

Lest we forget

Ernest Chausson was cut off in his prime - and he has since been sadly neglected. But he left behind some musical treasures, says Jessica Duchon

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Ernest Chausson died 100 years ago. He shouldn't have. Aged only 44, father of a happy family of five children and just reaching the height of his compositional powers, he was cycling down a hill when he suddenly lost control of his bicycle, struck a wall and was killed instantly. His premature death remains one of the most tragic in the history of French music, and he remains perhaps the most underrated French composer of his era.

Only a tiny handful of Chausson's works have a steady place in the mainstream concert repertoire. His compositional voice is steeped in the symbolist aesthetic of artistic Paris during the 19th century's gradual death throes - the cultural melting pot that was the background to the paintings of Odilon Redon, the poems of Stéphane Mallarmé and the plays of Maurice Maeterlinck.

Chausson has even been called "the Mallarmé of music". There are echoes in his music of his contemporaries - especially his teacher, César Franck, and his friends Gabriel Fauré, Henri Duparc and Claude Debussy - and with this range of influences, his voice distills the essence of his time: chromatic, lyrical, sensual and evocative. But simultaneously it remains his alone, imbued with a strange, troublesome melancholy.

This melancholy gathers power if you read some of Chausson's letters. His greatest fear, the letters reveal, was that he might die without having completely mastered and fulfilled his musical vocation. "There is a phrase by Schumann," he wrote in 1879, "which is terrible and which resounds in my ears like the trumpet of judgment day: 'One is only master of thought when one is master of form.' I feel more and more the truth of this thought, and it leaves me no repose. There are moments when I feel myself driven by a kind of feverish instinct, as if I had the presentiment of being unable to attain my goal, or of attaining it too late." In the light of his ignominious fate, this statement seems horribly prophetic.

Among the factors conspiring against Chausson during his lifetime was his own background. He was the son of a successful building contractor who had worked on Haussmann's remodelling of Paris into a city of wide, stylish boulevards, and grew up in a comfortable, bourgeois household in which a musical career was not seen as exactly desirable. Despite an early awareness of his musical calling, he obeyed his parents' expectations and went to law school. Only after qualifying was he free to join Massenet's composition class at the Paris Conservatoire, and then Franck's; and through Franck and his circle of disciples, Chausson encountered the influences that formed his musical personality.

Chausson's depressive tendency was in part fashionable - it was a crucial quality for the symbolists, whose art was essentially subjective, suggestive and overly contemplative. But in Chausson it had manifested in his early childhood. Both his elder brothers had died young; as the last surviving child, Chausson was overprotected by his parents and had no friends his own age. He was brought up in a cultured world where he encountered at an impressionable age many of the most important literary and musical figures of his day, but his enforced precocity left little room for the normal fun of childhood.

Later, fate smiled on Chausson, at least for a time. He was blissfully happy with his wife, Jeanne, and the warmth and stability of their marriage helped to build the secure foundation that he needed to develop confidence in his own abilities. While he composed with relative tranquillity works such as his especially beautiful songs, large-scale works were more problematic. His opera, *Le Roi Arthus*, caused him tortures of self-doubt and sub-Wagnerian misery. Yet Chausson was not all darkness; the association of his music with introversion and anguish has perhaps contributed to the even deeper neglect of his happier pieces, notably his scandalously underplayed Piano Quartet.

Chausson and his rapidly growing family lived in a large house on the Boulevard de Courcelles, where they began a distinguished art collection and hosted the great and good of Parisian artistic life. Redon was a close friend, an artist with whose work Chausson's has much affinity; and among the composers was the radical and bohemian Claude Debussy. With Debussy, Chausson developed a close friendship that proved exceptionally rewarding and stimulating for both.

For Debussy, Chausson's friendship provided a stable sounding post, an almost fatherly source of encouragement and good sense; while the example of Debussy's innovative fervour and mutual encouragement gave Chausson the impetus he needed to keep working and to write perhaps with greater assurance. But there was also an element of eclipse. Debussy became one of the most influential composers of the 20th century; but the centenary of Chausson's death this year has gone all but unmarked, certainly in Britain.

Fortunately there is one exception. The young French violinist Philippe Graffin has put together a short festival celebrating Chausson and his contemporaries Franck, Debussy, Duparc and Fauré in three concerts which he is bringing to the Wigmore Hall in London this weekend. Graffin is joined by the pianists Pascal Devoyon and Jeremy Menuhin, the cellist and violist Gary and Toby Hoffman, the Chilingirian Quartet and the singer Ann Murray accompanied by Graham Johnson.

"I don't think the wonderful qualities of Chausson's music have yet been fully appreciated," Graffin says, explaining his own enthusiasm for the project. "For me, the sensuality of his music, the poetic, evocative qualities, are ideal and quite unique. I view Chausson as not a perfect composer, but someone with a wonderful soul."

The softly spoken Graffin, still only in his early 30s, already has a name for creating interesting programmes; he is artistic director of a chamber music festival at St Nazaire in France and several years ago brought another unusual series to the Wigmore, a festival celebrating the music of Eugene Ysaie. Ysaie, a great violinist as well as composer, had taught Graffin's own teacher, Josef Gingold; this connection also provides the pivotal point for Graffin's Chausson festival, as the composer's most famous work, his *Poeme for Violin and Orchestra*, was dedicated to Ysaie. The *Poeme* is an unusual miniature concerto with a structure verging on the narrative. As Graffin points out, it shows the innovative side of Chausson as much as the poetic: "It was clear that this was one of the first examples of truly free-form writing in a concerto idiom."

As Chausson had so feared, he found his confidence and his mastery of form too late; and now it is almost too late for his centenary to help establish him in his rightful place at the centre of French fin-de-siecle music. But the Graffin festival should certainly help to redress a little of the balance.

Chausson on disc

Concert in D major, Op 21; Piano Quartet in A major, Op 30
Hyperion CDA66907

A spirited rendering of the unusual 'Concert' for piano, violin and string quartet, which emulates the medium of a baroque 'concertante' ensemble; coupled with perhaps Chausson's happiest work, the little-known Piano Quartet.

Poeme, Op 25; Piano Trio in G minor, Op 3; Andante et Allegro; Piece, Op 39
Hyperion CDA67028

A particularly beautiful performance of the Poeme by Graffin in the world premiere recording of the chamber version. Both discs feature Philippe Graffin (violin), Pascal Devoyon (piano), Toby Hoffman (viola), Gary Hoffman (cello), Charles Neidich (clarinet) and the Chilingirian Quartet.

- Those who want to know more about Chausson should book straight away for the Wigmore Hall's study day tomorrow, when Graffin and Edward Blakeman will lead an exploration of the life and music of Chausson and his contemporaries. Performances in the Chausson centenary series take place on November 13, 16 and 21 at the Wigmore Hall, London W1 (box office: 0171 935 2141).