

# February 1, 2026

## CONCERT

### Horn Sonata in F Major, Op. 17

#### LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1800

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Poco adagio, quasi andante
- III. Rondo. Allegro moderato

Beethoven wrote little chamber music for winds, and virtually all that he did write came before 1800. Some have felt that Beethoven wrote his chamber music for winds as a way of preparing himself to write symphonic music and thereafter lost interest in it. But that cannot be strictly true, for he composed the Sonata for French Horn and Piano two weeks after the premiere of his First Symphony. The famous Bohemian horn virtuoso Johann Wenzell Stich (who preferred to be known as Giovanni Punto) made a visit to Vienna in April 1800, and Beethoven wrote this sonata for him on that occasion. This music was written very quickly—by some accounts in just one day, by others in two days. Stich and Beethoven played the sonata at a concert in Vienna on April 18, 1800, and the performance drew such an ovation that the entire work had to be repeated. Beethoven and Stich performed the sonata a month later in Budapest and again at a benefit concert for wounded soldiers in Vienna in February 1801.

This sonata was of course written for the valveless French horn, and so it demanded great skill on the part of the horn player just to play all the notes; the invention of the valved horn (which took place about three decades later) solved many of these technical problems. This sonata has one curious detail of construction: the second movement is not really a complete movement in itself, but is merely a short bridge passage between the first and third movements. Beethoven adopted a similar structure in his cello sonatas from these years, apparently because he had reservations about the cello's ability to sustain a lyric slow movement by itself. He may have had similar reservations about the horn. As a result, this sonata consists of two fast movements separated by a very brief interlude. The outer

movements conform to the standard pattern of the classical sonata: the opening Allegro moderato, based on the brilliant opening fanfare for horn, is in sonata form, while the concluding movement is a dashing rondo.

### Piano Quartet in A Major, Op. 30

#### ERNEST CHAUSSON

Born: 1855

Died: 1899

Composed: 1897–1898

- I. Animé
- II. Très calme
- III. Simple et sans hâte
- IV. Animé

In 1897 Ernest Chausson began to compose a string quartet. A careful craftsman, he worked slowly, and after two years he had completed two movements and most of the third. That summer, Chausson and his wife took their five children to the village of Limay, about thirty miles west of Paris, and there he continued to work on the quartet. His wife took several of the children on a day-trip to Paris, and that afternoon Chausson and one of his daughters rode their bicycles to meet them at the train station. Along the way, Chausson lost control of his bicycle and—in front of his daughter—was thrown headfirst into a rock wall and killed instantly.

The grieving family was aware of Chausson's progress on the string quartet, and they asked French composer Vincent d'Indy—a friend of Chausson—to "complete" the work. There is evidence that Chausson had intended that the quartet would have four movements, but nothing of the fourth movement had been composed. Using the manuscript of the unfinished third movement and Chausson's sketches for the remainder of it, d'Indy brought the movement—and thus the quartet—to a firm conclusion. The String Quartet in C minor was premiered in Paris on January 7, 1900, and while no one can know what the rest of the quartet would have been like if Chausson had lived to finish it, d'Indy's completion has been judged a worthy effort and has been performed and recorded frequently.

Chausson had studied with Cesar Franck, who would sometimes base an entire movement on one seminal theme–shape that would then undergo continuous variations as it proceeded. We feel something of that in the first movement of Chausson’s quartet, which begins with a slow introduction marked Grave. The movement is in dark C minor, and as the upper strings provide tense accompaniment, the cello sings the long rising–and–falling theme that will return in many forms across the first movement; this is a powerful idea, and Chausson stresses that it should be played Marqué. The music moves ahead smartly at the Modéré, and Chausson does include a flowing second subject, introduced by the viola; the movement drives to a superheated climax before falling away to a quiet close. Chausson marks the second movement Très calme, and it features long melodies. But soon textures grow complex, the various melodic lines intertwine, and the music rises to an animated climax.

