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# FRENCH PIECES

HENRIK DAM THOMSEN

ULRICH STÆRK

- 
- Claude Debussy** (1862-1918)  
Sonate pour violoncelle et piano
- 1 Prologue. Lent 4:49
  - 2 Sérénade. Modérément animé - vivace 3:33
  - 3 Finale. Animé - lento - vivace 3:57

- Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924)
- 4 Élégie 6:33
  - 5 Berceuse 3:44
  - 6 Papillon 3:04
  - 7 Après un rêve 3:09

- Louis Vierne** (1870-1937)  
Deux pièces
- 8 Le soir 3:38
  - 9 Légende 2:35

- Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835-1921)
- 10 Romance opus 36 3:40
  - 11 Romance opus 51 3:31
  - 12 Le cygne 3:13

Total 45:35



# COMPOSERS

## **Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

Debussy inarguably belongs on any list of the most popular composers of all time. His works are loved for their sensual moods, peerless timbres and gentle expressions. But they also contain drastic experiments and in their day brought on a sea change in the way music was viewed.

Debussy started his career as French music's enfant terrible. At age 11, he was accepted into the Paris Conservatory, where he quickly gained notoriety as a breaker of molds who played and composed in an unorthodox manner without regard for prevailing musical conventions.

His inspiration was the Symbolist literature and art of his day, which subordinated reality to the inner world of the soul. In that mindset, old academic expressions were all but useless. Familiar forms, genres, scales and musical laws were jettisoned and replaced by dreams, the subconscious and exotic sounds.

He supplemented major and minor with new scales, in particular the whole tone scale, which is tension-less and points nowhere, and the five-note pentatonic scale, which has an exotic effect. Inspired by unfamiliar aesthetics, such as Balinese gamelan music, he created static textures that mutate through the use of timbre – all of them musical revolutions that won Debussy acclaim on Parnassus but hampered his broad popularity.

In his small orchestral piece *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, from 1894, Debussy definitively broke with the norms. The music is one big enigma. A prelude to something we don't get to hear. Debussy cultivates a similar evocativeness in his Preludes for Piano, 24 separate pieces that bear no titles but instead are referred to by symbolic afterthoughts, such as "The Sunken Cathedral" or "Dancers of Delphi."

Debussy is often likened to his contemporaries in French painting, the Impressionists, and today he is considered a pioneer of musical Impressionism. For his part, he found the term misleading. His music is not foggy and fuzzy but always has a precise goal, and it only got sharper over the years.

Late in life, Debussy grew very interested in the distinctiveness of French culture. His last works are neoclassicist, often with a pointed humor, and he published his scores in the 18th-century style. He refused to be called Impressionist and instead preferred the sober title "musicien français," French musician.

Debussy died in Paris, 1918, after almost 10 years with cancer. Paris was under attack by the Germans, and his funeral was without the official ceremony that his musical importance would have justified, even as the world was finally beginning to listen.

### **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)**

Poetry. Passion. Sensitivity. Gentleness. Beauty. Fauré is a favorite of those who seek musical pleasure. Works like Requiem, Sicilienne, Pavane, Berceuse and *Après un rêve* are shoo-ins on any list of stress-free music.

But saying that Fauré only wrote music for relaxation is only half the truth. When Fauré was born, Chopin was at the height of his career. When Fauré died, jazz and modernist atonality had arrived. His works run the gamut from one extreme to the other.

He began his career early. He was just nine when his family sent him from the Pyrenees to Paris to study music. There, a few years later, he became a student of Camille Saint-Saëns, who was 12 years his senior. The two remained close friends, spiritual kin and colleagues for the rest of their lives. Fauré made his living

as an organist, while his popularity as a composer steadily grew among French audiences. The French wanted musical poetry and beautiful sound in short forms, and Fauré's sensual miniatures fulfilled that demand. His most popular works were written in the 1870s and '80s.

But Fauré had ambitions beyond mere pleasing. Over time, he developed a more complex and harmonious style that would later have great influence on his students, among them Maurice Ravel and George Enescu.

Fauré's influence on later French composers cannot be overestimated. In 1896, he was named professor at the Paris Conservatory. From 1905 to 1920, he served as director there and diligently worked to modernize conservative teaching forms and integrate the musical thinking of a new age.

In his last decade, Fauré was France's most distinctive musical personality. He became a national icon and was regarded as the leading and most advanced French composer. In 1922, he was celebrated at a national homage at Sorbonne University in Paris led by President Millerand.

His late works demand more of the listener than his 30-40-year older favorites. They push the boundaries harmonically and have a refreshing unpredictability. Meanwhile, they maintain the charm and laidback elegance of his youthful works. Fauré's music evolved a lot, but it never became violent or aggressive.

Fauré died in 1924, at age 79. A respected music scholar later described him as "More profound than Saint-Saëns, more varied than Lalo, more spontaneous than d'Indy, more classic than Debussy. Fauré is the master par excellence of French music."

### **Louis Vierne (1870-1937)**

Louis Vierne had a declared wish to die on the organ bench in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

He was the organist there for 37 years, starting in 1900. Before that, he was assistant organist to his teacher, Charles-Marie Widor, at Saint Sulpice Church. The organ was Vierne's instrument, and his organ works today are core repertoire for organists around the world.

Vierne's life was no bed of roses. Throughout his life, he was plagued by mental illness. An unhappy divorce and the loss of both his brother and his son in World War I did not help his mental health. A brutal traffic accident nearly cost him one leg and made playing the organ difficult. An eye disease nearly blinded him.

These external circumstances, however, did not affect his music. On the contrary. In his professional life in music he found the clear framework and security he lacked in his personal life. His musical style is Romantic, but not as sentimental as that of his teachers César Franck and Gabriel Fauré. Vierne's music is built on strict forms, stylistic purity and French elegance. The same goes for his chamber music, orchestral music and vocal music.

Vierne was a dutiful and well-liked composition teacher at the Paris Conservatory, where he trained such important composers as the sisters Nadia and Lili Boulanger and Marcel Dupré.

The organ benches of Paris were a refuge for Vierne. And his wish to die on his beloved organ bench in Notre Dame came true. On June 2, 1937, during his 1750th organ recital, he suffered a stroke and fell off the organ bench, dead. One foot

landed on the low E-pedal, filling the cathedral with sound for several seconds after he expired.

### **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)**

There is a regrettable tendency among the prodigies of music history to die way too young. Saint-Saëns is an exception. He lived to be 86 and served as a central link between Romanticism and 20th-century music. The list of his compositions goes on and on and includes music of almost any genre.

At the tender young age of 10, he made his concert debut as a piano virtuoso. Later, he became an equally gifted organist and a sought-after instructor, training Gabriel Fauré and others. But most of all he liked to practice his own talent for composition and he lived the last 43 years of his life as a freelance composer.

Saint-Saëns' works bridge old and new, the intellectual and the spontaneous. He knew the tradition of the old masters and mainly employed established forms and constellations. But his tonal language has a new and different lightness. Heavy serious-mindedness is replaced by French elegance and grace. His music is melodious, fresh and untroubled, indeed, often joyous. He is the French heir to Mozart.

The traditionally defined style earned him a reputation as a reactionary among the French Impressionists, not least Debussy, in the early 20th century. Even so, his experiments, blending the Viennese classical tradition into his romantic music made him a model for such 20th-century neo-classicists as Stravinsky and Francis Poulenc. His skills in orchestral instrumentation influenced the development of late Romantic colors.

And the public never turned its back on Saint-Saëns. His elegant harmonic language exudes abundance in small, vigorous character pieces or virtuosic heavyweights alike. Ear-catching melodies, pleasant harmonies and striking effects always won him bravos in the concert halls.

Saint-Saëns was a bon vivant and adventurer. Long travels abroad in the French colonies in North Africa, North America and across Europe made him world-famous in his own life and gave his music an exotic tinge.

He died in Algeria in 1921. After his earthly remains were shipped back to Paris, he was given a state funeral, where the nation's political and artistic elites gathered to bid a final farewell to one of France's greatest sons.





# COMPOSITIONS

## **Claude Debussy (1862-1918): Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor (1915)**

1915 was a tough year for Debussy. World War I was raging all around him and he had been diagnosed with the cancer that would kill him a few years later. Indeed, the Sonata for Cello and Piano does not have the airy, carefree ring of his earlier works. Impressionism was creasing its brow. Still, Debussy was at the height of his career. The sonata's fragmented construction radiates inventiveness and forward-looking modernist elements. Its basic darkness is intermittently alleviated by humorous notions and fanciful highlights.

The first movement, the Prologue, opens as a resigned elegy. Music in the minor key and descending melodies are followed by frustrated eruptions of anger. All to no avail. The movement ends in the same darkness with which it began. The second movement, *Sérénade*, is anything but a lyrical evening song. Debussy referred to it as "Pierrot angry at the moon." It continues directly into a fiendishly virtuosic and restless finale that takes on a morbid character by constant changes of tempo and expression. Debussy at one point even marked it "Molto rubato con morbidezza" (Very uneven tempo, with morbidity).

The whole sonata takes barely 12 minutes, 12 minutes of a musical struggle with death.

## **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): *Élégie*, Opus 24 (1880)**

All things considered, you would think Fauré had put his laments, or elegies, behind him by 1880. It had been three years since his fiancée left him. In the immediate aftermath of the breakup, he had written his Piano Quartet No. 1, and its elegiac third movement had become popular. In 1880, when he decided to write a grand sonata for cello and piano, he opened with a slow movement modeled on the melancholy of the Piano Quartet. But he never finished the sonata and instead published the slow movement by itself as *Élégie* for Cello and Piano.

The mood is mournful. An expressive melody line in minor. Descending sequences, music with dark notes. In the middle of the movement, the energy intensifies, and the elegiac mood momentarily turns to despair, before the movement concludes the way it began: in darkness and stillness.

By 1880, Fauré may have been over his heartaches, but he maintained the sorrowful musical language, and it has made the *Élégie* one of his most beloved works.

### **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Berceuse, Opus 16 (1879)**

“Berceuse” means lullaby. But in 1879, Fauré only had himself to rock to sleep. He was a bachelor and childless. The Berceuse is neither autobiographical nor written for any particular purpose. Fauré wrote the lullaby because he couldn’t help himself. It is one example, among many, proving that Fauré was a master of the miniature. No one does it better when it comes to writing music of short duration and great expression. Good melodies, warm harmonies and pleasant atmospheres are hallmarks of Fauré.

The Berceuse opens with a gentle rippling of the piano. The cello takes the lead with a swaying melody in a melancholy tone that gradually unfolds but never loses its singable beauty. The Berceuse is charming, irresistible, and impossible to fall asleep to.

### **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Papillon, Opus 77 (1884)**

“Butterfly or dung fly, call it what you like!” Fauré wrote to his publisher regarding his new piece for cello and piano. His publisher, not surprisingly, went with butterfly, *Papillon*.

This was the same publisher who, after the success of the *Élégie* in 1880, had commissioned a new piece by Fauré for cello and piano. He was looking for a

lively, virtuosic contrast to the popular elegy. Fauré wasn’t crazy about the title. He didn’t have butterflies, or any other insects, in mind while he was working. Even so, it’s not hard to picture a fluttering butterfly when you listen to the rapid notes flying effortlessly from the cello. The short piece is like a mirage of a butterfly’s lightness. Charm, grace, translucency. Three minutes later, the butterfly (or the dung fly) has fluttered off.

### **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Après un rêve, Opus 7, No. 1 (1878)**

*Après un rêve*, “after a dream,” is originally a song describing the longing to return to an ecstatic dream of divine love. The song is one of Fauré’s most popular melodies and has been transcribed countless times. This version for cello and piano was created by the cellist Pablo Casals.

Fauré’s subtle melody moves with great grace and beauty between the dreamer’s peace of mind and the lover’s fear that the dream, the moment of bliss, will never return.

### **Louis Vierne (1870-1937): Deux pièces, Opus 5 (1895)**

The roar of the organ at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris is nowhere to be heard in Vierne’s *Deux pièces*. That’s testimony to the versatility of a composer who became famous primarily as the organist at Notre Dame. Most of his works have a fervent late-Romantic church atmosphere, with the organ front and center. *Deux pièces* is different. It has traces of Vierne’s teachers, Gabriel Fauré and Cesar Franck. A poetic mood, heartfelt harmony and weltschmerz.

The first piece, *Le soir* (Evening), is led by the cello’s perpetual melody, accompanied by gentle piano arpeggios. Stillness descends beautifully.

The second piece, *Légende*, exudes a similar calm. A swaying melody in 6/8 time, singable and steady, alternates between cello and piano. Is this a nod

from Vienne to his teacher Fauré? The music is certainly reminiscent of Fauré's famous Sicilienne. Meanwhile, the *Légende* evokes churchly associations. Perhaps the organ does ring in the subconscious mind after all.

### **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921): Romance, Opus 36 (1874)**

Imagine a Paris salon in the 1870s: well-dressed bourgeoisie, café au lait and champagne, carefree living. In a corner of the salon there is music, elegant and charming. French as all hell.

Saint-Saëns was French to the bone. It was precisely to give the Parisian bourgeoisie a pleasant musical diversion that he wrote his Romance. Originally for horn and piano. Heard just as often with cello.

Saint-Saëns is not stingy with the sweet perfume of France. Fragrant tones, a warm melody and lots of eroticism fill the air. A dusty, lethargic piano accompaniment, lightly separated notes of the cello and an atmosphere of laidback enjoyment. Three minutes of French confection.

### **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921): Romance, Opus 51 (1877)**

Adolphe Fischer of Belgium was one of the great cellists of the 19th century and a good friend of Saint-Saëns. Many of Saint-Saëns' works for cello were written for, and first performed by, Fischer. Great works, like the Cello Concerto No. 1. And lesser works, like Romance, Op. 51.

Fischer loved Saint-Saëns' tonal language. And understandably so, when you hear the Romance. The composer knew and understood the qualities of the cello. Long melody lines with a warm tone and heartfelt tranquility at the core. Music with the power to melt hearts.

In Romance, Op. 51, the cello gets to unfold beauty from start to finish. The jaunty, rhythmically pregnant piano accompaniment creates a contrast, small ripples that the cello effortlessly floats across. Elegant.

The world would be the poorer by many musical gems if Saint-Saëns had never met Adolphe Fischer.

### **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921): Le cygne (1886)**

The water shines like gold in the sun. Peace and tranquility. The white swan ("le cygne") glides majestically along, its head raised. Beauty in its purest form. No wonder Saint-Saëns' *Le cygne* has become a signature work in the cello repertoire.

The movement is a lyrical gem from Saint-Saëns' otherwise so cheerful suite, *The Carnival of the Animals*, which the composer wrote to divert himself a bit and rekindle his joy in music in the wake of a disastrous concert tour. The Carnival was intended as a musical jest. Saint-Saëns refused to publish it before his death. Soon afterward, it became his best loved work. Not least because of *The Swan*, which quickly became available in a sea of transcriptions and was used as both ballet and film music.

The musical intention is clear. The dainty piano accompaniment emulates the gentle ripples on the surface of the lake and the swan's feet, unseen below, propelling the big bird forward. The cello is the swan elegantly gliding through the water.



