

**Vive la Différence:
French Music of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries**

March 14 through April 13, 2021

ENSEMBLE 1828

Nicole Oswald, violin

Isaac Pastor-Chermak, cello

Alison Lee, piano

PROGRAM

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor (1915)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Prologue

Sérénade

Final

Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano (1886)

César Franck (1822-1890)

Allegretto ben moderato

Allegro

Recitativo-Fantasia

Allegretto poco mosso

INTERMISSION

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano (1914)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Modéré

Pantoum (Assez vif)

Passacaille (Très large)

Final (Animé)

Ensemble 1828, a rising Bay Area piano trio, is thrilled to bring an all-French program to Santa Cruz Chamber Players' unprecedented online 2020-21 season. Anchored by one of the great piano trios in the repertoire, our program celebrates three iconic compositions for strings and piano, delivered digitally to SCCP's fans and subscribers.

We begin with the *Cello Sonata* of Claude Debussy, considered by many to be the greatest cello sonata of them all. Composed in the twilight of Debussy's life, the *Sonata* is equal parts lush French impressionism and quirky modernism. The program continues with the *Violin Sonata* of César Franck, a quintessentially Romantic work and a staple of the violin-piano repertoire that will dazzle and inspire. The program concludes with all three artists onstage together for one of the great piano trios, not to mention one of the finest examples of Impressionist art of any genre: the Ravel *Piano Trio*. 🦋

🎻 Notes About the Program 🎻

Claude Debussy: Sonata for Cello and Piano

Few works of Claude Debussy (1862-1918) bear generic titles like symphony, quartet, concerto or sonata. Most have descriptive or evocative titles like *Printemps, Jeux, Claire de lune, La mer, Nocturnes* or *Ibéria*. Since chamber music tends, more than any other, to rely on the traditional forms of classical structure, it is scarcely surprising to learn that Debussy composed so little in this category. Most of the exceptions are found either in works of his student years or from the end of his life, when he looked more to Classical models and absolute music for his inspiration. Hence we find him in 1915 embarking on a project to compose six sonatas, each for a different combination of instruments. Only three were actually written, as Debussy's health was rapidly declining. The first of these was the *Cello Sonata*. The second was for flute, viola and harp; the third (his last composition) for violin and piano.

Except for the first three measures, the cello plays nearly continuously throughout the Prologue. Debussy took care to advise that “the piano must not fight the cello, but accompany it.” The principal theme is heard as a lyrical, descending line in the cello. This theme returns at the end of the Prologue after a middle section in which the piano momentarily assumes the principal role. Although the sonata is nominally in D minor, the flavour is strongly modal, perhaps in keeping with Debussy's presumed intent that the sonata evoke the character of old Italian *commedia dell'arte*.

The two following movements are played without pause. The *Sérénade* throws out bizarre whorls of sound much in the manner of a moonstruck, crazed harlequin careening about the stage. Sarcasm, banter, and an air of the fantastique are created through the use of special effects for the cello including pizzicato, glissando, *sur la touche* (bowing over the fingerboard) and *flautando* (delicate, flute-like sounds). The *Finale*, like the previous movements, leaves the cellist scarcely a moment's rest, but the piano writing is far denser than in the *Sérénade*. Cello and piano engage in exuberant

dialogue and reckless antics, pausing only for a moment of quiet reflection before resuming their drive to the finish. (Robert Markow)



Cesar Franck: Sonata for Violin and Piano

The marriage of violinist Eugène Ysaÿe and Louise Bourdeau in 1886 inspired Franck's lone *Violin Sonata*. Like Franck, Ysaÿe (1858-1931) was born in Liège. A composer himself, he became a champion of the newest French music. (In addition to Franck's *Sonata*, the *Concerto* and *Poème* by Chausson and Debussy's *String Quartet* are all dedicated to him.) Although 64 years old in 1886, Franck was still known primarily as an organist: at the important church St. Clotilde and the lavish public arts palace the Trocadéro, as well as professor of organ at the Conservatory. The recognition that he gained in the last years of his life, and then increasingly afterwards, was due in large part to the fervent missionary work of supporters such as Ysaÿe. The violinist played Franck's *Sonata* many times on his wide-ranging tours, telling his listeners that he played it “con amore” since it was a wedding present.

Franck originally intended the opening movement to be slow and reflective, but Ysaÿe persuaded him that it worked best at a quicker tempo, so Franck marked it *Allegretto*, though with the qualifier “ben moderato.” The movement juxtaposes rather than develops two themes, the first given almost exclusively to the violin, the second to the piano. These themes, particularly the violin's, will return in the following movements, a sort of cyclical recontextualizing that Franck picked up from Liszt.

The second movement is a dramatic scherzo in D minor, opening as a turbulent piano toccata, then with a surging, offbeat violin line laid over it. There are lyrical or pensive interludes, working like trio sections, but the roiling toccata always reasserts itself, ending with a final sweep to D-major triumph.

The voice-led chromaticism that Franck absorbed from Wagner is apparent in the piano's almost Tristanesque introduction to the third movement, a Recitativo-Fantasia. This introduction is also a reference to the opening of the *Sonata*, and much of this free-form movement is devoted to reflection on the previous movements. As the heading of the movement clearly indicates, there is a pronounced personality split mid-way through, as the improvisatory Recitativo yields to the more insistently directed Fantasia, which picks up some of the rumbling power of the second movement. The violin has a freshly configured dramatic theme in this section, which will come back in the finale.

That finale begins in a state of pure lyric grace, with a lovely optimistic theme that is played in canon, the violin following the piano's lead a bar later. This is developed against stormier energies from the second movement in a section that shifts from five flats to six sharps and back. The opening theme of the movement sneaks back into A major with all of its original sweetness—and in canon again—before swelling into exultant joy. (John Henken)



Ravel: Piano Trio

When in 1914 Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) determined to compose a piano trio, he was all too aware of the difficulties engendered by the mixed marriage of piano and strings. His solutions are altogether successful and wide-ranging. Note the introduction, in which the piano plays a chordal melody in the right hand over undulating octaves in the left, after which the strings enter with their own version of the same melody. Both violin and cello are set high in their respective ranges, improving their audibility, but even more significantly, they are placed resolutely out of the piano's way—the violin well above the piano, and the cello tucked in carefully between the piano's right and left hands. Versions of the same strategy are found throughout the work—for example, a slower transitional passage in the first movement that places the piano's soft chords above both string instruments. Ravel also made abundant use

of alternate string techniques such as harmonics, pizzicato, tremolos, and sustained trills, all in the interest of maintaining a solid balance between the three instruments.

The end result is a piano trio with an orchestral sheen about it, one of the most sonically satisfying examples of the genre ever written. However, all that technical magic would be little more than intriguing frippery without solid content, and here also the trio shines forth. Its four movements are each meticulously constructed and filled with fascinating material, some of it drawn from Basque folk idioms (such as the *zortziko* rhythms of the first movement), and some of it reaching well beyond Ravel's own time and place. Ravel titles the second movement Pantoum, which is a verse form from Malaysia in which the second and fourth lines of each four-line stanza become the first and third lines of the next. (Tidbit: Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics for "I Am Going to Like it Here" in Flower Drum Song are in pantoum form.) Precisely how that translates to music remains a bit of a mystery, but perhaps the movement's alternating pair of themes suggested the verse form to Ravel.

The trio evokes the past in its third movement, a passacaille, better known in its Italian spelling as passacaglia. It's a variation form stemming back to the sixteenth century, in which a repeated bass line provides a static foundation for an unfolding series of variations. In a fine bit of structural integration, Ravel derived that bass line from the first theme of the Pantoum. The spectacular finale makes use of irregular meters (fives and sevens, no less) and brings the work to a close in a sunburst of major mode. (Scott Foglesong)