Working from Chausson’s unfinished manuscript, D’Indy brought the quartet to its close with the third movement, but it may have been that Chausson intended that this movement should be the quartet’s scherzo, which would then have been followed by the fourth and final movement. But d’Indy could only work with what he had, and so he made this scherzo–like movement the quartet’s finale. Chausson marked the movement Gaiement et pas trop vite (“Gay and not too fast”), and it gets off to a vigorous beginning in F minor, marching smartly on dotted rhythms along its 3/8 meter. This music is full of metric variety, and that opening meter gives way to measures in 5/8, 3/4, and 6/4 as the movement proceeds. And it was just at this point that Chausson was killed and the manuscript left unfinished. D’Indy had Chausson’s sketches for the remainder of the movement, but he had to make some compositional choices of his own, and so he decided to conclude in C Major, the tonic major of the quartet’s opening movement. No one can know how Chausson would have ended the movement (or what the finale would have been like), but d’Indy’s decision brings the quartet to a firm conclusion.

A CURIOUS NOTE: For reasons that remain unclear, Chausson incorporated two unusual quotations in his manuscript for this quartet. Near the end of the first movement, listeners will hear an unmistakable quotation of the beginning of Debussy’s String Quartet, which had been premiered only five years earlier, and at the climax of the second

movement Chausson quotes the “Tarnhelm” motif from Wagner’s Das Rheingold (Tarnhelm is the magic helmet that renders its wearer invisible). The purpose of these quotations is unknown: Debussy was Chausson’s friend, and Wagner represented a direction Chausson felt that French music should avoid. Had Chausson lived to complete the quartet, we might have learned the reason for these quotations. And we would have heard the quartet in its (perhaps) full four–movement form.

## **String Quintet No. 3 in E–flat Major, Op. 97, “American”**

### **ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK**

Born: 1841

Died: 1904

Composed: 1893

- I. Allegro non tanto
- II. Allegro vivo
- III. Larghetto
- IV. Allegro giusto

Dvořák’s three years in America—from 1892 to 1895 as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City—form a distinct chapter in his career. From these years came several of his finest scores, including the New World Symphony, the American Quartet, and the Cello Concerto. Enthusiastic Americans claimed that Dvořák had made use of American materials and that these were examples of “American music.” But Dvořák would have none of that, denouncing “that nonsense about my having made use of original American melodies. I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies.” Dvořák felt that all his music was “genuine Bohemian music,” but the American Quartet incorporates a birdcall Dvořák heard in America, the New World Symphony evokes spirituals, and the question of specifically American influences on this most Bohemian of composers remains tantalizing.

Dvořák was fascinated by America. A train buff, he would sneak away from the Conservatory to watch locomotives pounding along New York City’s many rail lines. But after his first year in busy Manhattan, he took his family to Spillville, Iowa—a Czech community—for the summer of 1893. There, surrounded by familiar food, language, and customs, the Dvořák family could escape big–city life and relax. If Dvořák had been amazed by New York City, he found different kinds of surprises on the

American prairie. Bands of Iroquois Indians came to Spillville, selling medicinal herbs, and in the evening, they gave programs of their dances and music. Those impromptu performances in the cool Iowa twilight had an immediate impact on the composer: the beat of Iroquois drums echoes through this quintet, composed that same summer.

The opening of the *Allegro non tanto* is dominated by the husky sound of the violas—in fact, the prominence of the violas gives this music its characteristically dark sonority. The main theme is delayed slightly, and when it first appears—in the first violin—it grows out of the violas' introduction; many have felt that the movement's dancing second theme echoes the sound of Indian drums. This movement, in sonata form, moves to a quiet close on a cadence derived from the main theme.

The drums of the Iroquois, however, pound relentlessly through the *Allegro vivo*. Dvořák uses one of the rhythms he heard in Iowa as the driving force in this movement: it appears immediately in the second viola and can be heard in various forms throughout the movement. The trio section, soaring and lovely, brings an interlude of calm before the opening material returns.

The *Larghetto* leaves the sound of drums far behind. It is in theme-and-variation form, and in fact Dvořák had written the movement's main theme before he left for America. The first viola announces this wistful little tune, and five variations follow. Even before the first variation begins, however, Dvořák takes the tune through a modification that makes the music sound as if it has come directly from a late Beethoven quartet; after the energy of Indian drums, such heartfelt and intense music comes as a surprise.

The concluding *Allegro giusto* is an energetic rondo that depends heavily (maybe a little too heavily) on dotted rhythms. Dvořák interrupts the busy flow with two different theme groups, both lyric and haunting. The music rushes to its close on one of the most exuberant codas Dvořák ever wrote.

Dvořák was quite correct: he was Bohemian to the core, and so was his music. But this Quintet—and the other scores he composed in America—represent a very special kind of music. It is Bohemian music, but Bohemian music flavored sharply by the sounds Dvořák heard in America.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger