

Poème



Music for the romantic violin

Miwako Abe

David McSkimming, piano

Claude Debussy
Sonata for Violin and
Piano

1 Allegro vivo 5'03"

2 Intermède 4'36"

3 Finale 4'31"

4 Jules Massenet

Meditation, from
Thaïs 5'20"

5 Maurice Ravel

Movement de
Menuet, from
Sonatine 2'48"

6 Ernest Chausson

Poème Op.25 15'38"

7 Claude Debussy

La plus que lente
4'49"

8 Claude Debussy

La fille aux cheveux
de lin 2'55"

9 Eugène Ysaÿe

Poème élégiaque Op.
12 14'33"

10 Gabriel Fauré

Morceaux de lecture
1'20"

11 Maurice Ravel

Habañera 3'24"

12 Gabriel Fauré

Berceuse Op. 16
3'21"

**13 Camille Saint-
Saëns**

Introduction and
Rondo Capriccioso
Op.28 10'04



Poème
Miwako Abe
David McSkimming, piano

move
digital

"Brilliant ...
captivating ...
of formidable
dimension"

**The Sydney
Morning Herald**

"She is not only
an outstanding
violinist, but above
all Miwako Abe
possesses a rare
inner gift of the
flame for the music,
and this makes her
playing so warm
and living."

Sandor Végh

"A spirited
performance ...
to mark her out as
someone worth
watching ..."

The Times, London

© 2000 MOVE RECORDS

move.com.au

Great minds think alike," so we are told, and the seven great musical minds featured on this recording certainly did. Of course, their individual talents are without question, but at a time when changes were afoot in the musical world moving into the 20th century, they often inspired each other. Some taught; some developed a discreet rivalry; each adapted differently. Some were in the twilight of their careers as composers, set in their ways, struggling to find the spirit of earlier days.

All but one made it into the 20th century. Cut down in his prime Ernest Chausson died, aged 44, a bicycling accident in 1899 ending a period of more than twenty years during which all seven composers were alive and making their mark.

This recital is devoted to some of their romantic music. Debussy, Ysaÿe, Ravel, Fauré, Chausson, Saint-Saëns, and Massenet all knew the true spirit of the violin, an instrument whose capabilities are thoroughly etched with the poetic essence of them all.

1–3 Claude Debussy (1862-1918) **Sonata for Violin and Piano**

From December 1915 Claude Debussy was a sick man and in spite of operations and radium treatment he was in constant pain and growing ever weaker. Much of 1916 passed without his writing a single note of music.

"Since Claude Debussy is no longer writing music, he has no excuse for being alive," he wrote on 8 June 1916. "I have no hobbies. I was never taught anything but music ... Things are endurable only on condition that I can compose a great deal; but to keep tapping a brain that sounds hollow is an unpleasant business."

On 3 July he informed his publisher that he intended to work in spite of everything. "I cannot say that I feel any better, but I have made up my mind to ignore being the slave of this over-tyrannical disease. We shall soon see. If I am doomed to disappear soon, I wish to have at least tried to do my duty."

The *Sonata for Violin and Piano* is the most viable of Debussy's three late-career sonatas. The others were for cello and piano, and for flute, viola, and harp, both composed in 1915. The present work is also the one which most closely approaches the orthodox sonata form. Its three movements are marked 'Allegro vivo', 'Intermède (fantasque et léger)', and 'Finale'.

Debussy wrote on 17 October 1916, "I found the germ idea of the last movement ... Unfortunately, the first and second movements are holding back." By February 1917 both these movements were finished. The third was emerging with difficulty, and he wrote that he was attempting to render "the ploy of a theme turning back on itself, like a serpent biting its own tail."

A month later he was still engaged on the revision of this work but thought he could promise to let his publisher hear the first informal performance of it on 26 March. He was, however, delayed by his usual artistic scruples. Two redundant bars in the last movement spoiled the whole structure, and he was not able to repair the damage until a few days later. The manuscript, which is preserved in the Paris Conservatoire library, contains the first line of the rejected finale.

Debussy had the courage to play the piano part himself, with the violinist Gaston Poulet at the Salle Gaveau on 5 May 1917. This first performance of the *Sonata* was his farewell to the Paris public.

4 Jules Massenet (1842-1912) **Meditation, from Thaïs**

The haunting *Meditation* from *Thaïs* (1894) serves in the opera as an entr'acte. Athanael, the Cenobitic monk, has confronted Thaïs, the courtesan, condemning her corruption and promising to lead her to a holier life. As he sits on the steps of Thaïs's palace, waiting for her to join him, the *Meditation* is heard, symbolizing, as it were, Thaïs's farewell to a life of voluptuousness and her discovery of a new religion.

5 Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) **Movement de Menuet, from Sonatine**

The *Sonatine* dates from 1905 and could be described as a typically Ravelian piece of pastiche, exquisitely wrought and impregnated with nostalgia, but with an added piquancy due to the skilful infusion of new harmonies.

In *Sonatine*, with its three well-contrasted movements, Ravel assumes again the mantle of classicism. It has something of the chiselled perfection and non-chalant grace of the *String Quartet*, with the addition of a faintly archaic flavour.

6 Ernest Chausson (1855-1899) **Poème Op.25**

Chausson's reputation rests chiefly on a few orchestral works.

He had planned to write a work for violin and orchestra ever since hearing his close friend, the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, give the first performance of his (Chausson's) *Concerto for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet* in 1892. But by 1893 he had abandoned the idea of composing a full-blown violin concerto and had turned his thought instead to a single piece for violin and orchestra. "It would be very free in form, with lots of passages where the violin could play alone," he suggested. However, it was only after Ysaÿe had written his *Poème élégiaque* that Chausson

began to see more clearly the shape his own work could take. His *Poème* was completed in June 1896 and was dedicated to Ysaÿe, who gave the first performance in December of that year.

Debussy wrote: "The *Poème* contains Chausson's best qualities. The freedom of its form never hinders harmonious proportion. Nothing touches more with dreamy sweetness than the end of this *Poème*, where the music, leaving aside all description and anecdote, becomes the very feeling which inspired the emotion."

7 Claude Debussy **La plus que lente**

In his mature years Debussy rarely produced single piano pieces, as opposed to collections, unless there was a special reason. One such was the centenary of the death of Haydn in 1909, for which the Société Internationale de Musique commissioned musical homages from composers including Ravel, Ducas, d'Indy, and Debussy.

At that time the *valse lente* (slow waltz) was a popular Parisian salon style and Debussy revelled in the style for his tribute. It was probably this brief flirtation with the *valse lente* that inspired a year later the capriciously titled *La plus que lente* (the more-than-slow), in which for once he gave free rein to sentiment. For all that, however, even the piece's parodies are impeccably done.

8 Claude Debussy **La fille aux cheveux de lin**

In the eighth of his 24 *Préludes*, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The girl with the flaxen hair), Debussy, who idolized Chopin, hauntingly evokes the young Scottish girl in Leconte de Lisle's *Chanson écossaise*. The idiom is one of simple lyricism and recalls that of the earlier period of the *Clair de lune* or the *Suite bergamasque*.

9 Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931) **Poème élégiaque Op. 12**

From 1883 to 1886 Eugène Ysaÿe lived in Paris, where he formed lasting friendships with Franck, Chausson, Fauré, and Debussy, and became an eloquent interpreter of their works.

While still a student Ysaÿe began to compose for his own instrument, the violin, but he soon decided that virtuosity for its own sake did not interest him, and his most original and characteristic works are the poems for violin and orchestra and the sonatas for solo violin.

The symphonic poems of Liszt were the main influence on Ysaÿe's works for violin and orchestra; he was particularly attracted by the flexibility of this genre and its expressive potential. Although most of the works have colourful titles, Ysaÿe's intention was not so much to produce programme music as to create a suitable vehicle for his improvisatory style

of playing; often the titles were invented only after the music had been completed.

The best known of these poems is the first, the *Poème élégiaque* (1895). The mood is sombre throughout, with the music's dark sonorities accentuated by the re-tuning of the violin's G string down to F. The middle section, subtitled 'Scène funèbre', was performed at Ysaÿe's own funeral in Brussels in May 1931.

10 Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) **Morceaux de lecture**

The *Morceaux de lecture* was written for the Concours du Conservatoire on 24 July 1903. Written in the key of A, the work has no opus number. It is one of several small chamber works of Fauré's middle period, between 1897 and 1904, of which only the violin piece was published. It has been well said that "Fauré's work is a work of transition; he is a musician of the 19th century, but also a classic of the 20th century."

11 Maurice Ravel **Habañera**

Already at the age of twenty, Ravel, who was one of Fauré's students, had composed the famous *Habañera*, which not only contains the essence of his whole musical personality, but is a striking example of his extraordinary technical accomplishment at an age when most

students are still only feeling their way. Writing of this work in later life, the composer himself said: "I consider that this work contains in embryo several of the elements that were to be most characteristic of my later compositions."

The *Habañera* was Ravel's first published work and represents the old order giving way to the new: archaism mingled with modern dissonances-major ninths and seventh-in a classic framework. It was orchestrated in 1929.

12 Gabriel Fauré **Berceuse Op. 16**

The principal qualities of Fauré's music are its delicacy and refinement, purity of expression, and poetic style. As one commentator puts it: "Fauré reigns supreme over a world of sound where everything is beautiful, rich, peaceful, and pleasurable. With very simple means he is able to rise to the highest summits of nobility and grandeur."

The graceful *Berceuse* is perhaps Fauré's most transcribed piece, written in 1878-9 and first performed in 1880 by Ovide Musin and Fauré at the same concert as the *Piano Quartet*. Debussy composed an orchestral version in 1898.

13 Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) **Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso Op.28**

Saint-Saëns composed the dazzling *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso Op.28* in 1863 for the violin virtuoso Pablo Sarasate. It was among the items played at the composer's "last" public concert in 1913, although, like many a prima donna, Saint-Saëns was reluctant to retire for good and repeatedly appeared again on concert platforms well into his eighties.

The *Introduction*, designed in nicely judged spans of melody, leads to a *Rondo* which, vivacious with staccatos, trills, and glittering arpeggios, has an Italianate flavour that recalls the finale of the second concerto of a few years previously. While the violin part shines with virtuosity, the accompaniment has a discreet finesse and elegance.

This work soon established itself in the repertoire, spawning several transcribed versions: Debussy wrote a four-handed version for two pianos and Bizet a violin-piano arrangement.

Miwako Abe

A graduate of Tokyo's Toho Gakuen School of Music, Miwako Abe became a prize-winning graduate of the Guildhall School of Music in London whence the award of the prestigious Boise Foundation Scholarship took her to the Salzburg Mozarteum. Here she studied with celebrated violinist-conductor Sandor Végh and became his assistant. Her London debut recital at the Wigmore Hall received high praise from critics in *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*.

Miwako Abe has frequently performed as soloist and in chamber music ensembles, steadily enhancing her reputation across four continents as an exceptionally gifted artist. She has performed in England, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Poland, the Czech Republic, Israel, Turkey, Japan, Taiwan, India, and New Zealand. Since coming to Australia to join the staff of the Canberra School of Music, Australian National University, Miwako Abe has performed with major orchestras and ensembles as well as on ABC radio and overseas networks. She has worked live on air, in recordings, and in recitals with many distinguished associate artists.

An inspiring and highly successful teacher, currently Miwako Abe is Head of the String Department in the School of Music at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.



David McSkimming

David McSkimming is one of Australia's finest accompanists. He has given recitals with many of the country's most distinguished musicians, and in October 1998, as part of the Melbourne festival, David McSkimming was the associate artist in recitals with the renowned Korean soprano Sumi Jo and American tenor Gary Lakes.

Since graduating with a Masters degree in Piano Performance, he has appeared on many occasions with the Melbourne and Adelaide Symphony Orchestras, both as solo and orchestral pianist.

David McSkimming was a member of the State Opera of South Australia from 1976-1989, after which he worked with the Victoria State Opera until joining Opera Australia in 1997. He is Associate Artist at the Australian National Academy of Music.

David McSkimming's recording with Rosamund Illing, "Songs of Duparc and Poulenc", received widespread acclaim both in Australia and internationally and was voted "Australian Classical Vocal CD of the Year" in 1997.

Producer: Ralph Lane

Notes: Jeremy Vincent

Photograph: Irene Newton-John

Engineers: Martin Wright/Vaughan McAlley