

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2026-2027 chamber music season
chamber series 2: The Tipping Point

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

Program:
Charles Ives, *Sunrise* for soprano, violin & piano
Maurice Ravel, *Chansons madécasses* for soprano, flute, cello & piano
Kevin Puts, *And Legions Will Rise* for clarinet, violin & marimba
Béla Bartók, Piano Quintet in C Major, Sz. 23

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Charles Ives (1874-1954) was the son of a remarkable bandmaster and church musician in Danbury, Connecticut named George E. Ives. The elder Ives is not known to have written any music, but he had training in harmony, counterpoint and orchestration and an experimental attitude about music that he transmitted to his sons. According to Charles, he believed "that man as a rule didn't use the faculties that the Creator had given him hard enough. I couldn't have been over ten years old when he would occasionally have us sing, for instance, a tune like *The Swanee River* in the key of E-flat, but play the accompaniment in the key of C." The elder Ives is also known to have experimented with microtones, scales without octaves, and natural partial tunings of the piano. He believed strongly in encouraging natural music-making by untrained musicians, and he would accompany outdoor Camp Meeting services with a specially built slide cornet, so that he could follow the rising pitch of the congregation without holding them to an arbitrary pitch level.

By the age of fourteen, Charles was the youngest salaried church organist in the state of Connecticut. His father had encouraged a career as a concert pianist, but he stayed away from solo performing out of shyness. Many of the traits that characterize his later music were developed in the work under his father's supervision, including polytonality (fugues in four keys) and musical quotation, particularly of popular songs and marches. In 1894, Ives enrolled at Yale and began study with Horatio Parker. His father died suddenly the same year. Ives was somewhat frustrated by Parker's conservatism, but judging from the surviving compositions of that period (the First Symphony most prominent among them) he learned a great deal about editing to a level of controlled refinement.

After graduation he moved to New York and entered the insurance business, which would remain his primary source of income until retirement. For the first few years he kept a church organist job but gave it up in 1902 to devote more time to composing. In 1905 he became reacquainted with Harmony Twichell, the sister of a Yale classmate, and they were married three years later. He continued composing until 1926 and then spent the rest of his musical life revising, preparing manuscripts for performance, and attending concerts. Beginning with Copland's performance with Hubert Linscott of several songs at the Yaddo Festival in 1932, Ives' music caught the ears of many young composers, and his place in the musical world was secured. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for his Third Symphony. In 1954 he died of a stroke while recovering from minor surgery.

Ives' music has never been easy to categorize. He never fit well into any particular compositional school, probably because his father had instilled in him such a strong sense of independent thought. His reliance on quotation, particularly of the simple musical materials of 19th century marches and popular songs, has often baffled analysts and led them to take him less than seriously. In his settings, however, the musical materials of his boyhood evoke the kind of timeless serenity that strong memories can bring. Often his music sounds a great deal like memory, without a strictly measured timeline, sometimes building to a climax that is literally a wash of overwhelming experience. His choice of popular music also reflects a heartfelt love of the music that people experience together at home, in their church services, town meetings and holiday gatherings. Politically active throughout his life, Ives often chose patriotic themes, such as the organ variations on *America*, not to parody, but out of a genuine patriotism that wasn't afraid to have fun.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Ives' output, and another aspect that has resisted traditional commentary, is its amazing diversity of materials and musical language. He eschewed the development of a "personal style" or a recognizable sound in favor of serving the work at hand with the most effective and appropriate materials. Nowhere is this more evident than in the songs. He wrote songs throughout his composing career, ranging from simple settings of traditional and original melodies, to reworkings of German and French texts used by composers of the past, to complex, often impressionist sounding songs of great beauty and delicacy. His are art songs that stand up to comparison with the greatest song composers of the 19th century, for their organic relationship of text to music, for their subtlety of emotional effect, and sometimes for the powerful expressiveness gained by contrasting simple music with complex text or vice versa. His own thoughts on songs, from the postface to 114 Songs, are as follows:

> Some of the songs in this book, particularly among the later ones, cannot be sung, – and if they could perhaps might prefer, if they had a say, to remain as they are, – that is, "in the leaf," – and that they will remain in this peaceful state is more than presumable. An excuse (if none of the above are good enough) for their existence, which suggests itself at this point, is that a song has a *few* rights the same as other ordinary citizens. If it feels like walking along the left hand side of the street – passing the door of physiology or sitting on the curb, why not let it? If it feels like kicking over an ash can, a poet's castle, or the prosodic law, will you stop it? Must it always be a polite triad, a "breve gaudium," a ribbon to match the voice? Should it not be free at times from the dominion of the thorax,

the diaphragm, the ear and other points of interest? If it wants to beat around in the valley, to throw stones up the pyramids, or to sleep in the park, should it not have some immunity from a Nemesis, a Rameses, or a policeman? Should it not have a chance to sing to itself, if it can sing? – to enjoy itself, without making a bow, if it can't make a bow? – to swim around in any ocean, if it can swim, without having to swallow "hook and bait" or being sunk by an operatic greyhound? If it happens to feel like trying to fly where humans cannot fly, – to sing what cannot be sung – to walk in a cave, on all fours, – or to tighten up its girth in blind hope and faith, and try to scale mountains that are not – Who shall stop it!

– In short, must a song
always be a song!

Sunrise was Ives' final completed work, composed in August 1926. After that it seemed that his creative well had just dried up, but he kept trying until one day in 1927, when his wife Harmony recounted that "he came downstairs one day with tears in his eyes and said he couldn't seem to compose any more – nothing went well – nothing sounded right." Even with an abbreviated compositional career, Ives left a tremendous legacy as one of America's – and the entire musical world's – most individual and innovative voices.

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 *Chansons madécasses* (Songs of Madagascar) were composed in 1925 and 1926 and reflect the prevalent fashion for exotic subjects. The texts of the songs are by Évariste-Désiré de Parny, published in 1787 under the pretext of a collection of traditional songs of the Madagascan people. In truth, Parny never visited Madagascar or knew its language, but the poems are evocative nonetheless, providing picturesque song texts. The first and third songs are marvelously erotic – the word "volupté" appears in each, and that pretty much sums up the atmosphere of both. The second song is a dire, impassioned warning against the violence of the white men on the island. In fact, at the first performance in Paris, the first line of the song, "Aoua! Beware of the white men," prompted a noisy exit by a member of the audience, who shouted his displeasure at hearing such an unpatriotic sentiment while France was engaged in war in Africa.

Pulitzer Prize and Grammy-winning composer **Kevin Puts** (b. 1972) has established himself as one of America's leading composers, gaining international acclaim for his "plush, propulsive" music (*The New York Times*), and described by *Opera News* as "a master polystylist." He has been commissioned and performed by leading organizations around the world, including the Metropolitan Opera, Philadelphia Orchestra, Carnegie Hall, Opera Philadelphia, Minnesota Opera, and many more, and has collaborated with world-class artists such as Renée Fleming, Joshua Bell, Joyce DiDonato, Yannick Nezet-Seguin, and Marin Alsop, among others.

In March 2022 Puts' fourth opera, *The Hours* had its world premiere on the concert stage by the Philadelphia Orchestra under the baton of Yannick Nezet-Seguin, and was hailed as a "historic event ... with a lush orchestration that hits you in the solar plexus." (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*). *The Hours* premiered to sold-out houses as a fully staged production at the Metropolitan Opera in November 2022 starring sopranos Renée Fleming, Kelli O'Hara and mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato and was called "a stunning triumph" by *Variety* Magazine. The opera's revival in May 2024 played to packed houses and marked the first instance in the Metropolitan Opera's history of a work returning the season after its premiere. Other highlights of 2022 included the west-coast premiere of *The Brightness of Light* featuring Renée Fleming and Rod Gilfry with the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra. Written for Time for Three, his triple concerto *Contact* had its world-premiere in March 2022 with the Florida Orchestra and continues to receive performances around the world. A recording of the piece by the Philadelphia Orchestra and Xian Zhang, conductor was released on the Deutsche Grammophon album "Letters for the Future" and was awarded "Best Contemporary Classical Composition" at the 2023 Grammy Awards. Mr. Puts was named *Musical America's* Composer of the Year in 2024.

Puts' breakthrough opera *Silent Night* – for which he was awarded the 2012 Pulitzer Prize following its 2011 premiere by Minnesota Opera – has been heralded as "remarkable" (*The New York Times*) and "stunning" (*Twin Cities Examiner*). In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, Mr. Puts has received numerous honors and awards for composition. Since 2006, he has been a member of the Composition Faculty at the Peabody Institute and served as Distinguished Visiting Composer at the Juilliard School in the 2024-2025 academic year. He returned to his role as Director of the Minnesota Orchestra Composer's Institute in 2025.

Composer's program note:

> Composed in the summer of 2001, *And Legions Will Rise* is about the power in all of us to transcend during times of tragedy and personal crisis. While I was writing it, I kept imagining one of those war scenes in blockbuster films, with masses of troops made ready before a great battle. I think we have forces like this inside of us, ready to do battle when we are at our lowest moments. The piece was written at the request of Makoto Nakura and commissioned by the Kobe Shinbun. It was premiered in October 2001 at Matsukata Hall, Kobe, Japan by Mr. Nakura, Yayoi Toda (violin), and Todd Palmer (clarinet).

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) was born in Nagyszentmiklos, Hungary, now part of Romania. His parents were enthusiastic amateur musicians and encouraged his early interest. He was playing the piano by age four, composing by six, and discovered to have perfect pitch at seven. He was a shy and physically frail child, and his family moved often. Nevertheless, he was performing in professional settings in his teens, and when he auditioned for the Vienna Conservatory and Budapest Academy of Music (later known as the Liszt Academy) in 1899, was offered scholarships to study piano and composition at both. He chose Budapest, which had grown rapidly to become one of the largest cities in Europe. His compositions of the time are mostly unremarkable, but he was an outstanding pianist with a promising solo career. He became infatuated with the music of Richard Strauss, and Bartók's own transcription of *Ein Heldenleben* for solo piano was a favorite performance showpiece. He joined the piano faculty in 1906 and was tenured there from 1909 to 1934.

In 1905 Bartók met Zoltan Kodály. They became close friends and began together to research traditional Hungarian music, traveling to collect and classify folk songs, setting them in the manner of art songs for solo voice and piano, and incorporating their rhythmic and melodic elements into original works. It was through this research, eventually expanded to include folk traditions of neighboring Eastern European cultures, that Bartók found a compelling and original compositional voice, and his reputation as both a composer and performer grew through the 1910s. The isolation of the war curtailed performing and ethnomusicological research, but he delved even more deeply in creative work, expanding his harmonic language in the direction of dodecaphonic atonality. In the early 1920s he returned to field work and a renewed performing career, becoming so busy that he took a full three years off from composition in the mid-1920s, even describing himself as an "ex-composer." He resumed composing in 1926 following several visits to Italy and much study of Baroque music. The 1930s saw him gaining ever more

international acclaim; he joined the Permanent Committee for Literature and the Arts of the League of Nations' Commission for Intellectual Co-operation, and the latter part of the decade was probably the most productive time of his compositional career. His output from this period included the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, the Fifth and Sixth String Quartets, the Second Violin Concerto, and the *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet, and piano.

The political situation in Europe in the late 1930s increasingly interfered with Bartók's musicological research. He was also forced to change publishers and take steps to protect his manuscripts. A successful concert tour of the United States in 1940 inspired a move to New York later that year. His financial situation was quite difficult though, and his health faded steadily, with a diagnosis of Leukemia in 1944. He wrote the *Concerto for Orchestra* in 1943 on a commission from Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony and completed the Third Piano Concerto just before his death in September 1945.

Bartók's Piano Quintet in C Major is rarely heard on the concert stage. It is a very early work, composed beginning in 1902 just after he graduated from the Budapest Academy of Music. His influences at this point ranged from Brahms and Dvořák to Richard Strauss and his countryman Franz Liszt, and an avid fan of Bartók's later works would be hard pressed to identify the composer of his string quartets and other more well-known chamber music. Bartók himself performed the virtuoso piano part at the premiere and subsequent performances, which were well-received by audiences and many critics. In a letter to his Academy piano teacher István Thomán he wrote: "The difficulty of my quintet gravely jeopardized the accomplishment of its first performance—but after all it still somehow came through. The audience liked it to the extent of three recalls."

He revised the work in 1920 but was unsatisfied and withdrew it before it could be published, and it was thought that he destroyed the manuscript. It was found by Bartók scholar Denijs Dille in 1963, however, and in *The New York Times* review of a 1973 performance by the Juilliard Quartet and Beveridge Webster, Harold Schonberg wrote:

> And so the Piano Quintet is a derivative and eclectic work. But it is no less enjoyable for that. It is full of spirit, lovely tunes and rich sonorities. If it does not represent what the mature Bartók was to do – well, the same can be said of Stravinsky's E-flat Symphony and, for that matter, Beethoven's First String Quartet.

\- Gabriel Rice

Puts biography and notes courtesy of the composer, edited by Gabriel Rice

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