

# *Concerto for violin, piano and string quartet*

## *Op.21*

The double-concerto with the quartet was written for the famous Belgium violinist Eugene Ysaÿe in 1891. Chausson started with sketches when he was still working on his previous composition, his only symphony. To his friend Chivray he wrote: '*As long as that animal is not finished and copied, I feel that I cannot be calm.*' The insecurity of Chausson shows also after the completion of his work, '*Another failure*' was his conclusion. It got premiered on 4th march 1892 by Ysaÿe with Auguste Pierret and the Crickboom quartet. Pierret substituted as a pianist after the initially planned pianist withdrew himself just before the premiere. D'Indy, who took care of the rehearsals and organization of the concert wrote to Madeleine Maus the following:

*'The affair of the pianist... is most annoying. Chausson counts absolutely on the performance, it will be the ultimate disillusion for him, he will leave for Algeria and never return. It would be a disaster if Chausson is not played that night and it would grief me deeply'*

After the great success of the performance we can see, in a letter from Chausson to Ysaÿe, the impression and influence that the violinist and performance left upon the composer:

*"I feel sure that this week spent with you will give me spirit and self-confidence. I scarcely know myself since my return from Brussels; I have never been so light-hearted and happy, and I cannot think of you all without emotion. I feel that I am going to do far better work than before, and it is to you that I shall owe this."*

Another note of the composer, that he made in his own diary about the performance is this:

*'Never have I had such a success! I can't get over it. Everyone seems to love the Concert.'*

The concerto for violin and piano with the quartet was the first work of Chausson that gave him a huge success.

Ysaÿe had asked Chausson to compose a violin concerto, as well, that resulted in the 'Poeme' op.25. Chausson wrote the following to Ysaÿe about writing a concerto:

*"I hardly know where to begin with a concerto, which is a huge undertaking, the devil's own task. But I can cope with a shorter work. It will be in very free form with several passages in which the violin plays alone."*

In this concerto for violin and piano, Chausson has composed it with very clear indications of the main voice and other voices by changing the dynamic. Even though this piece is full of 'ultra-chromatic diatonicism' it sounds surprisingly tonal and relatively 'easy' to the ear and all these qualities make this piece an absolute masterwork for this repertoire.

**The first movement** of the concerto starts with a small motive of three notes that is a part of the main melody, which later gets played for the first time by the entrance of the solo-violin. Before that, the theme gets 'introduced' in a certain way. This is a very interesting way of starting this incredible composition.

With the entrance of the violin the piano gets takes the role of the accompanist, not just a 'simple' accompaniment but extremely virtuosic passages using many different chords and positions on the keyboard that makes this a highly intricate line. After the finish of the theme by both instruments, the quartet and piano continue with playing. Not long after the violin enters with a highly-chromatic second theme which gets repeated not much later in an altered version by the piano. The use of

cyclic technics, which was one of the key aspects of Franck's music, is very present in this work; even in accompaniments, we can see that the solo violin line plays identical accompaniments like the piano.

After a beautiful small solo for the piano, we enter in B-major with the third theme. Again, the way Chausson composed this section, especially for the piano part, is very particular and nearly idiosyncratic. Before we go back to the first theme, we have another incredible passage that is rhythmically very interesting; sixteenth chromatic line down against a triplet movement with a melodic hemiola. This gives a special atmosphere until we come 'back to earth' with the first theme, played both by the quartet and the piano. It basically is a certain recapitulation with the continuation of the second theme in the quartet and then back to the soloists. When the first theme comes back, after the cadenza of the solo-violin, we see again a certain recapitulation. The second theme comes back, foreshortened and intensified by the accompaniment in the piano part and the third theme comes back as the climax of the movement; not in B major but in D major this time.

The continues repetition of the themes, in this first movement is never boring and doesn't even hint towards 'repetitions', but due to the intricate use of many different composition styles and a huge variety in instrumental technics, this piece is composed perfectly.

**The second movement** is named a Sicilienne, a dance form which was often a middle movement from the Baroque period onwards. The rhythm is often a 9/8 or a 12/8 with a rather slow pace. It has, originally, a punctuated character and is often noted for its pastoral effect. D'Indy called it *'like the charming fanciful gardens of Gabriel Fauré'*

In the case of Chausson, the character is more sea-like, with continues waves, first divided between the cello and the alto and afterwards by the left hand of the piano. Throughout this movement, the main theme gets accompanied in this way. The climax of this movement is made not by the extension and dramatization, like writing octaves for the violin, of the main melody but by intensifying the accompaniment 'wave' figure. The climax gets extended by broken chord waves, instead of scales. The coda of this movement ends in quietness with the melody and accompaniment figure.

**The third movement** is a very slow Grave movement. Full of chromaticism. Due to the slow tempo, the slow chromatic figure has a bigger function than an 'accompaniment'. It sets the whole character of the piece. The melody that enters later by both the soloists starts in unison but quickly widens out through broken chords in the piano and double-stops and high notes on the violin. The chromaticism in this movement is of a very different character and function than for example in the first movement, though the first theme of the first movement returns in the end after the enormous climax of the third movement. Except for the last part of the movement, this movement is created mainly by the soloist instruments. The quartet has a rather small part which mainly adds colour to the work and helps in the climax for extra volume.

**The fourth movement** is a large moment which is based upon one theme and earlier themes from the same work. It can be seen as a rondo form with the main theme coming back from time to time. The biographers Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Leo Weinstein have suggested in their analysis that the last movement does not have the same strength as the other movements and suggest great fatigue as a cause of this. In my opinion, this movement is of a very strong character, especially with the reoccurring themes and inventive way of using his material.