

Nevada Chamber Music Festival 2024

"Piano Salon"

Sunday, December 29, 2024, 2:00 p.m.

Program notes by Chris Morrison

Reynaldo Hahn: *Variations chantantes sur un air ancien*
(1905, 4 minutes)

Born in Caracas, Venezuela, Reynaldo Hahn went to Paris as a child, and later studied at the Paris Conservatoire under Jules Massenet. Hahn's fame gradually grew as a composer, singer, and pianist in the salons of France's Belle Époque (he was also the lover of famed novelist Marcel Proust for a time). Toward the end of his life, after years as a composer, teacher, and music critic, he became the director of the Paris Opéra. As a composer he was largely known for his light-hearted operettas and his songs, although he also composed ballets, chamber music, and piano pieces.

In his *Variations chantantes sur un air ancien* (Singing variations on an ancient air), Hahn uses as his main theme the lovely, slightly sentimental aria "Beato chi può" (Blessed is he) from the 1655 opera *Xerxes* by Italian composer Francesco Cavalli. The variations, which decorate the main melody in a variety of ways, also focus on two significant parts of the melody, a sighing two-note motive and an ascending four-note phrase.

François Couperin: *Les Barricades mystérieuses*
(1717, 3 minutes)

François Couperin was part of a very well-known musical family – he is often referred to as Couperin le Grand (Couperin the Great) to distinguish him from other family members. He received his early musical training from his father, an organist in one of Paris's churches. After serving as an organist himself, Couperin became part of the court of Louis XIV. During his years in the court, he composed considerable chamber and keyboard music for the court as well as music for public consumption.

Among those latter works were four volumes of harpsichord music published from the early 1710s through 1730 and encompassing some 230 short pieces. Many of these have rather fanciful titles, including *Les Barricades mystérieuses*, or *The Mysterious Barricades*, taken from Couperin's second book of harpsichord pieces published in 1717. No one knows what the title may mean; suggestions have ranged from a reference to the stomping of the grapes in wine-making (the word barricade was back then used for the barrels in which wine was stored) to the flutter of women's eyelashes. The piece, one of Couperin's most famous, has been employed in numerous films and television shows, including Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette* and Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. Claude Debussy was also an admirer of the piece, once writing of its "subtly voluptuous perfume, so delicately perverse."

Emmanuel Chabrier: *Dix pièces pittoresques*, No 6: *Idylle*
(1880, 4 minutes)

Emmanuel Chabrier began taking music lessons at the age of six, and composed his first piano pieces at eight. But his parents were set on their son becoming a lawyer, and he duly attended law school while also continuing his musical studies. He served in the French civil service for some nineteen years while devoting his free time to music. Eventually he became a full-time composer, and was finally able to write larger-scale works, including operas. A cultured individual, he counted among his close friends writers Paul Verlaine and Émile Zola as well as painters Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas.

Chabrier composed his ten *Pièces pittoresques* during a vacation on the north coast of France. At the 1881 premiere of some of the pieces, composer César Franck remarked that he and the audience had “just heard something exceptional. This music links our own time to that of Couperin and Rameau.” It has been said that only their comparative awkwardness for the pianist has kept the *Pièces pittoresques* from becoming as popular as the piano works of Chopin or Debussy. The charming sixth piece of the set, *Idylle*, was described by the composer as an “Allegretto with freshness and naïveté,” its *pizzicato*-like accompaniment giving the music “a rather rural feeling.”

Frédéric Chopin: *Prélude* in G major, Op. 28 No. 3
(1838-39, 1 minute)

The 24 *Préludes* were published in 1839, right after Chopin had returned from a winter trip to the island of Majorca with writer George Sand, with whom he had started a relationship just months before. The pieces cover each of the major and minor keys, starting with C major and its relative minor A minor and working their way through the circle of fifths. Only one of the 24, the famous No. 15, “Raindrop,” lasts as long as five minutes, with most just a minute or two in length. Each was given an illustrative title by conductor-pianist Hans von Bülow, although the titles weren't Chopin's idea and are not uniformly used. No. 3, titled “Thou Art So Like a Flower,” features a light and cheerful main melody over a continuous, swirling bass line.

Camille Saint-Saëns: Violin Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 75
(1885, 24 minutes)

The first of Saint-Saëns's two sonatas for violin and piano was written for and dedicated to the Belgian violinist and teacher Martin-Pierre-Joseph Marsick, probably as a thank you gift after a concert tour of Switzerland with the composer. As is the case with the famous “Organ” Symphony No. 3 (written the year after this Sonata) and several other works, in the Violin Sonata No. 1 Saint-Saëns uses a four-movement structure in which the first two and second two

movements are linked. Saint-Saëns was a great Beethoven enthusiast, and it isn't hard to recognize some Beethoven-like qualities to the main melodies of this sonata.

The opening movement dispenses with a slow introduction and charges ahead with an energetic first theme, exemplifying the movement's "agitato" marking. Featuring a gentle falling violin line against piano arpeggios, the lyric second theme makes further appearances later in the sonata. This first movement takes the form of a dialogue between the two instruments, with neither dominating. Following without pause is a slow, dreamy second movement. Then comes the third, an elegant scherzo, transparently scored and in a fast waltz tempo, which leads, after several solemn chords from the piano, into a non-stop, virtuoso Finale that is considered by some as one of the most exciting movements in the violin-and-piano repertoire.

Gabriel Fauré: Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 15
(1876-79, 32 minutes)

In the early part of his career, Fauré mostly made his living as an organist. He was writing music as well, but mostly songs. Chamber music wasn't a priority for him, largely due to the lack of opportunities for performance – especially within France, where opera remained king. This changed, however, in 1871, when Camille Saint-Saëns (with the help of many others, including Fauré, Cesar Franck, and Jules Massenet) started the Société Nationale du musique (National Music Society) specifically to perform chamber works by young French composers. Saint-Saëns was a big influence on his student Fauré, introducing the younger man to a range of music by the likes of Wagner and Liszt, both of whom Fauré subsequently sought out and met.

Encouraged by the development of the Société, chamber music quickly became a priority with French composers. Fauré himself began to produce a succession of chamber music masterpieces, including the First Violin Sonata, the *Ballade* for solo piano, and the first of his two Piano Quartets, composed over the years 1876-79 and given its premiere at a National Music Society concert on February 11, 1880. The Quartet No. 1 proved to be a success, and is now generally regarded as one of the masterworks of his early composing life.

The first movement ably combines forward motion and a relaxed lyricism, with the harmonic richness familiar from later Fauré compositions. With its swirling motion and frequent string *pizzicati* (plucked notes), the second movement, a kind of *perpetuum mobile*, evokes the great eighteenth century French harpsichord masters like Rameau and the Couperins (whose music was starting to emerge from decades of obscurity during this very time). Many feel the slow third movement – at times solemn, always underlain by deep emotion – to be the highlight of the Quartet. The passion that is constantly threatening to erupt there actually does so in the final movement, which brings the Quartet to a powerful close.