## Henrik Dam Thomsen

Henrik Dam Thomsen divides his time between his position as First Principal Cellist with the Danish National Symphony Orchestra, a busy schedule playing solo and chamber music concerts, and teaching at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen.

His 1998 debut from the Soloist Class of the Royal Danish Academy of Music, received an extraordinarily enthusiastic review from the Berlingske Tidende newspaper: "Our expectations were very high, yet they were surpassed. Who could have dreamed of hearing a debut concert on an artistic level such as this? Henrik Dam Thomsen is not only a brilliant soloist, he is a virtuoso. This critic simply cannot remember anything more convincing in his 35 years of concert-going."

Henrik has continued to live up to this praise, as his large discography testifies. His 2004 release of music by Kodály and Britten (Chandos Records) was nominated for a Danish Music Award in the category of Best Solo Recording and received numerous excellent reviews in the international music press. In 2006, his recital recording with pianist Ulrich Stærk was CD of the Month in

international string magazine *The Strad*. In 2009, Henrik released "Live at the Tivoli Concert Hall" – a DVD/CD box set, again with pianist Ulrich Stærk as well as the Danish National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Thomas Dausgaard. Henrik is influenced by both the distinguished Scandinavian cello tradition and some of the international cello world's most important icons.

He studied in Copenhagen, London, and Bloomington, Indiana (USA), with Morten Zeuthen, Torleif Thedéen, William Pleeth, and János Starker. He has played numerous concerts at festivals throughout Europe, the U.S. and Asia, both as a soloist and as a chamber musician, including with the Sartory Quartet and the Copenhagen Cello Quartet.

Henrik Dam Thomsen has also distinguished himself as an improviser and has performed with an array of Danish and international jazz stars. He appears on a large number of award-winning film scores, notably for several films by auteur Lars von Trier.

## Ulrich Stærk

Ulrich Stærk is one of Scandinavia's most versatile pianists with an international career as a soloist, chamber musician and accompanist. He is an associate professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and guest professor at Conservatoire de Paris and Musikhochschule Hannover.

Since his spectacular debut recital in Copenhagen, 1989, Stærk has had a prolific international career, collaborating with such star musicians as Yo Yo Ma, Sarah Chang, Ralph Kirschbaum, Nikolaj Znaider, Ophra Harnoy, Cecilia Bartoli, Elisabeth Söderström, Inga Nielsen, Inger Dam-Jensen, Bo Skovhus, William Bennett and many others.

Stærk is also an internationally sought-after opera and lieder accompanist, and as a soloist he has regularly performed with such symphony orchestras as the Schleswig-Holstein Symphony Orchestra, the Danish National Symphony Orchestra, the Copenhagen Phil and the regional Danish orchestras of Aarhus and Southern Jutland.

Stærk has won numerous international awards for his recordings, which have been published by Philips, Universal, Naxos, Dacapo, Claves

and Classico. In 2002, his recording of the complete Schumann sonatas for violin and piano (with violinist Elisabeth Zeuthen Schneider) was showcased in all Tower Record stores in the US and won glowing reviews, including in Gramophone and Strad Magazine.

Stærk's recordings of songs by Carl Nielsen on Dacapo won a Gramophone Critics' Choice Award in 2003 as "Best Classical CD of the Year Worldwide," while Stærk was hailed as "a model accompanist." The same year, his solo CD of American piano music by Louis Gottschalk (Classico) was nominated for a Danish Music Award in the category of Best Classical Solo Recording.

Alongside his work with Henrik Dam Thomsen on "More French Pieces," Ulrich Stærk on the occasion of the Carl Nielsen sesquicentennial in 2015 gave successful recitals, including in Carnegie Hall, New York, and recorded Nielsen's complete works for violin and piano with violinist Niklas Walentin.

Among numerous awards, Stærk received the Artist Award of the Danish Music Critics Circle in 1989.





# CREDITS

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