

## PROGRAMME NOTES

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### **Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum** (from *Children's Corner*, L113)

Claude Debussy (1862~1918)  
(arr. Michael Mak)

Claude Debussy's *Children's Corner*, a piano suite of six pieces, was written between 1906 and 1908 and dedicated to his daughter Emma-Claude, known in the family as Chouchou. Debussy's first marriage in 1899 had been followed by a separation when he began his association with Emma Bardac, the wife of a banker and a singer of some ability. Their daughter was born in 1905 and in 1908 Debussy and Emma Bardac were able to marry. The suite starts with an arrangement of *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*, a parody of Clementi, whose piano studies under that title had long been a necessary part of any aspiring pianist's regime.

### **Clair de lune**

Claude Debussy

It is difficult to hear *Clair de lune* (Moonlight) with new ears, so familiar did it become, in various arrangements, even in Debussy's lifetime. Poetic and evocative, it suggests the nostalgic world conjured up by Verlaine in his *Fêtes galantes* and formed part of Debussy's *Suite bergamasque* written between 1890 and 1905.

### **Poème, Op. 25**

Ernest Chausson (1855~1899)

Brought up in cultured adult surroundings, the French composer Ernest Chausson acquired wide artistic interests. He was induced by his family to study and qualify as a lawyer, although he never practised as an advocate, instead turning his attention to music. He joined Massenet's class in orchestration at the Conservatoire in 1879, while informally attending the influential classes of César Franck. Failure to win the Prix de Rome in 1881 led him to discontinue formal instruction, while the influence of Wagner exercised a further influence on his work as a composer. With a private income, he was able to lead a life that allowed travel, and association with leading writers, musicians and artists of the time, after his marriage in 1882 and honeymoon at Bayreuth. He died in 1899 as the result of a cycling accident.

For some time there had been discussion between Chausson and the well-known violinist Eugène Ysaÿe on the possibility of a new violin concerto. Chausson, however, preferred a more original conception, a poem for solo violin and orchestra. His first sketch for the work had the explanatory title *Le chant de l'Amour Triomphant* (The Song of Love Triumphant), which suggests inspiration from a novel by the Russian writer Turgenev, who had settled in France, but the *Poème* has no overt programme. In

a single movement, it is in five sections, with a framework of three slower passages, the first, third and fifth, and rapider intervening sections, the second and fourth. It had its first public performance in Nancy in the year of its completion, 1896, with Ysaÿe, who had helped in the technical details of the solo part, as soloist. It remains an essential element in any violinist's repertoire.

## **Sonata for Violin and Piano**

Francis Poulenc (1899~1963)

*Allegro con fuoco*

*Intermezzo: Très lent et calme*

*Presto tragico*

Francis Poulenc was born in Paris in 1899, the son of Emile Poulenc, a director of the pharmaceutical firm Poulenc Frères. His musical tastes and gifts were drawn largely from his mother, an amateur pianist, who gave him his first piano lessons, when he was five, leading to study, three years later, with a niece of César Franck. Inspired by what he heard of Debussy, by 1914 he had discovered the music of Schubert and of Stravinsky and began lessons with the pianist Ricardo Viñes, his teacher for the next three years. Through Viñes he met Erik Satie and Georges Auric, with Honegger, Milhaud, Tailleferre, Manuel de Falla and, inevitably, Jean Cocteau, and made friends too with other writers, notably the poets André Breton, Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard, a reflection of his wide reading and general cultural interests. After military service between 1918 and 1921, he took lessons from Charles Koechlin, while critically bracketed with Milhaud, Durey, Tailleferre, Honegger and Auric as one of the group of young composers known as *Les Six*.

Poulenc made several attempts at writing a violin sonata, the first two of which he destroyed. It was only during the war, which he spent largely in Paris, confining his concert activities exclusively to French repertoire, that he turned his attention in 1943 to the composition of a sonata for the young French violinist Ginette Neveu. After her death in a plane crash in 1949 at the age of thirty he rewrote the last movement. The sonata was offered in memory of the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, a victim of the Spanish Civil War. The first movement opens with exciting drama, moving on to a more lyrical second theme and making, in passing, witty reference to composers of a more distant past. The central *Intermezzo* offers a respite before the final movement, leading to catastrophe in a short passage for unaccompanied violin, followed by bitter mourning, the violinist's last brief interjection, one of apparent triumph over early death.

## **Cinema Fantasy for Violin and Piano, after *Le bœuf sur le toit***

Darius Milhaud (1892~1974)

Born into a Jewish family in the southern French city of Aix-en-Provence, Darius Milhaud was trained at the Paris Conservatoire, originally as a violinist, before turning to composition. He enjoyed a close association with the diplomat-poet Paul Claudel,

whom he accompanied to Brazil as secretary, after Claudel's appointment as Minister at the French delegation in Rio de Janeiro. On his return to Paris in 1918, after two years abroad, Milhaud was for a time in the circle of Jean Cocteau and a member of the diverse group of French composers known as *Les Six*. Extremely prolific as a composer in many genres, Milhaud spent the years of the 1939 war in the United States, where he taught, combining this position with a similar post at the Paris Conservatoire after 1947.

Darius Milhaud wrote a considerable amount of music for the theatre, operas, ballets and incidental music, as well as film and radio scores. With Jean Cocteau in 1919 he wrote the ballet *Le bœuf sur le toit* (The Ox on the Roof), based on music he had written for a possible silent film, a medley of Brazilian music, with tangos, sambas and a Portuguese fado, traversing in its course key after key. For the staging Cocteau provided an imaginative and bizarre scenario. Individual episodes are framed by a recurrent Brazilian melody, the action set in an American bar during Prohibition. In the composer's version of the work for violin and piano or violin and orchestra considerable technical demands are made on the soloist.

### **Sonata for Violin and Piano in A**

César Franck (1822~1890)

*Allegretto ben moderato*

*Allegro*

*Recitativo-Fantasia: Ben moderato – molto lento*

*Allegretto poco mosso*

The career of César Franck is a curious one. Destined by his father for the concert-platform as a virtuoso pianist, he won, instead, a position of influence among his own circle in Paris as a composer and organist, distrusted and never in his life-time fully accepted by the musical establishment. Franck was born in Belgium, but in 1835 moved to Paris as a student, in pursuit of his father's ambitions for him. By the time of his marriage in 1848 he had abandoned any prospect of a career as a virtuoso pianist, serving, instead, as an organist, with an early association with the remarkable organ-builder Cavaillé-Coll, an instrument of whose he played at the important church of Ste Clotilde. In 1872 he became organ professor at the Conservatoire, where his classes also attracted students with interests in composition, as his organ improvisations continued to do. His pupils demonstrated great loyalty to him, but his lack of political skill, a necessity for a musician expecting a successful career, did little to help his wider reputation, which grew particularly after his death in 1890.

Franck's only *Violin Sonata* was written in 1886. It resembles his larger scale works in the thematic connection between its movements and in its highly original use of traditional forms, to be described by his pupil Vincent d'Indy as the first and purest model of the cyclic treatment of themes in the form of an instrumental sonata. The sonata was given to the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe at the latter's wedding in September of the year of its composition and was first performed by him in Brussels.

The first movement of the work, with its characteristic opening theme, serves as little more than an introduction to the weightier second movement, itself one of passionate intensity preceding a brief interruption of recitative and a return to the earlier mood, the thematic material always suggesting the intervals used at the opening of the sonata. The third movement, with the unusual title of *Recitativo-Fantasia*, starts, after the introductory piano chords recalling the opening of the work, with rhetorical statements from the violin. Of this there is an imaginative development, against a chromatically descending bass, before the appearance of the main theme of the movement. The sonata ends with a movement that opens almost in pastoral style with a canon in which one instrument closely shadows the other. The theme appears in various tonalities, with consequent variations in intensity, in a movement that provides a fitting climax to a work that makes equally heavy demands on both violinist and pianist.

Programme notes by Keith Anderson  
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