

# REVIEW: Passionate music, ardent performances at Close Encounters with Music

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David Edwards

Roman Rabinovich (piano), Diana Cohen (violin), Sarah McElravy (viola), Yehuda Hanani (cello), and Julian Rachlin (violin) perform César Franck's Piano Quintet in F minor at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center on Saturday, December 3, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

**Great Barrington** — The last thing you expect to get from a chamber music performance is a lesson in conducting. But that's essentially what violinist Julian Rachlin gave the audience on Saturday, December 3, at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center. Yes, the season's second "Close Encounters With Music" (CEWM) presentation was a program of chamber music — a violin sonata by Camille Saint-Saëns and a piano quintet by César Franck. But, unbeknownst to many in Saturday's audience, Mr. Rachlin is not only a violinist of international repute but also a well regarded orchestral conductor in Moscow, Luxembourg, Lucerne, Hamburg, and many other cities on both sides of the Atlantic. Whether directing an ensemble of five or ninety-five, Rachlin exerts a discernible influence on every performance he gives. Yes, all first-chair violinists must be able to act as leaders of their sections, but nobody does the job like Julian Rachlin. His cues are writ large in body language that's impossible to miss, even from the last row of the auditorium.

Saturday evening's CEWM program, titled, "The Passion of Camille Saint-Saëns and César Franck," focused on music inspired by these two French composers' romantic infatuation with Franck's student, Augusta Holmès. So it only made sense that the program should begin with a recording of a piece by Mademoiselle Holmès herself. The Wagner-inflected "Nuit et l'amour," from her symphonic ode for chorus and orchestra "Ludus pro Patria," proved an enticing introduction to the works of this lesser-known, but worthy, romantic-era composer. (We'll hear more from Augusta Holmès in CEWM's June 10, 2017 program, "Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman—Celebrating 100 Years of Women's Suffrage!")



Roman Rabinovich (piano) and Diana Cohen (violin) perform Saint-Saëns's Violin Sonata No. 1, Op. 75. Photo: David Edwards

Camille Saint-Saëns endured vociferous criticism for his sinful habit of allowing craftsmanship and technique to supersede emotional ardor of the sort popular in his day. But there was no shortage of emotion in Saturday's performance of his demanding Violin Sonata No. 1, Op. 75.

When competent musicians deliver a technically accurate performance of Saint-Saëns's first violin sonata, it tends to sound like a pianist following a violinist following a composer's score. That's okay, since even a perfunctory performance of this sonata is a virtuosic one and amply impressive. But when Roman Rabinovich (piano) and Diana Cohen (violin) play this piece, it sounds more like an individual musician with four hands playing the piano and violin parts simultaneously while channeling the composer's thoughts in real time. Whether you called it "controlled spontaneity" or simply "magic," such unity of purpose and execution made it hard to say who was accompanying whom on this piece. The couple's performance was brilliant in the sense that it illuminated easy-to-miss details in the score and maintained crystal clarity throughout the densest passages. And they get *extremely* dense: Saint-Saëns wrote it that way to show off his own virtuosic keyboard technique. It's scary stuff. For the undaunted Rabinovich, however, it was a mirthful frolic celebrating the great composer's sparkling wit and keen sense of craftsmanship. This music may very well be an expression of the composer's frustrated sexual desire, and there's certainly plenty of tension in it. But there's also much joy. Perhaps it's simply the joy he took in his ability

to musically distract himself from his baser instincts.

Last on the program, César Franck's Piano Quintet in F minor may, on first listen, seem appropriate as family entertainment. But when its naughty intentions are revealed, it becomes clear that the work is suitable for more mature audiences. Franck wrote the piece as an expression of the libidinous impulses he felt for his young composition student, Augusta Holmès, and, while the quintet incorporates no text, his dutiful wife's public condemnation of the piece is a pretty good indication that the composer articulated his unwholesome desires clearly enough.

César Franck's piano quintet would, of course, have sounded perfectly fine without Julian Rachlin's direction — the musicianship was there in spades squared, and the players were on their toes, vigilant and ready to charge out of the gate. But, as its most ardent aficionados are well aware, chamber music occasionally gets even better than "perfectly fine." Sometimes it rises to the level of sublimity and astonishes even the jaded. Unusually gifted directors like Julian Rachlin can facilitate this. And when they do, an interesting piece becomes riveting, a touching one gripping, and a perfunctory recitation of notes becomes strangely and irresistibly powerful. Performed at this level on Saturday evening, Franck's quintet seized Mahaiwe listeners by the throat and refused to let them go until the very last note had died away.



Roman Rabinovich (piano), Diana Cohen (violin), Sarah McElravy (viola), Yehuda Hanani (cello), and Julian Rachlin (violin) conclude César Franck's Piano Quintet in F minor at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center. Photo: David Edwards

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