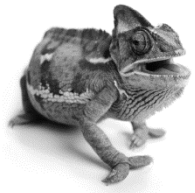

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2024-2025 chamber music season
chamber series 4: How it ends?

Saturday, April 5, 2025, 7:30 PM at First Church in Boston
Sunday, April 6, 2025, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:
Maurice Ravel, Sonata No. 1 for violin & piano "Posthume"
Richard Rodney Bennett, *After Syrinx I* for oboe & piano
Laura Schwendinger, *Ghost Music* for soprano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano & percussion
Olivier Messiaen, Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes
Gabriel Fauré, Piano Quintet No. 2 in c minor, Op. 115

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) came of age in a life of Parisian culture and privilege, though his father was Swiss and his mother Basque. His musical interest was supported from the very beginning, and he entered the Paris Conservatory's preparatory piano department at age 14, winning prizes and admission to the full Conservatory two years later. His career there was difficult, however, and he left without prizes. He returned in 1897 to study composition, finding a sympathetic teacher in Fauré, but was again denied the prizes that would lead to a diploma because of his inability (or unwillingness) to demonstrate mastery of traditional counterpoint.

Like many innovative French composers before him (notably Berlioz), Ravel essentially ignored the criticisms of the reactionary Parisian musical establishment and continued on his path, eventually gaining renown on the merits of his work. When it became clear to the musical public that he should be awarded the *Prix de Rome*, the highest state prize for a French composer, he was denied five years in a row. It soon emerged that all of the finalists were students of Lenepveu, a member of the jury. The ensuing scandal led to the resignation of the director of the Paris Conservatory and the installation of Fauré, but by then Ravel was officially too old for the award.

Ravel was proudly French, volunteering for service in World War I (his health was not good enough to be a pilot as he hoped, but he was eventually able to serve as a driver), but he never subscribed to blind nationalism and even refused the *Légion d'Honneur* when it was offered. He

also declined membership in an association of French musicians because he could not agree with their aims of elevating French music above all others and boycotting recently composed music from Germany. He believed that musical inspiration should come from all sources: Spanish music is evident in much of his output; he was for a time a close friend of Stravinsky and loved Russian music; he had a thorough knowledge of the Germanic and Austrian traditions; and he shared Debussy's fascination with the Javanese Gamelan and other Eastern music. In 1909 he took a leading role in the formation of the *Société Musicale Indépendente*, dedicated to performing music of interest regardless of nationality, genre, or style.

Ravel's war service was cut short by dysentery in 1916, and his mother – the closest emotional attachment of his life – died suddenly in 1917. He moved away from Paris, to "Le belvedere" in Montfort-l'Amaury, where he would remain for the last two decades of his life. Even though his own creative work slowed during this time, Debussy's passing in 1918 elevated Ravel in the eyes of many to the standing of France's leading musician.

Until 1975 only Ravel's second violin sonata was published and regularly played, the jazz-influenced G Major sonata composed between 1923 and 1927. The first sonata in a minor was composed in 1897 and most likely first performed in the context of Fauré's composition class at the conservatory, with Ravel at the piano and George Enescu on the violin. He completed only one movement, abandoned plans for more, and kept it out of his catalogue. But he never discarded it, and it was included in a collection celebrating the 100th anniversary of his birth with the subtitle "Posthume." This is clearly the work of a young composer, but the elements of what brought him success later are there – a gift for melodic shape and an adventurous use of freely moving harmony – and we can hear clearly why Fauré considered him to have so much promise.

Over the course of his career, **Richard Rodney Bennett** (1936-2012) earned the highest respect as a pianist and composer in nearly every field of music. His experiences as a performer ranged from the thorniest scores of Boulez to jazz partnerships and a cabaret show he developed as a pianist/singer in the 1990s, and his compositions from highly successful film scores to the most sophisticated music for the concert hall.

Bennett's inexorable musical talent was apparent early on and encouraged by the artistic atmosphere of his family; his father was a well-known children's book author. Apparently he began writing music almost before he could read, and he thoroughly assimilated the vast spectrum of music available to him while growing up. He spent summers at the Royal Academy of Music at Darmstadt, the center of the European avant-garde, and afterwards spent two years in Paris as a student of Boulez.

Even while immersing himself in the high avant-garde of continental Europe, Bennett had already had success with film scores, and he continued to support himself during that time and afterwards with more of the same. Throughout his career Bennett managed to excel in seemingly disparate musical activities. He loved ensemble playing of all kinds and was a sought-after pianist in both classical and jazz settings. He was knighted in 1999 and passed away in New York on Christmas Eve 2012.

After Syrinx I (1982) for oboe & piano was the first of a series of works written with Debussy's *Syrinx* for solo flute as their starting point, followed by *After Syrinx II* for solo marimba in 1984, the *Tango After Syrinx* for solo piano in 1985, *Sonata after Syrinx* for flute, viola and harp in 1985, commissioned by the Nash Ensemble for the celebration of the composer's birthday in 1986, and *Dreamdancing* from 1986, commissioned by the London Sinfonietta for the same birthday celebration.

The oboist quotes the opening of Debussy's original and then the duo proceeds with four linked contrasting movements, all based melodically on that opening. The *Syrinx* series signaled a new synthesis for Bennett's concert music, in which the serialist textures of his training are blended seamlessly with tonal elements, and the harmonic and melodic elements of each piece interact in much less rigid ways than they would in either system alone.

Laura Elise Schwendinger, born in 1962 in Mexico City, was the first composer to win the prestigious American Academy in Berlin Prize Fellowship. Her opera *Artemisia* was awarded the 2023 American Academy of Arts and Letters Charles Ives award, the largest of its kind for opera in the United States. Schwendinger's works have been performed and premiered by some of today's leading artists and ensembles. Her setting of *In Just-Spring* was performed on tour by Dawn Upshaw and Gilbert Kalish at the Tanglewood and Ojai Music Festivals, and recent premieres include her second opera *Cabaret of Shadows* (a Fromm Commission) by Musiqa at MATCH in Houston, *Nightingales* for Eleanor Bartsch and Ariana Kim with the UWSO and Dubuque Symphony, her harp concerto *Second Sight* for Atlanta Symphony Principal Harpist Elizabeth Remy Johnson, commissioned by the Emory Orchestra for their orchestra program's 100th anniversary, and a new solo cello work *Fluorescenza* for Matt Haimovitz's Primavera Project.

Ms. Schwendinger is Professor of Composition at The University of Wisconsin Madison and has been on faculty at summer Festivals such as New Music on the Point and the Bennington Chamber Music Conference. She was Guest Director of the Irish Composition Summer School and the Tallis Music Festival in Switzerland. In addition to the Berlin Prize, her honors include those from the Guggenheim, Koussevitzky and Fromm Foundations, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Copland House, Harvard Musical Association, Chamber Music America, and League of American Orchestras/New Music Alive. She has been granted residency fellowships at the MacDowell and Yaddo colonies, the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, the Bogliasco Center, and two American Academy of Arts and Letters awards (Goddard Leiberson Fellowship and Ives scholarship), as well as a first prize of the 1995 ALEA III Competition.

William Zagorski (*Fanfare*) wrote of her *C'e La Luna Questa Sera?*: "it evokes a sense of serene mystery and infinite beauty." John Van Rhein (*Chicago Tribune*) wrote of Eighth Blackbird's performance of *High Wire Act*: "it evinced an acute sonic imagination and sure command of craft." Of her *Song for Andrew* Anthony Tommasini (*New York Times*) wrote: "The piece is darkly attractive, artful and moving…" and of her *Fable*, Richard Buell (*Boston Globe*) wrote: "This was shrewd composing, the genuine article. Onto the 'season's best' list it goes." The *New York Times* reviewer Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim wrote in her playlist review "The chamber works grouped together on this captivating disc show off Laura Elise Schwendinger's acute ear

for unusual textures. In these works… she sketches musical short stories of somnambulant fragility and purpose."

