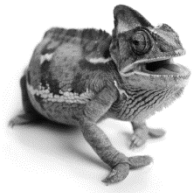

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2025-2026 chamber music season
chamber series 3: Bards & Ballads

Saturday, February 21, 2026, 7:30 PM at First Church in Boston
Sunday, February 22, 2026, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:
Rebecca Clarke, *Dumka*: Duo Concertante for violin, viola & piano (1940)
Einojuhani Rautavaara, *Ballad* for harp & string quintet
Carl Nielsen, Wind Quintet, Op. 43, FS 100
Antonín Dvořák, Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Major, Op. 81

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) was born in England to an American father and German mother. She enrolled at the Royal Academy of Music in London in 1903 to study violin but left abruptly when one of her professors made an unwelcome marriage proposal. Two years later she began a composition course at the Royal College of Music, where she was the first woman to study with Charles Villiers Stanford, also the teacher of Holst, Vaughan Williams, Frank Bridge and others. She was once again unable to finish, this time because her father – described in her memoir as a physically abusive authoritarian – banished her from their home.

Clarke set out on a performing career as a violist, and in 1912 was among a small group of women appointed by Henry Wood to the previously all-male Queen's Hall orchestra. Between 1916 and 1924 she toured extensively while living mostly in the United States, and met the new music patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge at her Berkshire Festival of Chamber Music in 1918. Coolidge encouraged her to enter the festival's composition contest – which was judged anonymously – and she was runner-up in both 1919 and 1921, for the Viola Sonata and Piano Trio respectively. For the 1923 Festival Mrs. Coolidge commissioned Clarke directly: $1000 for the Rhapsody for Cello and Piano, the only commission she ever awarded a woman.

Clarke recalled this high point in her composition career many years later in a radio interview with some amused self-deprecation that to our modern sensibilities seems incredibly sad:

> And when I had that one little whiff of success that I've had in my life, with the Viola Sonata, the rumor went around, I hear, that I hadn't written the stuff myself, that

> somebody had done it for me. And I even got one or two little bits of…press clippings saying that it was impossible, that I couldn't have written it myself. And the funniest of all was that I had a clipping once which said that I didn't exist, there wasn't any such person as Rebecca Clarke, that it was a pseudonym…for Ernest Bloch! Now these people have got it most beautifully mixed – I thought to myself what a funny idea that when he writes his very much lesser works that he should take a pseudonym of a girl, that anyone should consider this possible!

The truth was that her Viola Sonata was not at all a "very much lesser work." In fact, the committee, judging the works without knowing anything about the composers, had been tied between her piece and Bloch's Suite for Viola, and one of them guessed that she was Ravel. Mrs. Coolidge had broken the tie with her own vote in favor of Bloch.

In 1924 Clarke settled back in London and began performing as a soloist and in chamber music with Myra Hess and others, and formed an all-female piano quartet called the English Ensemble. With the onset of World War II she returned once again to the United States, living with her two brothers and their families and even finding herself taking non-musical employment as a nanny. Her written records make it clear that this was a low point, but she soon became reacquainted with a school friend, pianist James Friskin, who had joined the Juilliard faculty. They were married in 1944. Despite his encouragement, her compositional activity was limited for the rest of her life to just a handful of works and revisions of earlier scores. As she explained to an interviewer, "I can't [compose] unless it's the first thing I think of every morning when I wake and the last thing I think of every night before I go to sleep."

While helping to catalogue her works in 1976, Clarke dated the *Dumka*: Duo Concertante for violin, viola & piano to 1940-41, near the beginning of a series of late works that would adopt both a lean, modern approach and inspiration from the past. In this case she looked to the Eastern European form of the *Dumka* – a word literally meaning "thought" – that typically alternates rhapsodically between melancholy and exuberance. Brahms and Dvořák had both written Dumky, and in fact a short passage from Brahms' Op. 25 Piano Quartet can be heard in Clarke's opening and closing.

Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928-2016), in his own words:

> I was born in 1928 – fortunately in Finland. Fortunately, because this is a country with dramatic destinies, situated between east and west, between Tundra and Europe, between the Lutheran and Orthodox faiths. It is full of symbols, of ancient metaphors, revered archetypes. Just listen to Jean Sibelius. He gave me a grant to study at the Juilliard School in New York, and I had to go to America in order to learn to be European. Upon my return I went to the very centre of Europe, to Switzerland, to study the avant-garde…After these *Wanderjahre*, I taught at the Sibelius Academy until 1990 to make a living, composing mostly at night.

A modest summing-up of what was a remarkable life as a leader in Finland's vibrant musical community. He drew equally from the Americans he studied with – Copland, Sessions,

Persichetti – and the European avant-garde, as well as Finnish folk music. His music used many different compositional methods and drew from many influences, and while there were broad trends in the evolution of his style – neoclassical in the 1950s, serial in the 1960s, neoromantic in the 1970s – it is remarkable that consecutive works in his output often sounded and were constructed radically differently from one another. By the 1980s he more or less settled on an identifiable individual idiom combining aspects of all of it. In 1991 he wrote: "Naturally, the linking together of various (and to some people contradictory) systems must of necessity come to break the taboos of each system. But then I also believe that all artistic taboos are evidence of shortsightedness (in time and space) and often of racism."

Some notable works in Rautavaara's output include *A Requiem in Our Time* for brass and percussion from 1953, the piece that brought him to the attention of Sibelius; *Cantus Arcticus*: Concerto for Birds and Orchestra of 1972, in which the "soloist" is the sounds of birdsong in the Finnish Arctic he recorded himself; and the Seventh Symphony "Angel of Light" of 1994, one of several works inspired by the idea of angels, which achieved international success alongside the music of his regional contemporaries Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki. Rautavaara won many awards and was a highly influential teacher to generations of Finnish musicians at the Sibelius Academy, including such luminaries as Paavo Heininen and Kalevi Aho.

Rautavaara's *Ballad* for harp & string quintet was initially composed in 1973, though he soon withdrew it from his catalogue. He revised and re-released it in 1981 and described it as follows:

> Listening to this piece, one can imagine in the mind's eye some ancient bard from the days of chivalry and romance singing and accompanying his timeless song (here conveyed purely through music, of course, rather than music and words). This image is particularly strong at the opening of the work as we listen to the broad melody played by the harp. The plot takes a surprising turn early on: the music becomes restless and the strings' glissando motion thickens into clusters, over which the harp plays feverish patterns. There follows a dialogue between the harp and strings, and the story continues to become more dramatic, with extreme alternations in dynamic from pp to ff, until dense chords from the strings soothe the situation and prepare the way for the epilogue.

The music is characterized predominantly by motivic development and variation. Typical Rautavaarian symmetries are present in many places in the strings' harmonies and the harp's melodic progressions. Many of the musical sections are linked together by abrupt changes, which serves to lend a loftiness or epic air to the work.

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) came from humble beginnings on the island of Funen, known as the Garden of Denmark. His father was an amateur violist and cornet player who played for parties and festivals, and Carl joined him when he had gained sufficient skill on the violin. Nielsen attended the Copenhagen Conservatory from 1884 to 1886, where he showed no particular promise but worked hard at the violin and at harmony and counterpoint. He earned a place in the second violin section of the Royal Theatre orchestra and began composing, first with modest string quartets patterned closely on earlier continental models.

The young man from the small town had larger ambitions for himself, however, as well as an insatiable curiosity for high culture. He successfully applied for a scholarship to travel throughout Europe, where he became acquainted with the works of Wagner and heard many of the great performers and orchestras of the day. In Paris he met another Dane traveling on a scholarship, the sculptress Anne Marie Broderson. They began traveling together, fell in love, and married in Florence before returning home to Denmark. Her influence on him was significant; she was talented and strong-willed, and achieved notoriety in her field ahead of her husband. Furthermore, she helped him to distill his aesthetic of clarity and bold movement, and they shared an artistic and philosophical interest in the fundamental drives of human nature. For the first several years of their marriage she traveled often, leaving him at home with their three young children while he juggled duties at the orchestra and his own composition work. He was often unhappy, even suggesting divorce in 1905, but the tension of his personal struggles manifested in stronger and more direct musical expression, and therefore greater professional success as both a composer and conductor.

