

# August 1, 2025

## PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

### Fritz Kreisler's 150th Birthday Celebration

Born: 1875

Died: 1962

Fritz Kreisler may have been the most natural musician who ever lived. Following boyhood studies at the Vienna and Paris Conservatories, he had no musical instruction after age 12. And after an American tour at age 15, he put the violin aside for six years, spending that time in medical school and the army before picking up the violin again and resuming his career. Music just seemed to flow out of him: he could pull out a sonata he had not played in years, glance at it, and walk on stage to play it from memory. Audiences loved Kreisler, his gorgeous sound, and his impeccable technique, and Kreisler loved to play for them: in one year alone, he gave 260 concerts (his good friend Rachmaninoff grumbled that Kreisler gave so many concerts that he never needed to practice).

Kreisler composed several different kinds of music. There were "serious" compositions, like his String Quartet. There were the short, charming pieces for violin and piano; though sneered at as "salon music" by snobs of another age, they are some of the most enchanting and melodic pieces ever written. There are the series of quasi-baroque pieces purportedly by Pugnani, Porpora, Martini, and others that Kreisler claimed to have discovered in a monastery in southern France. For years he played these to rhapsodic acclaim before admitting in 1935 that he had written them himself—to the howls of critics who felt that they had been duped.

In his book *The Virtuosi*, Harold C. Schoenberg tells a story that captures Kreisler's spirit perfectly. Once at a benefit concert when he was performing the Kreutzer Sonata with Rachmaninoff, Kreisler became lost and desperately tried to find his way back.

"For God's sake, Sergei, where am I?" he whispered.

"In Carnegie Hall," Rachmaninoff whispered back.

Schoenberg concludes: "When Kreisler was a very old man he was told this story by a young

interviewer, who asked him if it were true. Kreisler howled with laughter. He said it was the funniest thing he had ever heard. But, he said, it was not true. First of all, he and Rachmaninoff always took over the Metropolitan Opera for their charity performances. And, second of all, 'I never lost my place in the Kreutzer,' Kreisler said, drawing himself up."

## CONCERT

### Piano Trio No. 2 in B minor, Op. 76

#### JOAQUÍN TURINA

Born: 1882

Died: 1949

Composed: 1933

- I. Lento — Allegro molto moderato
- II. Molto vivace
- III. Lento — Andante mosso — Allegretto

Trained at first in Seville and Madrid, Turina moved to Paris in 1905 at the age of 23, to study with Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum. Like so many young Spanish composers of his generation, Turina loved Paris, its richness, and the training it offered. He remained there for nine years, returning to Spain just as World War I began. Many young Spanish composers of this era devoted themselves to Spanish subjects and to creating a specifically Spanish music. Turina was very much part of this nationalist movement, as compositions such as *Sinfonia sevillana*, *La oración del torero*, and *Sanlúcar de Barrameda* make clear. But among his generation of Spanish composers, it was Turina who remained most strongly attracted to the classical forms developed by German composers: sonatas, trios, and quartets.

In Madrid, Turina conducted and composed, and in 1930 he was named Professor of Composition at the Madrid Conservatory. His Piano Trio No. 2 in B minor, Opus 76 dates from 1931, shortly after his appointment to the faculty of the Madrid Conservatory. Though Turina uses no actual folk tunes in this music, it nevertheless has a particularly "Spanish" atmosphere: the Trio is full of the rhythms and melodic shapes characteristic of Spanish music. The first movement opens with

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a quiet—and very brief—Lento introduction before the Allegro molto moderato surges to life with the exciting main theme. Turina writes a playful second subject for the violin, and this dynamic opening section gives way to a reflective central episode introduced by the cello; the opening material returns to drive the movement to the piano's powerful concluding chord. The Molto vivace, set in the 5/8 meter characteristic of some Spanish folk music, is in ABA form. The piano has the musical interest at the beginning while double-stroked muted strings race along quietly as accompaniment; at the center of this movement, the strings have a lyric duet before the opening material returns. The finale is episodic in structure: it is essentially a series of dances, and along the way there are many changes of speed and mood. The most lively and colorful of the movements, it provides a fitting conclusion to the Trio.

## **Andante religioso, Op. 78**

Composed: 1909–10

## **Allegretto ma non troppo, Op. 84**

Composed: 1909–10

## **MEL BONIS**

Born: 1858

Died: 1937

Melanie Bonis showed extraordinary musical promise as a girl—she taught herself to play the piano—but her parents discouraged any thought of a career in music. Fortunately, she was able to play for César Franck, who arranged for her admission to the Paris Conservatory. At the Conservatory, where she was a fellow student of Debussy, she studied piano (with Franck) and composition. She had great success at the Conservatory, where she was awarded prizes in both harmony and piano, but her parents forced her into an arranged marriage with a successful businessman 22 years her senior. This brought her a very comfortable lifestyle, but it also threw up hurdles: her husband did not like music, and he already had five sons. Bonis, who had three children with him, was forced to give up any thought of a musical career, and she devoted the next twenty years to her domestic responsibilities.

In 1894, at age 36, she returned to composition and quickly achieved success. After hearing one of Bonis' piano quartets, Saint-Saëns remarked: "I never thought a woman could write something such as this. She knows all the clever tricks of the composer's trade." Faced with such attitudes, Bonis adopted a shortened version of her first name (Mel), feeling that its gender neutrality would let her music be judged more fairly. She composed over 300 works, including chamber music, songs and other vocal music, works for piano, and a handful of orchestral compositions. The period of World War I was difficult for her (one of her sons was a POW, though he returned safely after the war), and she contracted debilitating arthritis. During the 1920's music headed in entirely new directions, and Bonis' music, rooted in the romantic idiom of the nineteenth century, fell out of fashion. When she died in 1937 at age 79, she had been almost entirely forgotten.

In the years 1909–10, Bonis wrote three brief pieces for violin and piano, dedicating them to friends and colleagues in Paris. These pieces were conceived as individual works, but in 2018 the French publisher Henry Lemoine brought them out under the title *Trois pièces pour violon et piano*; this recital offers the first two of those pieces. Both are gentle, and both are beautifully written for the two instruments. The first is titled *Andante religioso*. While "religioso" does not have a particular musical meaning, it often refers to dignified and heartfelt music, and that is the case here. The music is marked *Sostenuto* ("sustained"), and the graceful melody heard at the beginning rises to a restrained climax, then falls away to a quiet conclusion. The *Allegretto non troppo* is more animated, with the violin's melodic line unfolding above a steady rush of sixteenths from the piano; much of the writing here is set high in the violin's range. The subdued second theme-group maintains some of the opening atmosphere before a brief return of that opening material and another quiet close.

## Thème varié, Op. 15

### CHARLOTTE SOHY

Born: 1887

Died: 1955

Composed: 1921

Born into a wealthy and cultivated family that encouraged her musical interests, Charlotte Marie Louise Durey made the most of her opportunities. She studied piano and composition as a child and then entered the Schola Cantorum in Paris, where she studied organ with Louis Vierne and composition with Vincent d'Indy; she later studied counterpoint with Albert Roussel. She thrived in this rich atmosphere: among her friends were Mel Bonis and Nadia Boulanger. In 1909 she married the French composer Marcel Labey, with whom she had seven children. Their home in Paris became a center for artistic gatherings, and the couple was part of the thriving musical life in Paris before and after World War I.

With all these demands, her time to compose was limited: her list of published works runs to only 35 opus numbers. Among these are a symphony inspired by World War I, the lyric drama *L'esclave couronné* (for which she wrote the libretto), songs, works for keyboard, and chamber music, including four string quartets; she also wrote the libretto for her husband's lyric drama *Bérengère*. Though she was well-positioned in Parisian musical life, she was quite aware of the difficulties facing women composers: as a composer she adopted the name Sohy from her maternal grandfather and signed some of her works as Charles Sohy or Ch. Sohy; she also published under completely invented masculine names (and she published some music under her own name, too). Sohy wrote in the polished post-Romantic style fashionable at the turn of the century, a style that quickly went out of vogue after World War I. Though she lived until 1955, Sohy's music was seldom performed over the final decades of her life and is being rediscovered only now.

Sohy composed her *Thème varié* in 1921, scoring it originally for violin and piano. She also prepared a version for violin and orchestra, though it is the original version that is heard at this concert. This "varied theme," set in D minor and marked *Lento* ("Slow"), is sung by the violin at the very beginning. That theme then goes through a series of what

might be described as "organic" variations: rather than numbering the variations and developing each separately, Sohy lets her theme evolve continuously across the music's nine-minute span. Some of these episodes are fast, some are slow; Sohy changes meters frequently and takes her music through remote keys along the way. The writing for violin is graceful and lyric, though this does not prevent its turning brilliant—at one point the violin soars up to a high E, almost at the end of the instrument's fingerboard. These spirits eventually wind down, and *Thème varié*, which had begun in D minor, concludes very quietly in D Major.

## String Quintet in C Major, D. 956

### FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born: 1797

Died: 1828

Composed: 1828

- I. Allegro ma non troppo
- II. Adagio
- III. Scherzo. Presto — Trio. Andante sostenuto
- IV. Allegretto

Universally acknowledged as one of the finest creations in all chamber music, Schubert's String Quintet in C Major dates from the miraculous final year of that composer's brief life, 1828. That year saw the revision of the "Great" Symphony in C Major and the composition of the three final piano sonatas, the songs of the *Schwanengesang* collection, this quintet, and the song "Der Hirt auf Dem Felsen," completed in the weeks just prior to Schubert's death on November 19. The date of the Quintet is difficult to pin down, but it was probably composed at the end of the summer: on October 2 Schubert wrote to one of his publishers that he had "finally turned out a Quintet for 2 violins, 1 viola, and 2 violoncellos."

Some have been quick to hear premonitions of death in this quintet, as if this music—Schubert's last instrumental work—must represent a summing-up of his life. But it is dangerous to read intimations of mortality into music written shortly before any composer's death, and there is little basis for such a conclusion here—although he was ill during the summer, Schubert did not know that he was fatally ill. Rather than being death-haunted, the Quintet in C Major is music of great richness, music that suffuses a golden glow. Some of this is due to its

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unusual sonority: the additional cello brings weight to the instrumental texture and allows one cello to become a full partner in the thematic material, a freedom Schubert fully exploits. Of unusual length (over 50 minutes long), the Quintet also shows the incredible harmonic freedom of Schubert's final years—someone once commented that this music seems to change keys every two bars.

The opening Allegro ma non troppo is built on three theme groups: the quiet violin theme heard at the very beginning, an extended duet for the two cellos, and a little march figure for all five instruments. The cello duet is unbelievably beautiful, so beautiful that many musicians (certainly many cellists!) have said that they would like nothing on their tombstone except the music for this passage. But it is the march tune that dominates the development section; the recapitulation is a fairly literal repeat of the opening section, and a brief coda brings the movement to its close.

Longest of the four movements, the Adagio is in ABA form. The opening is remarkable. The three middle voices—second violin, viola, and first cello—sing a gentle melody that stretches easily over 28 bars; the second cello accompanies them with pizzicato notes, while high above the first violin decorates the melody with quiet interjections of its own. The middle section, in F minor, feels agitated and dark. A trill leads back to the opening material, but now the two outer voices accompany the melody with runs and swirls that have suddenly grown complex.

The third movement is a scherzo-and-trio, marked Presto. The bounding scherzo, with its hunting horn calls, is fairly straightforward, but the trio is quite unusual, in some surprising ways the emotional center of the entire Quintet. One normally expects a trio section to be gentle in mood, sometimes even a thematic extension of the scherzo. But this trio, marked Andante sostenuto and in the unexpected key of D-flat Major, is spare, grave, haunting. Schubert sets it in 4/4 instead of the expected 3/4, and its lean lines and harmonic surprises give it a grieving quality quite different from the scherzo—and from the rest of the Quintet. The lament concludes, and the music plunges back into sunlight as the scherzo resumes.

Many have heard Hungarian folk music in the opening of the Allegretto, with its evocation of wild Romani fiddling. The second theme is one of those graceful little tunes that only Schubert could write; both themes figure throughout the movement, until finally another cello duet leads to a fiery coda ingeniously employing both main themes.

The Quintet in C Major is one of the glories of the chamber music repertory and one of Schubert's finest works. Yet he never heard a performance of it. The Quintet may have been rehearsed at a gathering of Schubert's friends in October—the evidence is unclear—and Schubert died a few weeks later. The music then slipped from memory: it lay in manuscript for years and was not officially premiered until 1850, twenty-two years after Schubert's death.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger