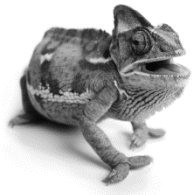

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

**PROGRAM NOTES**

**Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston**
*Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director*

**2025-2026 chamber music season**
**chamber series 5: Things Seen Right-to-Left**

Saturday, May 16, 2026, 7:30 PM at First Church in Boston
Sunday, May 17, 2026, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

**Program:**
Erik Satie, *Choses vues à droite et à gauche (sans lunettes)* for violin & piano
Michael Stephen Brown, *The Lotos-Eaters* for flute, cello, piano & percussion
Ralph Vaughan Williams, Phantasy Quintet
Reena Esmail, *Jhula Jhule* (Back and Forth) for clarinet & piano
Maurice Ravel, Piano Trio in a minor

**Program notes by Gabriel Rice**

**Erik Satie** (1866-1925) was born as Eric Satie – the first of many transformations – in the small port city of Honfleur in northwest France. His family moved to Paris briefly, but following the death of their mother Eric and his brother returned to Honfleur to be cared for by their grandparents. When their grandmother died tragically in a drowning accident, they were once again uprooted back to Paris to live with their father and his new wife, a pianist and salon composer Eric despised. She insisted on sending him to the preparatory department of the Paris Conservatoire, an experience he described as "a sort of local penitentiary." The teachers judged him to be a gifted pianist who was completely lacking in motivation, describing him as the laziest student at the conservatory.

The pattern was established. Satie had his own priorities, and no amount of criticism was going to change them. As soon as he could, he left home and immersed himself in the culture of the famous Chat Noir cabaret, adopting the persona of a long-haired bohemian dressed in a frock coat and a top hat (this was also when he changed the spelling of his first name). Soon he was conducting the orchestra, but just as soon afterwards found himself in a disagreement with the colorful master of ceremonies, Rodolphe Salis, and moved down the street to play the piano at another cabaret, the Auberge du Clou. There he met and befriended Debussy, who was among the few to discern the serious intent behind Satie's parodies.

Satie's musical skills at this time could not compare to the originality of his conception or his wide-ranging interests, including Gothic art and mystical religion. He left the cabaret world and

became involved in a small quasi-religious group called the *Ordre de la Rose-Croix Catholique du Temple et du Graal*, led by Joséphin Péladan. As the official composer for the group, he invented a kind of music he called "static sound décor," which would accompany theatrical or religious events but simply followed its own way with no relation to what was happening simultaneously. These pieces display an astonishing lack of traditional musical development, meandering through simple melodic ideas with apparently no rhyme or reason.

In 1893 he broke off with Péladan and founded his own religious group, the *Église Métropolitaine d'Art de Jésus Conducteur* – of which he was the only member. The published writings he did from this vantage point were scathing attacks against those he viewed as his artistic enemies, suggesting real mental illness in their paranoia. Again he changed his appearance, using a small inheritance to buy 7 identical dun-colored suits. During this time he attempted three times, unsuccessfully, to gain admittance to the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and had his only known love affair, a traumatic involvement with the painter Suzanne Valadon.

Seeking a quiet lifestyle with fewer distractions, Satie moved for a final time in 1898 to the suburb of Arcueil. Every day he made the 6-mile walk to Paris, stopping along the way at cafes to compose and drink. He also changed his appearance for the final time, adopting the role of a bourgeois business functionary with wing tip collars, a bowler hat, and always carrying an umbrella (which he would protect under his coat when it rained). Reputedly, nobody but him ever entered his apartment there until after his death, and then those who did were astonished that he could emerge every day dressed so impeccably from such filthy, crowed rooms. Also, they found no fewer than 100 umbrellas.

In 1905, Satie decided once and for all that he needed more technique in order to achieve his musical goals, and he enrolled at the Schola Cantorum – with classmates half his age – to study counterpoint and composition. Beginning in 1911 when Ravel performed some of his early works, Satie finally gained real recognition for his innovations and doors began to open for him. Commissions came through Diaghilev, Cocteau and others, and he formed greater associations with other artists, especially in the Dada movement. Two festivals of his music were staged in 1920, and many younger composers and other artists considered him an almost spiritual leader. Years of heavy drinking caught up eventually, however, and he died in 1925 of cirrhosis of the liver.

Satie described the impetus behind his own music as follows:

> Do not forget that the melody is the Idea, the outline; as much as it is the form and the subject matter of a work. The harmony is an illumination, an exhibition of the object, its reflection … If there is form and a new style of writing, there is a new craft … Great Masters are brilliant through their ideas, their craft is a simple means to an end, nothing more. It is their ideas which endure … The Idea can do without Art.

In other words, Satie was not so concerned about music for its own sake. Motivic development was not interesting to him. There is no rhythmic ingenuity in his work whatsoever. Music was simply the delivery method of his ideas, which were defined as much as anything by what they were not. He spent his entire life and career challenging, rethinking – even parodying – 19th century values. Satie is the anti-Romantic.

*Choses vues a droite et a gauche (sans lunettes)*, translated as "Things seen right to left (without glasses)," dates from 1914 and is Satie's only published work for violin and piano. The three movements that make up this small suite are satires on Baroque forms, beginning with a "Hypocritical Chorale," complete with the postscript "My chorales equal those of Bach, with this difference: there are not so many of them, and they are less pretentious." The second movement is a "Groping Fugue," in which the written instructions to the players are more well-developed in some ways than the fugue subject itself; he instructs the pianist to open "with silly but convenient naïveté," and follows with instructions to evoke "tenderness and fatality" and "dry and distant bones." The final statement of the theme is to be performed "with a big head." The final movement, titled "Muscular Fantasy," is a parody of virtuosic violin techniques, which requires, of course, virtuosic technique to perform.

A 2025 MacDowell Fellow and 2024 Yaddo Artist, **Michael Stephen Brown** (born 1987) performs recitals and concertos worldwide and is commissioned by leading orchestras, soloists, and chamber music organizations. His honors include the 2026 Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award, an Emerging Artist Award from Lincoln Center, and an Avery Fisher Career Grant. He has appeared as soloist with the Seattle, Phoenix, North Carolina, Albany, and Maryland Symphonies, as well as the NFM Leopoldinum Orchestra, and has given recitals at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, the Louvre, Wigmore Hall, and Beethoven-Haus Bonn.

Brown's latest composition, *The Carnival of Endangered Wonders: A Zoological Fantasy*, is a large-scale chamber work co-commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, CMS Palm Beach, La Musica (Sarasota), Music@Menlo, Friends of Music (Kansas City), and Premiere Performances of Hong Kong, and will premiere in 2026. A frequent artist with CMS Lincoln Center, he tours internationally in a duo with longtime musical partner Nicholas Canellakis and collaborates regularly with Pinchas Zukerman, Amanda Forsyth, Arnaud Sussmann, and Kristin Lee. A dedicated educator, he gives lectures and masterclasses around the world.

As a composer, Brown has received commissions from organizations and artists including the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, CMS Lincoln Center, the Bridgehampton and Gilmore Festivals, the Maryland Symphony, Osmo Vänskä and Erin Keefe, the SPA Trio, and pianists Anne-Marie McDermott, Jerome Lowenthal, Ursula Oppens, Orion Weiss, Adam Golka, and Roman Rabinovich, as well as soprano Susanna Phillips and cellist Nicholas Canellakis. He recently served as Composer and Artist-in-Residence at the New Haven Symphony and is a recipient of the Copland House Residency Award. His symphonic work *American Diaries* draws on texts by Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes alongside excerpts from his grandfather's World War II diary.

Selected by András Schiff for an international recital tour, Brown made debuts at Zurich's Tonhalle and New York's 92nd Street Y. He appears regularly at major festivals including Tanglewood, Bridgehampton, Marlboro, Music@Menlo, Ravinia, Saratoga, Caramoor, Bard, Sedona, Moab, and Tippet Rise.

A prolific recording artist, Brown recently released *Twelve Blocks*, an album of music written for friends and longtime collaborators. A second recording follows in fall 2026, featuring his Piano Concerto and *Vortex* for cello and strings with the East Coast Chamber Orchestra. Additional forthcoming projects include *Mendelssohn+*, featuring premieres by Delphine von Schauroth, and the complete nocturnes of Gabriel Fauré. He is the composer for Angeline Gragasin's upcoming film *Look But Don't Touch.*

Brown earned dual degrees in piano and composition from the Juilliard School, where he studied with Jerome Lowenthal, Robert McDonald, and Samuel Adler and was awarded the Petschek Piano Award. His mentors have included George Perle, András Schiff, and Richard Goode. He lives in New York City with his two 19th-century Steinways, Octavia and Daria. Known for his engaging commentary on music and distinctive socks, audiences value both his insight and his presence onstage.

Composer's program note:

> I was deeply moved by Tennyson's poem "The Lotos-Eaters." It vividly captures mariners yearning for a life of peace, rest, and even death. They arrive in a land where people do nothing but eat the lotus flower, causing them to lose all desire to return home and resign themselves to a life without struggle. When reading this poem, I was struck by the musical nature of the language and inspired to compose a piece for flute, cello, piano, and percussion. Writing for percussion is like being a kid in a candy store for me – so many possibilities. I spent time experimenting with shakers and striking random household items around my NYC apartment to capture the essence of "The Lotos-Eaters."
>
> Each movement of my composition is inspired by different evocative lines from the poem. The first and fifth movements feature all the instruments, while the inner three break off into different combinations. The opening evokes a storm with the rumbles of a thundersheet, inside-the-piano techniques, key clicks from the flute, and harmonics on the cello, portraying the foreign land.
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> The second movement, "Toil," scored for piano and percussion, uses pitched rice bowls to evoke the struggle of a life of work, contrasting with the peaceful longing of the lotos-eaters. Movements three and four highlight the flute and cello respectively in solo roles, while the finale reunites the quartet in a serene and tranquil conclusion.

**Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958), despite a rather slow start, became the most prominent British composer of his generation. He came from a distinguished English family; his paternal grandfather was the first Judge of Common Pleas, and his mother's parents were Josiah Wedgwood III and a sister of Charles Darwin. His early musical education was in keyboard instruments, harmony, violin and viola, and he considered a career as an orchestral player. Composition always attracted him, however, and despite technique that he himself described as amateurish, he determinedly pursued his ambition. He enrolled twice at the Royal College of Music and traveled to Berlin in 1897 to study with Bruch and Paris in 1908 to work with Ravel.

It soon became clear to the young Vaughan Williams that the most fertile material for inspiration lay not in imitating continental composers but in the music of his own land, and he pursued a study of English folksong, as well as Elizabethan and Jacobean music. Along with his good friend and trusted colleague Gustav Holst (until Holst's death in 1934 the two composers met regularly to critique each other's work), he developed a philosophy of musical citizenship that would become a central facet of his public persona. Over the course of his long and distinguished career, Vaughan Williams would earn fame not only for the deeply expressive, visionary music he wrote for the concert hall, but also for choral music intended to be sung by amateurs and incidental music for film and other occasions. Despite his own personal atheism, his deep and sincere consideration for the people of Great Britain led him to compose a great deal of church music and devote many months to work on *The English Hymnal*.

Vaughan Williams gained international fame as a symphonist and conductor, traveling widely to perform his *A London Symphony*. He also taught at the Royal College of Music, mentoring such composers as Gordon Jacob. By the time of his death in 1958, he had clearly earned the love of the English people, and his ashes were interred at Westminster Abbey in front of a large crowd.

Chamber music aficionados may have wondered why so many pieces by British composers have the word "phantasy" – with the unusual ph spelling – in their titles. The reason stems from one man, an extremely successful industrialist, philanthropist, and amateur violinist named Walter Wilson Cobbett (1847-1937). Cobbett's primary business was Scandinavia Belting, which became a leading supplier of automotive belts essential to the transmissions of Ford and other motor vehicles in the United States and Europe. By 1907 he was independently wealthy and began spending more and more of his time on his musical interests, including chamber music in his home and amateur orchestras such as the Strolling Players' Orchestral Society. He also delivered lectures, contributed to *The Strad* magazine and *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, established a free music library in partnership with the Society of Women Musicians, and in 1929 published the *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, still a standard reference tool. He owned a fine collection of Cremonese violins and sponsored a competition for British luthiers. As a member of the Music in War-Time Committee during the First World War, he helped organize concerts at military camps and hospitals, in social clubs for the wives of armed forces personnel, even lunchtime concerts for munitions workers in factories, all of which provided both employment for musicians and much-needed entertainment.

Between 1905 and 1919 he established the Cobbett Musical Competitions, five separate contests, all but one open only to British subjects, for various ensembles and with various guidelines. Most of them called for a "phantasy," his own conception of an older genre, short pieces for viols called "fancies" or "fantasies" from the 16th and 17th centuries by composers such as William Byrd and Orlando Gibbons. For the purpose of the competitions a "phantasy" was a piece up to 12 minutes long that may consist of different sections varying in tempi and rhythms and performed without pause.

Concurrent with the competitions, Corbett directly commissioned more than a dozen new works from emerging and established British composers, most of them in the same "phantasy" genre. Vaughan Williams' Phantasy Quintet, for standard string quartet plus viola, was commissioned in 1912 and premiered in 1914, and its musical materials and structure conformed so perfectly to

Corbett's request that he described it as "a piece of music which represents so exactly the phantasy as I conceived it that it may well serve as prototype to those who care to write in this form in the future."

**Reena Esmail**'s (b0rn 1983) music weaves together the traditions of Hindustani and Western classical music, drawing musicians from many perspectives into shared creative spaces. Esmail divides her attention evenly between orchestral, chamber and choral work. She has written commissions for ensembles including the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Seattle Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, and San Francisco Symphony, and her music has been featured on multiple Grammy-nominated albums, including *The Singing Guitar* by Conspirare*, BRUITS* by Imani Winds, and *Healing Modes* by Brooklyn Rider. Many of her choral works are published by Oxford University Press, and her piece *TaReKiTa* has sold over 100,000 copies worldwide.

Esmail's life and music was profiled on season three of the PBS Great Performances series *Now Hear This*, as well as *Frame of Mind*, a podcast from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Esmail was the Los Angeles Master Chorale's 2020-2025 Swan Family Artist in Residence and was the Seattle Symphony's 2020-21 Composer-in-Residence. She has been in residence with the Tanglewood Music Center (co-Curator 2023), Spoleto Festival (Chamber Music Composer-in-Residence 2024) and Marlboro Music Festival (Composer-in-Residence 2025).

Esmail holds degrees in composition from The Juilliard School and the Yale School of Music. Her primary teachers have included Susan Botti, Aaron Jay Kernis, Christopher Theofanidis, Christopher Rouse, and Samuel Adler. She received a Fulbright-Nehru grant to study Hindustani music in India. Her Hindustani music teachers include Srimati Lakshmi Shankar and Gaurav Mazumdar, and she currently studies and collaborates with Saili Oak. Her doctoral thesis, entitled "Finding Common Ground: Uniting Practices in Hindustani and Western Art Musicians" explores the methods and challenges of the collaborative process between Hindustani musicians and Western composers. Esmail resides in her hometown of Los Angeles, CA.

*Jhula Jhule* (Back and Forth) was commissioned by MuSE – Multicultural Sonic Evolution in New York and premiered in 2013 in its original version for violin and piano. Since then, Esmail has adapted it for several other instruments, and this version for clarinet and piano was premiered in 2017 in Boulder, Colorado.

Composer's program note:

> When writing this piece, to be based upon Indian folksong, I cast a wide net for source material – I scoured the internet and my large collection of Indian music, listening to everything from Bengali Bauls, Rajasthani folk singing. I even tried to find songs from Goa and Gujarat, the places my parents are from in India, typing every conceivable search term into Google. However, the material I felt most connected to in the end didn't come to me from a distant corner of India, but in the most common way folk music can be transmitted: through the generations of my own family.

This piece uses two folk melodies. The first is a song called "Ankhon vina andharon re," which I found on a recording my mother's father made long before I was born. Of his five grandchildren, I am the only one who never met him. But as I've grown up, I realize how much we have in common, including our deep love of music. My mother often tells me stories of listening to records of Beethoven Symphonies on hot nights in Kenya, where my grandfather spent most of his life. All the lights were turned off, and they would listen as a family, in the silent darkness, following his lead as he taught them to savor each note. We still have recordings of my grandfather singing songs in many languages – English, Marathi, Konkani, Portuguese and others – which I listen to from time to time, imagining what it might have been like to know him.

The other song comes to me from my grandmother, my father's mother. My father's parents (who even our American friends affectionately called Mamma and Pappa) moved to the US the year before I was born and lived with us for most of my childhood. I grew up speaking to Mamma only in Gujarati, a language that I spoke to no one else until she died in 2007. As a baby, Mamma would often sing me this lullaby: *Jhula Jhule, Jhula Jhule / Reena Rani Jhula Jhule* which translates: "Back and forth, back and forth / Reena the Queen swings back and forth." It has been years since I have thought about this melody, but while working on this project, it suddenly popped back into my mind. I'm so glad it did – it is one of the few musical memories I have of her.

Working on this piece was very special for me. I spent most of my childhood as a first-generation American unconsciously trying to separate my home life from my outside life. I became aware very early on that there was no real resonance for my Indian culture in my American surroundings. As a composer, I've often quoted from pieces I love (mostly by other western composers, and more recently from Hindustani bandishes). But this is the first time I've felt able to bring songs from my own family into my music, and into the western concert hall. I think – I hope – I've finally found a point of resonance.

**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.

The Piano Trio was composed during the summer of 1914 just as France was entering the war, and he worked diligently, even feverishly, through writer's block in order to finish it before volunteering to serve. He wrote to a friend:

> I am working—yes, working with the sureness and lucidity of a madman. At the same time I get terrible fits of depression and suddenly find myself sobbing over the sharps and flats!

The struggles proved immensely fruitful. Asymmetrical rhythmic motives derived from Basque music permeate the first and fourth movements. The second movement, *Pantoum*, is based on a Malay poetic form that was fashionable in France at the time; four-line stanzas are constructed so that the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third line of the next. Always the craftsman, Ravel used the poetic inspiration to manipulate two musical ideas to wonderful effect. The third movement is based on the traditional passacaglia form, but the ground bass becomes ever more harmonically and rhythmically varied throughout the movement. The finale, in a free Rondo form, utilizes virtuoso techniques from the strings to create the impression of a much larger ensemble, a brilliant ending for one of the great and unique masterpieces of the chamber music repertoire.

\- Gabriel Rice

Brown and Esmail biographies and notes courtesy of the composers, edited by Gabriel Rice