

# Program Notes: Paris

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

## CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

(Born October 9, 1835, Paris; died December 16, 1921, Algiers, Algeria)

### Piano Trio no. 1 in F Major, op. 18

**Composed:** 1864

**Published:** 1867

**Other works from this period:** Suite in d minor for Cello and Piano, op. 16 (1862); *Introduction et rondo capriccioso* in a minor for Solo Violin and Orchestra, op. 28 (1863); Orchestral Suite in D Major, op. 49 (1863); Romance in B-flat Major for Piano, Organ, and Violin, op. 27 (1866); Piano **Concerto** no. 2 in g minor, op. 22 (1868)

**Approximate duration:** 26 minutes

With the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 came a marked shift in Europe's balance of power. The Second French Empire under the reign of Napoleon III collapsed. The war brought about a newly unified Germany, which would claim the French territory of Alsace-Lorraine until the end of the First World War. This course of events inspired deep nationalist sentiments throughout France—a spirit that would be reflected as much in the country's musical activity as in other cultural spheres. In 1871, one year after France's military defeat, composers Romain Bussine and Camille Saint-Saëns formed the Société Nationale de Musique; three years later, the French conductor and violinist Édouard Colonne founded the Concerts de l'Association Artistique. For several decades leading to this point, lyric opera had dominated France's musical life; now, these fledgling organizations spurred a flurry of instrumental composition, laying the foundation for a strong tradition of French chamber music towards the turn of the twentieth century. This charge was led by some of France's most prominent composers, including Saint-Saëns, Ernest Chausson, César Franck, and others.

Saint-Saëns was one of his country's most highly regarded musical figures over the latter half of the nineteenth century. A child prodigy who attracted considerable attention in his youth, he continued to be regarded in his maturity as an excellent technician in all parts of his craft. In addition to being a prolific composer in every prevalent genre of French music during his time, he was also a gifted pianist and organist and was often compared during his lifetime to Mozart.

By the time of the Société Nationale de Musique's founding, Saint-Saëns had already produced a respectable corpus of solo and chamber instrumental music. One of the finest among these is the Piano Trio no. 1 in F Major, op. 18, composed in 1864 and published three years later. Though the piano-trio literature was a rich one indeed, spanning works by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, et al., Saint-Saëns had virtually no French models in the genre. While the **Opus** 18 Trio might betray the influence of Mendelssohn's two piano trios, the work more so reveals Saint-Saëns to possess a distinct—and distinctly French—voice. The trio, composed in Saint-Saëns's thirtieth year, attests to French music historian Henry Prunières's appraisal of the composer: "His style, precise, nervous, and clear-cut, is absolutely characteristic and also essentially French; it recalls that of eighteenth-century French writers, particularly of Voltaire—nothing is superfluous, everything has its place. Order and clarity are supreme."

Following a four-measure curtain-raiser, the **Allegro vivace** presents the **theme** that flows through much of the **movement**: a jaunty ascending figure, answered by gleeful **staccato** eighth notes. This theme, offered in turn by cello, violin, and piano, illustrates the

very delicacy and lightness of touch that, over subsequent generations, would become so strongly associated with French music. Its effervescent air lends credence to early biographers' suggestions that the trio was inspired by a holiday in the Pyrenees. The movement is dominated by the central theme and remains brisk and sunlit throughout.

The piano presents a double-dotted rhythmic **ostinato** in pallid **octaves** to begin the **Andante** second movement. The violin accompanies this solemn, folk-like tune with an eerie octave drone, redolent of the *clavecin-vielle*, a type of **hurdy-gurdy** common in the French mountain regions.

Saint-Saëns steadily elevates these rustic strains to chamber music of the utmost elegance, as when refashioning the double-dotted *vielle* tune into a rhapsodic melody, floating atop an undulating piano accompaniment.

A winsome **scherzo** follows. A playful repartee between string **pizzicati** and offbeat piano chords turns into a blithe gallop that propels the movement forward. The trio concludes with a cheerful **Allegro** finale. It begins in an unassuming fashion: violin and cello trade plain, two-note utterances, accompanied by gently rippling sixteenth-note figurations in the piano. But this music quickly escalates to a more vigorous ado, accented by an occasional melodic zoom, like a car speeding by.

Saint-Saëns soon displays a cunning sleight of melodic invention. What had previously seemed to be ornamental filigree—the piano's opening sixteenth notes—is revealed to be the movement's primary theme. The music quiets to a **pianissimo** and the melody emerges, unadulterated, in a prayerful whisper. The speeding car persists, but now in hushed tones.

\*Bolded terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 94.

The piano reverts to rippling sixteenth notes, with the strings now clarifying the previously concealed melody. The clarity and brilliance of this music, representative of Saint-Saëns at his finest, sustain the finale to its radiant conclusion.

## FRANCIS POULENC

(Born January 7, 1899, Paris; died January 30, 1963, Paris)

### Sextet for Wind Quintet and Piano, op. 100

**Composed:** 1932–1939

**Published:** 1945

**First performance:** December 1940, Paris

**Dedication:** Georges Salles

**Other works from this period:** *Caprice* for Solo Piano, op. 60 (1932); Concerto in d minor for Two Pianos and Orchestra, op. 61 (1932); *Pierrot* for Voice and Piano, op. 66 (1933); *Suite française* for Solo Piano, op. 80 (1935); Organ Concerto in g minor, op. 93 (1938)

**Approximate duration:** 18 minutes

From the onset of the First World War into the 1920s, Paris was, more than ever before, an international hotbed of cultural activity. Gertrude Stein's salon frequently hosted fellow American expatriates Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and Thornton Wilder. Picasso kept a home in Montparnasse, where he fraternized with the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, among others. Composers from across Europe and the United States, including Prokofiev, Arthur Bliss, and Aaron Copland, likewise flocked to Paris.

Wagner's influence steadily evaporated and gave way to a wild new potpourri of musical styles. In 1920, France became the adoptive home of the thirty-eight-year-old Igor Stravinsky, whose *Rite of Spring* had set Paris on fire seven years earlier; Stravinsky's newly cultivated **neoclassical** style became a great influence on a group of rising young composers known as *Les Six*: Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Germaine Tailleferre. These six initially came together in 1917 in support of the composer Erik Satie, who had come under fire for his ballet *Parade*. Based on a book by Jean Cocteau and featuring cubist décor designed by Picasso, *Parade* was an exceedingly modern production for its time and scandalized Paris. The iconoclastic Satie mentored *Les Six* as the young firebrand composers steadily conquered Parisian musical society. Although Satie remained the subject of much public indignation among French audiences, his protégés would become modernist darlings of 1920s Paris.

*Les Six* sought to cultivate a music that was distinctly their own, a musical perspective unique to France, which moreover captured the vitality of their time. "We were tired of Debussy, of Florent Schmitt,

of Ravel," Poulenc noted. "I wanted music to be clear, healthy, and robust—music as frankly French in spirit as Stravinsky's *Pétrouchka* is Russian." Poulenc's musical ideal was one that integrated the élan of jazz, cabaret, and other popular styles into the Western classical tradition. His lighthearted sextet testifies to this ideal and remains one of the composer's most popular works.

The sextet's instrumentation—a standard wind quintet of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and horn plus piano—gives perfect voice to Poulenc's compositional language. The ensemble affords the vivacity and variety of color necessary to allow Poulenc's sharp and, at times, biting humor to come through. His deployment of wind instruments in the *Allegro vivace* presents a Technicolor palette of timbres to match Poulenc's impish melodic and **harmonic** language. This ebullient opening movement betrays as much a debt to vaudeville or even circus music as to Stravinsky's neoclassical style, in its textural clarity and melodic immediacy. Each voice excitedly emerges to the fore and then, just as quickly, recedes to background, as in a game of Whac-a-Mole.

Poulenc was moreover his generation's leading composer of *mélodie* (a Romantic French song), and throughout the sextet, the winds issue **cantabile** lines in pseudo-vocal expressive fashion. A thoughtful bassoon monologue leads to a slow middle section, featuring noirish solo lines supported by a pulsating piano accompaniment, before a reprise of the mischievous opening music.

A honeyed oboe melody, *très doux et expressif*, begins the sextet's second movement, a *divertissement* rife with piquant **chromaticism**. As in the preceding movement, each voice soon comes to the fore for its melodic turn, whether in solo passages or various duo combinations. This vaguely sultry music gives way abruptly to music of almost inane glee, but the movement returns to its earlier material to close on a more contemplative note. Despite the piece's overall lightness in character and, in particular, its middle movement's designation as a *divertissement*, this music nevertheless lends the work a certain gravity. It attests to Poulenc's appraisal of the music of France: "You will find sobriety and dolor in French music just as in German and Russian. But the French have a keener sense of proportion. We realize that somberness and good humor are not mutually exclusive. Our composers, too, write profound music, but when they do, it is leavened with that lightness of spirit without which life would be unendurable." Witness, too, the sextet's high-spirited **Prestissimo** finale, whose good humor is tempered by an introspective **coda**.

The work bears a dedication to the French art historian Georges Salles.

## JEAN FRANÇAIX

(Born May 23, 1912, Le Mans, France; died September 25, 1997, Paris)

### String Trio

**Composed:** 1933

**Published:** 1935

**Dedication:** "A Messieurs Étienne, Pierre et Jean Pasquier"

**Other works from this period:** Eight *Bagatelles* for Piano Quintet (1932); Quartet for Flute, Clarinet, Oboe, and Bassoon (1933); *Sonatine* for Violin and Piano (1934); String Quartet (1934); Suite for Violin and Orchestra (1934)

**Approximate duration:** 13 minutes

The composer and pianist Jean Françaix produced an oeuvre, comprising more than two hundred works across genres, as characteristically French as his name. Françaix's neoclassical language betrays the influence of his compatriots in *Les Six* and, by extension, their guiding light, Stravinsky. In his personal pantheon of musical idols were Mozart, Schubert, Chopin, and, shoulder to shoulder with these,

Emmanuel Chabrier and Francis Poulenc. Françaix made numerous orchestral transcriptions of these composers' music, including, most famously, Poulenc's *L'histoire de Babar*, arranged at Poulenc's request.

The melodic and textural clarity that characterizes these composers' music would likewise distinguish Françaix's. Add to this a sense of irony, most apparent in his theatrical works but which permeates his instrumental chamber music, as well. Françaix's String Trio, composed when he was only twenty-one, nevertheless reflects an assuredness of style and illustrates these hallmarks of his musical language.

The opening *Allegretto vivo*, played ***con sordino*** (with mutes) throughout, features brisk, skittish, staccato sixteenth notes, underpinned by cello pizzicati. Snatches of suave melody briefly emerge, only to quickly cede the floor back to the fleet staccato figures. Clipped staccati and piquant pizzicati continue into the scherzo, giving the movement a similar impish energy to the *Allegretto*—but now *senza sordino* (without mutes). The full-throated color becomes especially salient in the unapologetically boorish ***trio*** section. Mutes are replaced for the debonair *Andante*. Cantabile melody carries the movement, first in the violin and then taken up in turn by the cello and viola, supported by a crooning accompaniment. The rambunctious energy of the *Allegretto* and scherzo returns for the work's rondo finale.

## CÉSAR FRANCK

(Born December 10, 1822, Liège, Belgium; died November 8, 1890, Paris)

### Piano Quintet in f minor

**Composed:** 1879

**Published:** 1881

**First performance:** January 17, 1880, Société Nationale

**Other works from this period:** *Les Éolides* (**symphonic poem**)

(1875–1876); Three Pieces for Organ (1878); *Le vase brisé* for Voice and Piano (1879); *Le Chasseur maudit* (**symphonic poem**) (1882); Violin Sonata in A Major (1886)

**Approximate duration:** 35 minutes

César Franck represents an important dimension of France's musical climate in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In addition to his role in the renewal of French instrumental composition, Franck was one of his generation's great musical pedagogues, cherished by his students at the Paris Conservatoire as a father figure. Franck taught organ at the Conservatoire, but owing to his greater emphasis on **counterpoint** and improvisation than on keyboard technique, he was widely regarded as the academy's premier composition professor.

Franck guided a generation of French composers wrestling with the influence of Richard Wagner on Europe's musical landscape. Wagner's revolutionary philosophies on art and music in the late nineteenth century seduced many young composers, who strove to emulate his stylistic innovations; others developed a strong ambivalence towards Wagner and regarded him as a symbol of the prevailing German aesthetic—a backdrop against which to define their own language.

Franck's fascination with Wagner is evident in his *au courant* approach to harmony and form. But rather than reverently mimic Wagner, Franck absorbed that influence and integrated it with the fundamental values of the **Classical** era to ultimately serve his own musical vision. John Trevitt and Joël-Marie Faquet have noted in Franck's late chamber works "a balance between his inherent emotionalism and his preoccupation with counterpoint and Classical forms...[a] double allegiance to the Viennese tradition on the one hand, and to Liszt and Wagner on the other." The result of this duality is a compelling and individual voice that pointed French music towards the twentieth century.

Franck's Piano Quintet in f minor, completed in 1879, impresses with its sheer, intense, expressive passion. The work's overwhelming pathos has even offended some: following the quintet's premiere in 1880, with Franck's close friend Camille Saint-Saëns at the piano, Franck joined Saint-Saëns onstage and presented the piece's original manuscript to him as a token of his gratitude. Saint-Saëns, to whom Franck had dedicated the quintet, expressed his displeasure with the work by refusing the manuscript and walking offstage. Another listener whose favor the Piano Quintet failed to win was Franck's wife, who suspected that its visceral power could have only been inspired by amorous feelings for another woman.

Despite Saint-Saëns's reservations, the Piano Quintet is an expertly wrought work. It is cast in cyclic form, a compositional device particularly associated with Franck, in which thematic material from one movement resurfaces in later movements. This technique serves to unify the separate movements of a piece into an organic whole; the disparate contexts in which one musical idea appears moreover infuse it with multiple layers of meaning. Cyclic form is closely related to Wagner's use of **leitmotifs** and Liszt's principle of thematic transformation; the way in which Franck uses cyclic form also evokes Beethoven's penchant for dramatically recalling earlier themes at climactic points in his music.

The quintet opens with a powerful declamation in the strings; the piano answers with a thoughtful, lilting soliloquy. This dialogue launches the movement's slow introduction, in turns tender and ardent. The temperature rises considerably as the introduction yields to the main *Allegro* section. Within the *Allegro*, Franck transfigures the piano's earlier soliloquy into the movement's second theme.

The French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger surmised that Franck's Piano Quintet contained more instances of the extreme dynamic markings *pianississimo* and *fortississimo*—very, very soft and very, very loud—than any other work in the chamber literature. Indeed, the atmosphere remains relentlessly feverish throughout this first movement. Franck's thick chromatic harmonies further fuel the music's anxious energy.

Though markedly less extroverted, the second movement, marked ***Lento, con molto sentimento***, loses nothing of the first movement's ardor. Amidst the movement's melancholic sighs, the lilting piano soliloquy from the first movement reappears.

Following a quietly frenzied introduction, the finale's impassioned first theme sweeps in above a diabolical **triplet** accompaniment in the piano. The understated second theme recalls the melancholy of the slow movement. Franck develops each of these themes throughout this dramatic **sonata-form** finale, restlessly expanding its emotive breadth. Before the work's fiery conclusion, Franck looks wistfully back once more to the quintet's cyclical theme: the first violin part—marked *pianississimo, dolcissimo, molto espressivo*—longingly reprises the first movement's piano soliloquy.