

Amédée-Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)
Concert in D for violin, piano and string quartet, Op 21

Décidé
Sicilienne
Grave
Très animé

This is an unusual piece. First, its name: not a sextet, not a concerto, although some editions and concert publicity call it that, but a Concert. Chausson (according to Grove) was here reviving the 18th century term used by Couperin and Rameau for chamber music (concerted playing) intended to be listened to (rather than danced to) in a concert. But it is also unusual, indeed unique, in its scoring. It is (I think) the only work for this combination. There are a few other piano and string sextets but all use a combination of instruments that is lighter on top and richer in the bass than Chausson's piano, three violins, viola and cello; for example, Mendelssohn's 1842 sextet uses piano, violin, two violas, cello, and double bass. While Mendelssohn's work is an extension of a conventional piano quintet, where the strings generally play as a whole, Chausson's concert is a different beast with the solo violin and piano parts mainly "projections against the quartet background". Whatever the problems that this unusual combination raises for the composer (and performers), Chausson has succeeded in finding an effective vehicle for his wonderful melodic and harmonic abilities. It was dedicated to Chausson's friend, the brilliant Belgian violinist and composer Eugène Ysaÿe who premiered it in Brussels in 1892.

Chausson wrote rather little (only 39 opus numbers including just two other chamber pieces); he came to composition aged 25, abandoning law to take lessons with Massenet at the Paris Conservatoire, but at 44 he was tragically killed in a bicycle accident on the family country estate. His family was well-off thanks to his father having helped Haussmann rebuild Paris in the 1850s, and their salon in Paris attracted writers, painters and other musicians (Mallarmé, Debussy, Cortot, Ysaÿe). Chausson had many talents, he also wrote short stories and drew well. While at the Paris Conservatoire he attended classes by César Franck whose influence is apparent in tonight's Concert, which dates from Chausson's "middle period". Although his early work shows Massenet's influence with shapely melodic lines and elegant harmonies serving pretty rather than profound ideas, the middle period works, like those of Franck, are more elaborate, more intensely dramatic with many modulations, and exploit Franck's cyclic form.

The drama is apparent immediately. Three fortissimo octave chords from the piano, repeated more slowly and quietly, and then the motif is taken up pianissimo by the string quartet and chromatically extended into the movement's main theme. Much of the interest then lies in the solo violin and piano, with the quartet providing a background and occasional commentary.

The second movement is in the dance rhythm of a baroque Sicilienne. Chausson's use of archaic forms reflects his efforts to find a different way forward for French music to that of Wagner, whose music he nevertheless admired. This Sicilienne is a light, restrained and graceful contrast to the dramas of the first movement.

The brooding *Grave* opens with sad, sliding semitones in octaves in the piano, joined by the solo violin's theme, hopelessly descending again in semitones; the quartet adds its voice to the general despair. But then the piano introduces a more optimistic double-dotted accompaniment to the solo violin's rising figure, the clouds lift and the violin turns the original sliding semitone motif into an optimistic figure that sets the mood up to the reflective end of a beautiful movement.

The last movement's energetic syncopated opening theme throws off the reflective mood, and Chausson works everyone very hard as the music becomes more complex. The Concert's opening theme returns in Franckian cyclic style just before the boisterous finish.