Composer's program note:

> *Ghost Music* is dedicated to Deb Boldin and the Chameleon Arts Ensemble.
>
> Like the ghosts of Robert Frost's poem *Ghost House*, my musical characters flow in and out of the work as if phantoms inhabiting the musical space. The soprano starts without words, as a ghost whose wails echo through the empty halls. Is the reader remembering a world that no longer exists, filled with family and friends that he barely remembers or is he a ghost as well where he once lived, and where his memory now is unreliable? The natural world tries to wake our speaker up from the sleepy spirit state. The whippoorwill "comes to shout" but he is far enough away that we can barely hear him, and "the summer star is dim." Most of the musical dynamics are very soft throughout to reflect this.
>
> The setting has several recurrent ideas, a lovely lilting harmonic progression that serves as a "hymn for the dead," a melodic turn that we hear first in the flute and then in the soprano. It is echoed throughout and developed in other musical contexts. Many moments in the poem are set with little flourishes of tone painting.
>
> The marriage of text and music here is meant to evoke the sense of what is lost, especially in this moment when many long for the world we used to know, a world where we agreed that the lives of children were important, the state of our environment should be protected, when our allies were our friends, and that bigotry of any sort was not acceptable. That world, I am sorry to say, no longer exists. The setting of this text reflects my sadness at this loss.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was the most prominent French composer of the second half of the twentieth century, and one of the most unique and independent figures in all of music history. He came from a family not of musicians but of literary people. His father Pierre Messiaen translated the complete works of Shakespeare into French, and his mother was the poet Cécile Sauvage. His talent for music was demonstrated early, and he enrolled at the Paris Conservatory at age 11, studying piano and organ, and composition with Paul Dukas. Following graduation, he was appointed principal organist at La Trinité in Paris, where he served for most of his life.

Messiaen identified four central "conflicts" in his life and work as a composer, areas in which the listening audiences – and usually even other musicians – could not perceive his work in the manner that he did. First, he was a passionately, profoundly devout Catholic, and he was constantly aware that his audience was on the whole atheistic, at least in comparison to his own all-encompassing belief. Strangely, his parents were not religious; he professed to have been born with his own faith. Secondly, he was fascinated by birds and their songs. He considered them to be "the greatest musicians existing on our planet." He and his second wife, the virtuoso pianist Yvonne Loriod, traveled throughout France and the world transcribing their songs by ear,

which he then included in many compositions. “Just as Bartók wandered through Hungary to collect folk songs, so did I spend many years in the French provinces to write down the songs of birds.” The “conflict” arose, again, from his awareness that his audience was primarily city-dwellers with little understanding of the wondrous variations in the songs of different species of birds.

His third “conflict” was that he identified sounds with colors: “when hearing sounds, I see colors in my mind’s eye. I announce it to the public, I repeat it to the press, I’ve explained it to my pupils, but no one believes me.” Each pitch of the western twelve-note scale had its own discernible color for him. They mixed, moved, and combined with changing sounds. The colors were the same for the same note in different octaves, although he described higher notes as “more diluted with white” and lower notes as “mixed with black.” Lastly, Messiaen identified himself as a “rhythmician.” He considered most of Western music to be rhythmically unsophisticated, tied slavishly to a regular pulse (in fact, the only canonical composer he also considered to be a rhythmician was Mozart). He studied non-Western music extensively, and used many of the techniques he found there, such as additive rhythms, to help him portray the rhythmic fluctuations of nature – of God’s creation – such as “the waves of the sea, the sound of the wind, or the shape of tree branches.”

Though most of Messiaen’s music was published by the French firms Éditions Alphonse Leduc and Éditions Durand, he also had an enthusiastic champion in Alfred Schlee, founder of Universal Editions in Vienna. When the 93-year-old Messiaen was asked to contribute a short work for string quartet or some subset thereof to a concert celebrating the 90th birthday of Schlee in November 1991, he gladly agreed, joining 36 other prominent composers. Of course, he was the only one to add another instrument to the mix, in this case a piano. He also, in a piece just slightly over three minutes long, displayed all of his hallmarks: additive rhythms, block chords representing all the colors of the rainbow, a palindromic structure of variations leading to a climax and returning the way it came, and, of course, the song of his favorite bird, the Garden Warbler.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was born to the minor French aristocracy. His father, recognizing early musical talent, sent him to the newly established *École Niedermayer*, a Parisian training school for church musicians. It was there that he met and studied with Saint-Saëns, who broke from the school’s curriculum to present his students with the latest in contemporary music. Fauré worked, often unhappily, as a church musician for most of the next three decades, serving at Notre Dame and as Saint-Saëns’ assistant at the Madeleine. In 1896 he became chief organist there, and then took over from Massenet as teacher of the composition class at the Paris Conservatoire, where his pupils included Ravel, Enescu, Koechlin, and Nadia Boulanger. The appointment brought him much more acclaim as a composer. He was named director of the Conservatoire in 1905 and proved effective in reforming and modernizing the institution, much to the displeasure of older, more reactionary faculty, many of whom resigned.

Fauré is often considered the most advanced composer of his generation; his career spanned from the end of Romanticism through the first quarter of the twentieth century, a time in which musical language underwent tremendous changes. His very personal and innovative harmonic

palette had wide-ranging influence, even, arguably, towards Debussy. Fauré's reputation has never matched the high quality of his music, perhaps due to the small number of large-scale works in his output.

The Piano Quintet No. 2 in c minor was composed between 1919 and 1921, a time of significant changes in Fauré's life. Increasing hearing problems – not only deafness but also distortion of pitches in the extreme registers – made teaching nearly impossible, and he retired from his position at the Conservatoire in 1920. As he told his wife, "I can't emphasize enough how much I'm savoring the idea of my deliverance!" He was looking forward both to freedom from the day-to-day problems of running a music school and the freedom to spend more of his time at his own creative work.

Fauré was always able to compose away from the keyboard, but even so, in this quintet he avoided the lowest registers of the piano, where the distortion of pitches was the worst. Even with such obstacles, however, the second piano quintet is a decidedly sunny piece, full of inventive combinations of sonorities and playful counterpoint. Following the first performance in May of 1921 – where he likely was able to hear very little of the music, though he was able to appreciate the enthusiastic applause – he remarked, "Of course a successful evening like tonight gives me great pleasure, but what's *disturbing* is that afterwards it's not just a matter of coming back down to earth; one must try to do even better."

None other than the young Aaron Copland published a celebratory article in the October 1924 issue of *The Musical Quarterly* titled "Gabriel Fauré, a Neglected Master," just one month before Fauré's death. Of the second piano quintet he wrote:

> …if one were forced to name Fauré's *chef d'oeuvre*, those who know his work best would agree on the second Piano Quintet (1921). In it is embodied a pure well of spirituality, a humanizing force such as is found in only the greatest masters. For those who love Fauré's music, it is the "holy of holies" – to analyze it theme by theme and movement by movement would be desecration!

Copland concluded the article as follows:

> For many, many years [Fauré] was the center of a small admiring group which has gradually widened so as to include all Parisian concert-going circles. It is this fact which makes one hopeful that what was true of Paris may be true of the world at large. And the world at large has particular need of Gabriel Fauré today; need of his calm, his naturalness, his restraint, his optimism; need, above all, of the musician and his great art:

"Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté, Luxe, calme, et volupté."	"There - nothing but order and beauty dwell, Abundance, calm, and sensuous delight."

> – Charles Baudelaire, translated by Richard Stokes

- Gabriel Rice

Schwendinger biography and note provided by the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice