



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2025-2026 chamber music season

Up Close 2: Behind Me — dips Eternity —

Sunday, April 26, 2026, 4 PM at Goethe-Institut, Boston

Program:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Sonata No. 21 in e minor for piano & violin, K. 304

Tōru Takemitsu, *Hika* (Elegy) for violin & piano

Claude Debussy, Sonate in g minor for violin & piano, L. 140

Sergei Prokofiev, Violin Sonata No. 1 in f minor, Op. 80

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) is a more familiar figure to the general public than most composers, if nothing else from the movie *Amadeus* – exaggerated though it may be. Born in Salzburg, Austria to Leopold Mozart, a well-respected musician himself, he was the most prodigious of child prodigies, coming to the attention of Europe’s musical elite both as a performer and a composer well before his tenth birthday. He nevertheless had to struggle to earn a decent living, serving as concertmaster in the orchestra and then organist for the Archbishop of Salzburg before moving to Vienna, where he eventually attained the position of composer of the Imperial and Royal Chamber. All of this occurred, of course, before he died of rheumatic fever just shy of his 36th birthday.

Somehow, even with a busy performing schedule, Mozart managed to write an absolutely staggering amount of music in his short life; his catalogue includes 21 stage and opera works, 15 Masses, over 50 symphonies, 25 piano concerti, 12 violin concertos, 27 concert arias, 17 piano sonatas, 26 string quartets, and many other pieces including no less than 35 sonatas for piano and violin.

The Sonata No. 21 in e minor K. 304 comes from a set of six known as the “Palatine” sonatas; Mozart dedicated them to Maria Elisabeth, wife of the Elector of Palatine, when they were published in November 1778. He composed it in the summer of that year in Paris, in the middle of an extended tour from September 1877 to January 1879. He had left Salzburg with his mother, traveling through Mannheim, Paris, and Munich in search of a position. In that respect the trip was a failure. He spent too much money and was unable to secure any stable employment, but the most significant tragedy was that his mother fell ill and passed away in July of 1878 in Paris.

It was up to him to write to his father with the news and make his way home.

In this context it feels significant that this sonata is one of only two works of chamber music with piano and strings that Mozart set in a minor key, and its emotional depth is remarkable compared to his other violin sonatas, even the others in this particular set. The a minor piano sonata K. 310 reflects a similar depth and was composed at around the same time. Widely considered one of his best and most significant pieces of chamber music, this sonata was described by Alfred Einstein as “one of the miracles among Mozart’s works.”

Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996) was born in Japan but spent the first years of his life in China. He returned for elementary school and was conscripted into the Japanese army when he was only fourteen years old. Although he described this as a “bitter event,” conscription did provide his first exposure to Western music, which had previously been banned in Japan. While working at an American military base following the war, Takemitsu took every opportunity to listen to Western music on the armed forces radio network and decided to be a composer, despite the fact that he had no training whatsoever. He remained almost entirely self-taught, primarily studying the works of Debussy and Messiaen. Together with several friends, he formed the Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop) for the collaborative creation of mixed media projects specifically avoiding traditional Japanese artistic traditions.

In the late 1950s, Takemitsu’s work began to receive international attention, beginning with a stroke of fortune: Stravinsky happened to hear his 1957 *Requiem* for strings, declared it a masterpiece, and invited the young composer to lunch. He soon received a commission from the Koussevitsky foundation, likely on Stravinsky’s recommendation. *Dorian Horizon* (1966) was premiered by the San Francisco Symphony under the direction of Copland. In the early 60s he met and worked with John Cage, whose fascination with Japanese culture sparked a new interest for Takemitsu himself in his native musical tradition. This launched a fruitful period of work combining Japanese and Western instruments.

Takemitsu was undoubtedly the most prominent Japanese composer of the 20th century, the first to gain international recognition. He was awarded the Prix Italia in 1958 and the Grawemeyer Award in 1994, as well as honorary memberships in the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Akademie der Künste of the DDR and admission to the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and the Académie des Beaux-Arts. In addition to concert music, he wrote nearly 100 film scores, earning him the Los Angeles Film Critics Award for the music to Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran*. He became something of a celebrity in Japan, even finding time to write a detective novel and appear on television as a celebrity chef. Takemitsu’s plans to compose an opera were tragically ended by his early passing from pneumonia during treatment for bladder cancer.

Hika for violin & piano was composed in 1966; the title translates to “Elegy.” The musical material on which *Hika* is based first appeared in the third movement of *Pause Ininterrompue* (“Uninterrupted Rest”) for solo piano, composed in 1959 as an homage to Alban Berg. *Pause Ininterrompue* was inspired by a poem with the same title by the Japanese surrealist poet Shuzo Takiguchi, but in typical fashion Takemitsu was not attempting any kind of direct representation but rather to convey the impressions and feelings evoked by the poem. He described Takiguchi’s

work as “an act directed at discovering the original unpolished tone, rather than at polishing and presenting a finished form of some given material” – which is an apt description of Takemitsu as well.

Of his own work, Takemitsu commented: “My music is like a garden, and I am the gardener. Listening to my music can be compared with walking through a garden and experiencing the changes in light, pattern, and texture.” In an insightful survey of recordings for *The New York Times*, Paul Griffiths wrote: “his music’s customary slow andante may have come from a deeper inkling into how we listen...The irregular amble is the tempo of one thought supplanting another, each lasting for the normal extent of time we think of as the present, which is about two or three seconds. Music behaving this way can seem to go at its own pace, because it is going at ours.”

Even in its brief five minutes duration, *Hika* is a perfect encapsulation of Takemitsu’s aesthetic: the central importance of *Ma* – the Japanese concept of necessary, meaningful silence – and the unhurried pace of impressions and deep emotions evoked without the need for specific representation.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was from a family of Burgundian peasants settled near Paris around 1800. Childhood piano lessons led to admission in the Paris Conservatory in 1872. His record there was not particularly distinguished, earning him a *premier prix* only in accompaniment, but his talents for composition became much more apparent outside the academic halls. He was hired in the summer of 1880 by Tchaikovsky’s patron, Nadezhda von Meck, to teach her children and play duets. She took him to Florence and Arachon, and then the following two summers to Russia and Vienna. In 1884 he won the *Prix de Rome* and spent the next two years there at the Villa Medici. Debussy continued his cosmopolitan cultural education over the next several years, cultivating friendships with poets – particularly the Symbolists – and painters in the Paris cafés, searching out non-Western musical traditions such as the Javanese Gamelan, and visiting Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889. The Wagnerian influence remained strong for the rest of his life, even if it was often manifested in opposition. He never lost admiration for *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde*, and Wagner’s general conception of music-drama was central to Debussy’s overall aesthetic. The influence of poetry and visual arts may have been even greater than that of Wagner or any other musician, however. Although Debussy has often been given the label Impressionist, his aesthetic is much better described in relationship to Symbolism, the short-lived French literary movement characterized by rejection of realism, naturalism, and clear-cut forms, and a taste for the esoteric and mysterious.

Debussy, of course, achieved much more than simply rejection of previous modes of communication, finding increasingly subtle ways of writing evocative, affecting, moving music. He became the pre-eminent French composer of his time, revolutionizing harmonic language and formal considerations. In a sense, however, the underlying philosophy of his music was not so far from the world of earlier French musicians such as Rameau and Couperin, who had always been concerned with the portrayal of visual and emotional images through innovative instrumental writing. Among Debussy’s last works were the pieces published together as “Six Sonatas for Various Instruments, Composed by Claude Debussy, French Musician.” The title of this collection has been widely interpreted as Debussy’s inheritance claim to the rich tradition of

the French Baroque. Debussy's stress on his nationality was prompted by an increasing desire to assert the greatness of his nation, in view of the menace coming from across the Rhine (the First World War was in its full swing).

Only three of the planned pieces were completed before his death: the Cello Sonata in the summer of 1915, the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp in the fall of the same year, and the Violin Sonata in March 1917 while in the grips of the colon cancer that would prove fatal. Debussy had a difficult time with the Violin Sonata, which took much more time than the previous two for a number of reasons. He was not only in rapidly increasing pain from his illness, but was also ever more appalled at the human cost of the war. He wrote: "I only wrote this sonata to be rid of the thing, spurred on by my dear publisher. This sonata will be interesting from a documentary point of view and as an example of what may be produced by a sick man in time of war." Such bitterness is not apparent in the music, however, which ranges from rapturous beauty to buoyancy, and the energy he summons for the ending is downright defiant. The Violin Sonata was his last completed composition, and its premiere was his last concert in Paris.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) was born in the Ukraine, the only child of a prosperous and cultured family. He entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory at age thirteen, studying composition and then piano. Due to a willful, often arrogant, attitude toward his teachers, he soon cultivated an image of *enfant terrible*. Nonetheless, upon graduation in 1914, he won the prestigious Rubinstein Prize, the top award for a student pianist, by boldly presenting his own First Piano Concerto. In 1918 he left Russia for a concert tour of the United States and spent the next eighteen years living outside his homeland, first in America and then mostly in Paris. He maintained a busy concert schedule while composing a prodigious amount of music, much of it for Dyagilev's Ballet Russe and opera companies around the world.

Between 1932 and 1936, Prokofiev gradually moved back to the Soviet Union. During these transitional years he completed two of his most popular works, music for the film *Lieutenant Kije* and the ballet score *Romeo and Juliet*, but by 1936 when his wife and family arrived to settle in Moscow, musical life in Soviet Russia was becoming increasingly isolated and controlled by the Communist Party. His relationship with the censors was touchy; some of his larger-scale works intended as patriotic statements were condemned, but he also had great triumphs: the Fifth Symphony and film music *Alexander Nevsky* were both political and popular successes. In 1948, however, the government tightened its grip again, issuing a decree declaring the works of most prominent composers "marked with formalist perversions...alien to the Soviet people." Many of Prokofiev's works were banned from performance. He attempted reconciliation with an opera based on the life of a real Soviet war hero, but official response was unfavorable and the performance was withdrawn. That year his health began to decline rapidly, and he died of a brain hemorrhage on March 5, 1953. Ironically, it was the very day of Stalin's death.

Prokofiev's Violin Sonata No. 1 in f minor, Op. 80, was begun by 1938 but set aside and not completed until 1946. In between came the Fifth Symphony, and he also transcribed his Flute Sonata and called it the Violin Sonata No. 2. He described the f minor sonata as follows:

In mood it is more serious than the Second [Sonata]. The first movement, *Andante assai*, is severe in character and is a kind of extended introduction to the second movement, a *sonata allegro*, which is vigorous and turbulent, but has a broad second theme. The third movement is slow, gentle, and tender. The finale is fast and written in complicated rhythm.

“More serious” may be an understatement, as this sonata is among the darkest, most foreboding works he wrote. The slow-fast-slow-fast movement structure was modeled on Baroque church sonatas, and Prokofiev indicated a particular violin sonata by Handel as a direct inspiration. It was dedicated to and first performed by David Oistrakh; the two men worked closely together on the piece, and the sonata benefits from the unforced virtuosity made possible by perfectly characteristic violin writing. Prokofiev told Oistrakh that the whispery scales in the violin at the end of the first movement, which return in the finale, should sound “like the wind in a graveyard.” In between comes the terrifying, crushing opening of the second movement and the haunting third movement. Midori suggests: “Perhaps, here is the composer’s prediction, in symbolic representation, of music’s future under harsh restraints.”

- Gabriel Rice

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