In 1914 his marriage came to another crisis, this time over his infidelity. They lived mostly apart for eight years, and once again personal turmoil drove Nielsen to new artistic heights. The Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, widely considered his greatest works, were composed during this period. The Wind Quintet on today's program was written directly after the Fifth Symphony in 1922. Nielsen had been invited to a rehearsal of Mozart's Quintet for Piano and Winds involving members of the Copenhagen Wind Quintet, and he was so taken with the wind players that he wrote them a piece which has become one of the best-loved standards of the genre. He further intended to write a concerto for each of them but completed only the clarinet and flute concertos before his death in 1931 of heart disease.

In the Quintet, he made masterful use of the combinations of tone color available to the disparate ensemble, ranging from duets in various combinations to dramatically symphonic scoring for all five instruments. Moreover, he gave each instrument a significant solo turn, a musical portrait of the player behind the instrument. He left only a brief description of the work:

> The composer has here attempted to present the characteristics of the various instruments. Now they seem to interrupt one another and now they sound alone. The theme for these variations is the tune of one of Carl Nielsen's spiritual songs, which is here made the basis of a number of variations, now gay and grotesque, now elegiac and solemn, ending with the theme itself, simply and gently expressed.

Antonín Dvorák (1841-1904) was the most important figure in Czech music in the late 19th century. Although he came from a modest background, his musical talent was recognized and encouraged early, and he was working as a professional violist in a dance band led by Karel Komzák by the time he was eighteen. Komzák's band became the house orchestra in the new Provisional Theater in Prague in 1862, and for the next nine years Dvorák served as principal violist for productions of operas by all of the great German, French, Italian, Czech and Slavic composers. By 1865 he was composing privately, progressing systematically in the study of the styles of Mozart and Beethoven through to the works of Wagner, and from small to large-scale forms. He made a formal announcement that he was composing in June of 1871 in a Prague

musical journal. He built gradually on his successes, obtaining performances by Smetana and others, and by 1875 receiving money from the Austrian State Stipendium committee.

His application to the committee in 1877 led to a much more significant career advancement. Brahms wrote an enthusiastic letter to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock, recommending that he publish Dvorák's *Moravian Duets* for soprano and piano. Simrock agreed and also published the *Slavonic Dances* for piano four hands, which became an international success. Dvorák's reputation was made, and he and his works were soon in demand throughout Europe.

American audiences are most familiar with Dvorák's Symphony No. 9 "From the New World," and we often hear of his time in the United States. In 1891, he was asked by Jeanette Thurber to be artistic director of the new National Conservatory of Music in New York. It was her dream to foster an "American style" of art music, and she asked for Dvorák's help, as he was the European composer with the most obviously nationalistic style. He researched Native American music and black spirituals and widely expressed his view that an authentically American music could be created from those elements. He and his family missed home very much, however, and when the National Conservatory began having financial difficulties they returned to Bohemia, where he spent his last years.

In 1887 Dvořák revisited his Op. 5, a piano quintet in A Major that he had completed 15 years earlier. At that time, he had considered it a failure and destroyed the manuscript; critics were harsh both about the obvious inexperience his piano writing displayed and for his use of Eastern European folk-dance idioms. Fortunately, a friend had a copy he could borrow to revise, but he quickly found himself frustrated with the original material and ended up starting completely fresh. Even more fortunately, he was much better at writing for the piano by this time, and the music community throughout Europe now celebrated his Czech roots rather than looking down on them.

The new piece would be his Op. 81, also in A Major, and it perfectly represented his particular fusion of the Austro-German tradition with his own Slavonic roots. A defining characteristic of the entire piece is the alternation of moods from melancholy and dreamy to joyful, exuberant, dancelike and back again, and the second movement "Dumka" is a perfect example of its genre. The third movement is a Scherzo in the traditional sense, but it also bears the subtitle "Furiant," another dance form that beautifully captures the rhythmic playfulness of Slavonic music. The A Major Quintet was immediately popular and was soon established as one of the major works for the genre.

- Gabriel Rice