CMSFW Ensemble with Gary Levinson and Friends
Saturday, 10 January 2026 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2026

Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 87
Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

For sheer joy and excitement wrapped up in music, it's hard to beat Dvořák's E-flat major piano quartet. Ablaze with gorgeous melodies, appealing sentiment, and dynamic Czech rhythms, this work encompasses everything we love about this splendid composer. While it's tough to pick a favorite piece among Dvořák's chamber works, this quartet definitely has to be a contender.

Like Mozart, Dvořák wrote many chamber works for various ensembles throughout his career but composed only two quartets for piano and strings. Also like Mozart, Dvořák played a number of instruments in addition to the piano, and favored the viola, particularly when he played chamber music. Dvořák's fourteen string quartets are one indication of his great love for the string family. His reputation among music lovers has traditionally rested on a small number of well-known works.

Bohemia and Moravia were both part of the Habsburg Empire for Dvořák's entire life. Because German was the official language, he was educated in the German tradition, but he remained very proud of his Czech birthright. He was extremely successful in synthesizing German musical heritage with the compelling melodic and rhythmic energy of his native Czech folk songs and dances. He was blessed with unceasing melodic inventiveness. If his use of conventional musical form is sometimes less disciplined than that of his good friend Brahms, the results usually make for captivating listening. And along with Brahms, he was one of the great champions of absolute music, rarely employing extramusical associations. His chamber music sometimes begs for full orchestra, so rich are its textures.

This afternoon's piano quartet evinces strong contrasts of mood in its opening movement. The unison string statement of the theme, followed by the pianist's response, tempts comparison to the Mozart G-minor Quartet, K. 478. Dvořák invests his theme with harmonic ambiguity that makes it all the more powerful. He hints at minor mode in that opening unison gesture, not letting us settle in too comfortably to the idea of E-flat major. His development section is particularly dramatic, skillfully derived from the unison melody, and moving smoothly from aggressive gestures to surprisingly delicate ones. Balance between piano and strings is flawless. The composer curtails his recapitulation, choosing instead to extend the movement with a coda. The drama of the development recurs, with unusual piano modulations underscored by string *tremolandi*.

The slow movement, in the distant key of D flat, belongs to the cello, whose serene, lyrical theme prevails over the ominous rumblings that contrast with it. The sedate third movement is more minuet than scherzo, a pensive waltz-like interlude whose smooth seams blur the contrast of its trio. Gypsy inflections in its G-minor middle theme add exotic flavor. At the end, the trilling piano decoration of the minuet melody emulates the cimbalom, a hammer dulcimer common in Roma music.

Dvořák's Bohemian roots take over in the finale, an exuberant outpouring of rhythmic vitality and melodic invention. Here again, the tonal ambiguity between major and minor mode is a dominant characteristic of the music. The pull of both song and dance are strong, but ultimately it is Dvořák the choreographer who provides the energy and impulse that drive this wonderful conclusion.

Concerto in D for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet, Op. 21 (1891)
Ernest Chausson
Born 20 January 1855 in Paris
Died 10 June 1899 in Limay, near Mantes

The term “Renaissance man” was inspired by extraordinary figures such as Leonardo da Vinci who were well-versed in many fields of art, science, and knowledge. Ernest Chausson was such a man, compressing a remarkable amount of intellectual and artistic activity into his brief forty-four years. From childhood, he was keenly interested in the visual arts and literature, as well as music, but took a law degree to placate his father.

Beginning in the 1870s, Chausson frequented Parisian salons, developing friendships with such important figures as the painters Odilon Redon and Henri Fantin-Latour. Countermanding his father’s wishes for his career, Chausson sought out Jules Massenet for composition lessons at the Paris Conservatoire in 1879. He fell under the Wagnerian spell in 1880 and soon determined to devote himself to music. Eventually he became host to a brilliant salon in Paris, assuming an important role in the city’s intellectual life and artistic circles. Many poets, artists, and musicians gathered at his residence. Claude Debussy, Isaac Albéniz, the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe were all regular visitors.

Ysaÿe (pronounced Ee-ZYE-ee) is particularly important with respect to the work we hear this afternoon. Chausson dedicated the Concerto in D to him, and Ysaÿe played the premiere in Brussels in March 1892. His advocacy of this work was a big plus. Chausson had focused on ambitious stage works early in his career with limited critical success. Before this work, his reputation was still tenuous. The Concerto in D was a turning point.

So why is this work called “concerto” when it appears to be a chamber music sextet? Chausson’s title is *Concert en Ré majeur*. “*Ré”* is the French orthography for “D” (think do-re-mi). The French word *concert* (pronounced *cone-SARE*) is generally translated as “concerto” but actually means harmony,

agreement, or concord. Chausson was thinking in terms of a Baroque concerto grosso: smaller forces collaborating harmoniously as an ensemble, with cameo roles for more than one soloist. The violin and piano are often spotlighted when they play with the anchoring texture of the string quartet. In many places, piano and violin dominate the texture. At least once in each movement, they *are* the texture. They tend to function as a pair and the string quartet functions as a separate, complementary blocked ensemble. Sometimes the two blocks of sound are in opposition; more often, they complement one another.

If Chausson borrowed from Baroque heritage in his conception of the relationship between and among instruments, his harmony and melodic language are entirely late Romantic. Listeners are unlikely to know other music by Chausson except, perhaps, his lovely *Poème* for violin and orchestra. Not surprisingly, his style derives from his principal teachers at the Paris Conservatoire: Jules Massenet and César Franck. Like many late nineteenth-century French composers, Chausson was also influenced by the rich sonorities and chromatic progressions of Wagner's operas. Franck left the strongest imprint on this work, which adopts a cyclic structure [using similar or identical thematic material in more than one movement].

The first movement is the longest by far at about fifteen minutes. It opens with a slow introduction, an imposing statement in octaves of the dominating motive, echoed in unison by viola and cello. Chausson has thus announced that this motive will be important.

Its initial development, with broad, arpeggiated figures from the piano, leads to the violin solo, declaiming a long lyrical expansion on the same theme. Momentarily, the string quartet has dropped out and the piano/violin duet takes center stage. While these two disparate entities occasionally overlap at climactic moments, Chausson is very careful in his allocation of material. The occasional passage for piano solo usually serves as a bridge for a modulation to another key.

The *Sicilienne* opens with full ensemble. Chausson unfolds a ternary movement as concise as the opening movement was expansive. Despite its brevity — at four minutes, it is the concerto's shortest movement — it deploys the full sextet resources most evenly. Even so, the close is an eight-measure coda for violin and piano, joined only in the final chord by the quartet. The spirit of Gabriel Fauré is more present in this movement than any other.

Chausson's tragic *Grave* opens with another duet for violin and piano, now in the dark tonality of F minor. This is a splendid late Romantic slow movement that builds twice to an agitated climax. In each case, the piano texture thickens and grows more demanding. Although we hear duets with violin and piano again, the string quartet gets its share of the lyrical and dramatic moments. Chausson manages his ensemble effectively, subduing the full sextet at the close to a level even quieter than the beginning.

Piano gets the initial statement in the Finale. The strings, dominated by solo violin, soon take up its material. For the first time in this work, we hear dance-like music. In a series of variation-like episodes, Chausson moves us through multiple key changes, ultimately settling on a chromatically inflected D major. This finale is the most homogeneous movement for all six players in terms of the balance of material. It also links the entire concerto by quoting and varying themes introduced in earlier movements.

Chausson was not present when the first performance was in preparation. His colleague Vincent d'Indy oversaw rehearsals and intervened when the pianist balked, declaring that the keyboard part was too difficult. A substitute, Auguste Pierret, was called in from Paris, and the Brussels premiere took place as scheduled on 4 March 1892 with Pierret and Ysaÿe as soloists, collaborating with the Crickboom Quartet. Maurice Kufferath of *Le Guide Musical* deemed Chausson "an ingenious inventor of new

sonorities." Such warm words must have been balm to the composer whose music had been greeted with acerbity by the Parisian press. Brussels proved to be a happier venue for Chausson's music than the French capital.

Chausson's career was cut short by a bicycling accident in early summer 1899. Who knows what he might have accomplished had he been granted a few more years.