soviet government monitored artists less strictly and Prokofiev was able to devote time to composing non-politically influenced chamber works in addition to propaganda music. Atovmian ensured that publication continued to be available to Prokofiev throughout the war. In 1948 the Soviet Union further tightened the restrictions on the performance of musical works, and Prokofiev wrote letters of apology and self-abasement to protect himself. The

government arrested his wife Lina for an earlier attempted escape to France and condemned her to 20 years in a labor camp, from which she was released three years after Prokofiev's death. He died March 5, 1953, the same day as Joseph Stalin.

Prokofiev began composing his Violin Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 80 in 1938 but put it aside for other projects until 1943. Before completing the sonata in 1946, he wrote a second violin sonata and several other chamber works. In October of the same year, Prokofiev coached pianist Lev Oborin and violinist David Oistrakh, to whom he dedicated the sonata. As a pianist, Prokofiev followed printed markings and dynamics very closely, and he asked Oborin to follow the dynamics he wrote even if it meant drowning out the fighting violinist.

The first movement opens with an ominous melody in the piano and a low growling in the violin. Later, bell-like chords introduce a string of scales that Prokofiev referred to as "wind passing through a graveyard." The second movement erupts with furious hammer-like blows and disorienting harmonic and rhythmic twists and turns. A dramatically romantic melody breaks through the chaos in heroic style. The third movement is a dreamy and numbly detached wandering through the remnants of the battle of the previous movement. The finale breaks into a folk-like dance with tonal changes that create a certain uneasiness among the gaiety. The dance develops into a restless sense of repressed screaming that never finds release or resolution. The graveyard wind returns with a final melodic statement that ends unresolved.

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