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## **Program Notes**

Our season is titled “Once Upon a Time”—exploring the power of music to tell a great story—and this program titled “Lovers and Dreamers” begins with a piece about storytelling. The Hungarian folk hero Hány János was a soldier, a lover, and a fanciful teller of tales—who came to believe his own stories! In his *Hány János Suite*, Kodály presents a colorful series of illustrations of János’ tales. After intermission, violinist Rachel Barton Pine—whom one reviewer called “...the real thing, a prodigious talent with obvious personality and a clear-eyed vision”—joins us for two very different French Romantic works. Chausson’s *Poème* shows the violin’s lyrical side, spinning out a series of gorgeous melodies—one of which may be an evocation of an exotic melody that figures prominently in a passionate short story of the day. The *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* by Saint-Saëns certainly has its dreamy moments, but the focus here is on astonishing virtuoso fireworks.

### **Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967)** **Suite from the opera *Hány János***

*Kodály's opera Hány János was composed in 1925-26, and was first performed in Budapest on October 16, 1926. The Suite heard here was premiered in New York City, on December 15, 1927. Duration 25:00.*

The mythical Hány János (literally “John Henry” —probably a version of the Hungarian folk character “Strong John”) was a soldier and a habitual spinner of tall tales, who first appeared in an early 19th-century novel by Johann Garay. He is part of the grand tradition of great liars that show up in the folklore of many countries: like Baron Munchhausen in Germany or Mike Fink in frontier America. Kodály's opera dramatizes a series of János’ implausible whoppers, culminating in his singlehanded defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte's army. Kodály's treatment of Hány János is humorous but sympathetic— János is not a simple liar, but a romantic dreamer who believes his own farfetched imaginings.

Kodály orchestrated his *Hány János Suite* within a few months of the opera's premiere. Like most of Kodály's music, it is based upon the distinctive sound of Hungarian folk music. As young men, Kodály and his close friend Béla Bartók spent a great deal of time travelling through rural Hungary, collecting folk songs and dance music with the aid of primitive sound recording equipment. Both men absorbed this style into their own compositions. Part of the distinctively Hungarian sound of *Hány János* is the cimbalom, a Hungarian folk instrument (a large dulcimer). The work presents unique challenges for nearly every section of the orchestra.

The *Háry János Suite* presents six episodes from the opera. The first movement, titled *Prelude: The Tale Begins* opens with what can best be described as an orchestral “sneeze”—according to Hungarian superstition, any statement made following a sneeze can be regarded as the Gospel Truth! The music for this movement has János sitting down before a group of faithful listeners in his home town of Abony Magna, to begin the story of how he once had to subdue Napoleon. After the opening “sneeze,” the music moves gradually towards a high point, and closes rather quietly as János whispers to bring his listeners closer.

The second movement, *Viennese Musical Clock*, describes the fabulous clock at the Imperial palace of Schönbrunn. At this point in the story, János and his sweetheart Orsze are in Vienna with Marie Louise, daughter of the Austrian Emperor, and wife of Napoleon. In passing through Abony Magna, Marie Louise had seen János and had—of course—fallen hopelessly in love with him. Marie Louise begged him to accompany her to Vienna, and János agreed—on condition that he could bring Orsze along! The music for this movement is perfectly descriptive: a clock with marching mechanical soldiers and elaborate chimes to mark the hour.

In the third movement, *Song*, Kodály has Háry János and Orsze pining away for their homeland, and singing a sentimental song about the little cottage they will build when they return. Here, Kodály uses an authentic Hungarian folk tune, *On this side the Tisza, beyond is the Danube*, as the main theme. This lovely theme is sung by a series of solo instruments, beginning with the cello. The cimbalom plays a prominent role in the more agitated middle section of this movement.

*Battle and Defeat of Napoleon* is the outrageous climax of Háry János’ tale. Napoleon has heard of his wife’s love for Háry, flies into a jealous rage, and sends an invading army to Austria. János defeats battalion after battalion of French soldiers, and eventually forces Napoleon to fall to his knees and beg for mercy. The music is dominated by brass and percussion, and includes a lugubrious duet for bass trombone and tuba. Napoleon is personified by the solo saxophone, and we hear him ordering his troops into battle, and eventually pleading with János.

The *Intermezzo* reflects the joyful mood after János’ amazing victory. The opening theme uses the old Hungarian *verbunkos*, a courtship dance. This section once again showcases the cimbalom. Kodály also uses folk material in the lyrical middle section of this movement: the solo horn introduces an 18th century dance tune.

The final movement, *Entrance of the Emperor and his Court*, brings his tale to a close. Here Háry János describes how the Austrian Emperor and his entire court come to pay their respects and to thank him for turning back the French invasion. This is set as an energetic march, as the courtiers and ladies make their grand entrance. Finally, with a brass fanfare, the Emperor himself enters to give Háry János a richly-deserved reward.

**Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)**

## Poème for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 25

*Poème* was composed in 1896, and was performed in public for the first time on April 4, 1897, as part of the *Colonne Concert* series in Paris. The dedicatee and first soloist was Eugène Ysaÿe. Duration 16:00.

Ernest Chausson did not start off to be a musician, but began a career in music while he was in his 20s. Chausson was destined for a career in law when he finally gave in to his desire to compose and entered the Paris Conservatoire to study with Jules Massenet. However, Chausson does not seem to have been attracted to grand French opera, which was the preoccupation of Massenet and most of his colleagues—eventually he gravitated towards study with César Franck, the organ teacher at the Conservatoire. Franck and his small circle of students were much more concerned with orchestral works and chamber music, media which seem to have suited the unassuming Chausson perfectly. Chausson died tragically—in a bicycle accident—just as his career as composer was taking off. His *Poème* was published shortly before his death.

*Poème* seems to have been inspired in part by a short story by Ivan Turgenev, one of Chausson's favorite writers. *Le Chant de l'amour triomphant* (*The Song of Triumphant Love*) is a love triangle: two young men, an artist and a musician, in love with same woman. When the artist wins her love, the musician leaves for a long trip in the Middle East and India, returning after several years to have dinner with his old friends. When they ask him to play, he brings out a strange Indian violin, and plays a bewitching, magical melody that reawakens old passions. Chausson originally included the title of Turgenev's story as a subtitle of his piece, though later changed his mind, and simply titled the work *Poème*. While it's unclear whether or not Chausson intended the piece to be heard as a programmatic version of the story, one of his early biographers suggested that the flowing main theme might represent the magical “melody from Ceylon” played by Turgenev's young musician.

This violin solo was written for the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, and typically for Chausson, the work focusses on expression and beautiful timbres rather than flashy virtuosity: Ysaÿe was certainly a technical virtuoso, but was more famous for his large sound and devotion to expressive playing, qualities that are foremost in *Poème*. Though Ysaÿe played the formal premiere in Paris, a concert that was warmly received, the reception to an earlier informal performance was even more enthusiastic. In the fall of 1896, Chausson, Ysaÿe, and their wives were on holiday together with friends in a home on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. Ysaÿe began a marathon recital—a kind of French Romantic jam session—accompanied by Madame Chausson at the piano, including a sightreading of *Poème*. Townspeople, including several rough local fishermen, gradually began to filter into the room. Eventually, after demanding that *Poème* be repeated three times, the fisherman showed their appreciation by parading Ysaÿe around on their shoulders!

The work is tied together by the main theme, a long-breathed idea that will reoccur several times—providing formal stability to a work that sounds spontaneous and

rhapsodic for much of its length. The orchestra picks up this theme with a simple harmonization, and then the soloist develops the melody in a passionate solo cadenza. The remainder of the piece continues freely, with new material explored and framed by references to the main idea. Near the end, the soloist reaches a melodic peak above full *forte* orchestra, a moment that marks the pinnacle of this work. After a final statement of the main theme, a long passage of descending trills brings this *Poème* to close.

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

*Saint-Saëns composed this work in 1863 for the violinist Pablo de Sarasate, who played its premiere in 1870. Duration 9:00.*

Saint-Saëns was a towering figure in French music: a prolific composer, a virtuoso pianist, longtime organist at the Madeline church in Paris, and one of France's leading music journalists. He composed in every genre—even writing one of the first true film scores (music to accompany a silent film from 1909). The *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* is tied to his long friendship and working relationship with one of the 19th century's greatest violin virtuosos, Pablo de Sarasate. They met for the first time when Sarasate was a 15-year-old child prodigy and Saint-Saëns was a 24-year-old composer/organist who already had a formidable reputation. Sarasate had been disappointed by the trivial nature of much of the virtuoso music he was called upon to play, and met with Saint-Saëns to ask for a more weighty work. In his memoir, Saint-Saëns described this first meeting: “Flattered and charmed to the highest degree, I promised I would, and kept my word with the Concerto in A Major.” This 1859 work, published as the *Violin Concerto No. 1*, was never a great success, and is only rarely heard today. But the *Concerto No. 3*, written for Sarasate in 1880 remains very much in the repertoire. Between these two concertos, Saint-Saëns composed a slightly shorter, work for his friend—the *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*—that remains his most popular solo work for violin.

Saint-Saëns uses a reduced orchestra in this work, allowing the solo part to shine throughout. The *Introduction* is marked *Andante malinconia* (meaning “melancholy”), and begins with the violin laying out a long romantic theme, but this solo part soon becomes more agitated, and a short cadenza leads into the main body of the piece. The “capriccioso” of *Rondo capriccioso* means “capricious” or “whimsical” but a better designation might have been “ferocious”—this is aggressive and increasingly virtuosic music. Saint-Saëns paid tribute to Sarasate's homeland by giving the main rondo theme a distinctly Spanish flavor, and a second main idea is equally Spanish in character. A short outburst from the orchestra and a bit of flash from the solo part lead into a contrasting episode: the theme of the introduction, elaborately decorated. The rondo theme appears again, and there is one more lyrical episode. Near the end, there is a sudden ratcheting up of the tempo, and the violin begins a fiery coda, culminating in a short cadenza and a wild conclusion.

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