

**Ronen Chamber Ensemble**  
and  
**Virginie Robilliard**  
*1990 Laureate of the*  
*International Violin Competition of Indianapolis*

**February 26, 2008**

**PROGRAM NOTES**

**Ernest Chausson (1855-1899): *Poème* for violin and piano, Op. 25**

*Notes by Cathleen Partlow Strauss*

Chausson was one of those fortunates who was independently wealthy and could therefore work at his art at his own pace. He produced relatively few works, never worrying about success as a professional musician. Although he started his university studies in law, he soon turned to music. He briefly studied with Massenet at the Paris Conservatory, and later continued as a private student of César Franck. The influence of Franck, as well as Wagner, is evident in much of his work. He had just begun to achieve some degree of critical acclaim, in large part due to successful performances of his *Poème* and his only symphony, when he was killed in bizarre fashion in a bicycle accident.

Chausson wrote *Poème*, in its original form for violin and orchestra, in 1896 for the famous Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. It had its first performance in Paris on April 4, 1897. The music was inspired after Chausson read a short story by Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883), entitled "The Song of Triumphant Love." Part of the story is exotic in setting, and has, as a central feature, a prominent story-line about a violin. This exoticism is revealed by Chausson's impression of Eastern music. It is at the heart of the late French Romantic aesthetic and is a gorgeous and opulent work. The rhapsodic piece is half the length of a traditional concerto, with more freedom inherent in the structure.

**Maurice Ravel (1875-1937): Introduction and Allegro for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet (1906)**

*Notes by Hsueh-Yung Sheh and Cathleen Partlow Strauss*

While Ravel and Debussy were genuine iconoclasts in setting up what is known as the Impressionist style, the break with common practice is not as great as one might think. By the time the Impressionist phase in Ravel simmered down at the beginning of the 20th century, several late-Romantic influences were very clear: the Russians as represented by Rimsky-Korsakov, the indigenous French Romantics such as Gounod and Massenet, and of course, there is always Wagner in the background (what would Wagner have thought his flower maidens of *Parsifal* would engender...). More than Debussy, Ravel at this time drew upon the sensuous nature of Massenet and was still very much in the world of the "*salons*." The World War in the next decade would change all that; *La Valse* (1920), despite the sumptuous orchestration, is a rather savage depiction of the downfall of the old order.

That evolution is all still far away in the context of the *Introduction and Allegro*, which is, in effect, a concert waltz not that far removed from the Johann Strauss waltzes. Like Strauss, this work begins with a broad introduction, leading into a number of waltz tunes. The harmonic language is, of course, a little richer with a lot more seventh and ninth chords of all kinds. The formal organization is also tighter. The whole work, including the introduction, fits into a more-or-less standard binary form, of which the second half is a more compressed version of the first half. The piece is true chamber music, but the harp is prominently featured and given the very non-chamber music-like device of a cadenza. This occurs in the middle of the work separating each section of the binary form.

Two themes are involved in the work. The very opening presents them in short order, first in the winds, and then in the strings two bars later. The thematic material is motivic in nature, not a full fledged melody. The motives are treated to color and texture changes using the inherent qualities of winds, bowed strings, and plucked harp. The accompanimental lines provide shifting backgrounds changing the atmosphere from dark to light, thin to opulent, sometimes exotic, then sometimes percussive. These are simply followed transitions that allow for this most Impressionistic work of Ravel to luxuriate in a sound experience.

**Béla Bartók (1881-1945): *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet and piano, Sz. 111**

*Notes by Hsueh-Yung Shen and Cathleen Partlow Strauss*

*Contrasts* was composed specifically for Joseph Szigeti and Benny Goodman, and is his only chamber work involving wind instruments. Compared to his string quartets and violin sonatas, the work is considerably more light-hearted, displaying an almost Haydnesque sense of humor. Much of this humor comes from sudden juxtapositions of contrasting textures and moods. The use of three rather different kinds of instruments in itself guarantees contrasts in the actual sound of the work. The constant juggling of all of these kinds of contrasts represents a display of virtuosity for the composer as well.

The two outer movements show most strongly the influence of Bartók's study of folk music in Eastern Europe. Typically, they are in various stylized dance forms, using many of the characteristic scales and rhythms. The dotted rhythms of the first movement have a strong Hungarian flavor. Bearing in mind Benny Goodman's pre-eminence as a jazz soloist, it is not surprising that Bartók chooses to highlight a number of common points the folk traditions have with jazz, such as melodic and rhythmic inflections, and the feeling of improvisatory freedom. The clarinet's cadenza in this movement embellishes this movement's broad, twirling theme.

The slow movement shows Bartók's more serious side, with a mysterious nocturnal mood. It is conveyed simply in the stark, mirrored lines of the violin and clarinet pitted against soft trills in the piano which provides an antiphonal color to the other two instruments.

Bartók gives both the clarinetist and violinist plenty to do. In the Finale, both musicians must change instruments, or the violinist must re-tune the instrument bringing the G string up to G-sharp and the E string down to E-flat. The clarinetist will set aside the A clarinet in favor of the B-flat instrument for the beginning of the movement. The country fiddler is definitely invoked in the beginning, playing a deliberately mistuned fiddle set up with tritones (an augmented fourth interval) on open strings. The use of this interval is symbolic, as the tritone has always represented the "devil" throughout music history. In this context it represents a sort of exorcism, which is chased away in a feverishly rustic dance with stamping rhythms. The middle section of the movement meter changes to 13 pulses in each measure. These pulses are broken down into a 3:2:3 pattern, typical of Balkan or Rumanian folk music. Exotic color is further provided in the piano by the use of whole-tone clusters.

**Maurice Ravel (1875-1937): *Tzigane***

*Notes by Cathleen Partlow Strauss*

Ravel was in his forties when he wrote *Tzigane*, a work inspired by his interest in Hungarian culture and the remarkable personality and performing style of Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Aranyi (1895–1966), the great niece of another master violinist Joseph Joachim.

Following the First World War, Ravel moved out of Paris. During this period he wrote his violin sonata, a duo sonata for violin and cello in memory of Debussy, and the famous *Tzigane*. Originally for violin and the luthéal (a long-lost gypsy keyboard instrument that could imitate a cimbalom, guitar or harmonica), Ravel later set the accompaniment for a very colorful orchestra. Today, it is more often played by violin and piano.

*Tzigane*, a French word meaning "gypsy", is a show-piece of the violin repertoire. Designed by the composer to test the musical and technical ability of any performer, the piece captures the spirit of gypsy improvisation. D'Aranyi's improvised additions to the piece were included by Ravel in the final version. Ravel follows the pattern of a traditional *czárdás*, a long, slow solo introduction, which leads to a rhapsodic *friska*, or fast section. The *friska* is presented as a festive, frenzied dance in the form of a loose set of variations. Ravel uses two themes: one previously used in the *czárdás*, and another introduced toward the middle of the main section. The piece culminates in a whirlwind finale.