



presents...

*The Shenson Great Artists & Ensemble Series*

**ANTHONY McGILL** | Clarinet

**GLORIA CHIEN** | Piano

Friday, April 3, 2026 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

**CLAUDE DEBUSSY**      **First Rhapsody for Clarinet and Piano**

**ANDRÉ MESSAGER**      **Solo de concours**

**CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS**      **Sonata in E-flat Major for Clarinet and Piano, Opus 167**

*Allegretto*  
*Allegro animato*  
*Lento*  
*Molto allegro*

INTERMISSION

**ROBERT SCHUMANN**      **Fantasiestücke, Opus 73**

*Zart und mit Ausdruck*  
*Lebhaft, leicht*  
*Rasch und mit Feuer*

**JOHANNES BRAHMS**      **Sonata in E-flat Major for Clarinet and Piano, Opus 120, No. 2**

*Allegro amabile*  
*Allegro appassionato*  
*Andante con moto; Allegro*

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Fred M. Levin, The Shenson Foundation.**

**San Francisco Performances acknowledges the generosity of Concert Partners  
James Abrams and Thomas Chiang, Kathryn Kersey, and Gussie Stewart**

**Anthony McGill** is represented by MKI Artists  
70 S Winooski Ave., #318, Burlington, VT 0540      [mkiartists.com](http://mkiartists.com)

**Gloria Chien** is represented by [gloriachien.com](http://gloriachien.com)

Steinway Model D, Pro Piano, San Francisco.

## ARTISTS PROFILES

San Francisco Performances presents Anthony McGill for the third time. He first appeared in November 2021

Gloria Chien makes her San Francisco Performances debut



“McGill is an extraordinary player, with a quiver of skills and a palette of colors that only buttress what is a singular sensibility toward his instrument. The man is an artist.”

—The Washington Post

Clarinetist **Anthony McGill**, Principal Clarinet of the New York Philharmonic, is one of classical music’s most celebrated performers and advocates. Hailed by *The New York Times* for his “brilliance, penetrating sound and rich character,” McGill was named *Musical America’s* 2024 Instrumentalist of the Year and received the 2020 Avery Fisher Prize.

As a soloist, McGill performs with major orchestras such as the New York Philharmonic, BBC Scottish Symphony, and Chicago Symphony. He is a sought-after chamber musician and recording artist, collaborating with the Pacifica Quartet and pianist Gloria Chien on acclaimed albums like *American Stories* and *Here With You*.

An advocate for equity in classical music, McGill founded the #TakeTwoKnees movement and collaborates with the Equal Justice Initiative. He directs Juilliard’s Music Advancement Program and teaches at Curtis. A Curtis graduate himself, McGill serves on several arts organization boards and is a Backun Artist.



Taiwanese-born pianist **Gloria Chien** has one of the most diverse musical lives as a noted performer, concert presenter, and educator. She made her orchestral debut at the age of sixteen with the Boston Symphony Orchestra with Thomas Dausgaard, and she performed again with the BSO with Keith Lockhart. She was subsequently selected by the *The Boston Globe* as one of its Superior Pianists of the year, “who appears to excel in everything.” In recent seasons, she has performed as a recitalist and chamber musician at Alice Tully Hall, the Library of Congress, the Phillips Collection, the Dresden Chamber Music Festival, and the National Concert Hall in Taiwan. She performs frequently with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. In 2009, she launched String Theory, a chamber music series in Chattanooga, Tennessee that has become one of the region’s premier classical music presenters. The following year she was appointed Director of the Chamber Music Institute at Music@Menlo, a position she held for the next decade. In 2017, she joined her husband, violinist Soovin Kim, as artistic director of the Lake Champlain Chamber Music Festival in Burlington, Vermont. The duo became artistic directors at Chamber Music Northwest in Portland, OR in 2020. They were named recipients of Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s Award for Extraordinary Service in 2021 for their efforts during the pandemic.

Most recently, Gloria released two albums: her *Gloria Chien LIVE* from the Music@Menlo LIVE label and *Here With You* with acclaimed clarinetist Anthony McGill on Cedille Records. Gloria received her bachelor, masters and doctoral degrees at

the New England Conservatory of Music with Wha Kyung Byun and Russell Sherman. She is Artist-in-Residence at Lee University in Cleveland Tennessee. She is a Steinway Artist.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### First Rhapsody for Clarinet and Piano

**CLAUDE DEBUSSY**  
(1862–1918)

In 1908 Debussy was named to the advisory board of the Paris Conservatory. It was only a minor position, but for a composer never wholly free from financial worries it was a welcome appointment. Debussy’s duties appear to have centered around the Conservatory’s annual concours, the examinations held at the end of each academic year for instrumentalists. In 1909 Debussy was asked to provide two test-pieces for the *concours* for clarinetists. Debussy was a notoriously lazy composer who seemed to take a perverse delight in missing deadlines, and being asked to write academic pieces would seem exactly the situation to bring out this side of him. But, for whatever reasons, he found writing these pieces for clarinet an attractive challenge, and he completed them in 1910. The first, titled simply *Petite pièce*, is a sight-reading exercise, but the other, much more substantial, is an examination piece intended to test musicianship. Titled *First Rhapsody*, it puts clarinetists through their paces, offering the opportunity to demonstrate a singing, sustained sound in the opening section in 4/4 and to show off the agility of their technique in the jaunty and chromatic fast section in 2/4. Debussy could be sour and self-deprecating, but he was delighted by the *Rhapsody* and described it as “one of the most pleasing pieces I have ever written.”

Debussy liked this music enough that the following year he arranged it for clarinet and orchestra, and that version has proven particularly effective. Debussy’s title *First Rhapsody for Clarinet* seems to imply that he intended to write more for that instrument, but he did not. His *Second Rhapsody*, not nearly so well known as the First, is for saxophone.

## Solo de concours

### ANDRÉ MESSEGER

(1853–1929)

The name André Messager is almost unknown to American audiences today, but at the time of his death a century ago he was famous not just in France but throughout the world. Trained as a pianist and organist, Messager studied with Fauré and Saint-Saëns and began his career as an organist in Paris. But the acclaimed premiere of his *Symphony in A* in 1875 encouraged him to focus on composition, and he quickly achieved success as a composer, particularly of stage works. Messager composed operettas, ballets, cantatas, and operettas—particularly *Veronique* of 1898—were performed internationally. Along the way, Messager became an extremely successful conductor, not just of his own works, but particularly in the opera house, where his performances of Mozart and Wagner were much admired; it was Messager who led the premiere of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1905. Messager conducted throughout Europe, in the United States and South America.

In 1899 Messager was asked to write the test-piece for the annual examination of student clarinetists at the Paris Conservatory (just as Debussy would compose the opening work on this program for the same *concours* a decade later). For that occasion Messager composed an absolute gem of a piece, which he titled simply *Solo de concours*, and it quickly evolved from a test-piece to a favorite concert-piece for clarinetists everywhere (the Paris Conservatory liked the piece so much that they have used it as their annual test-piece many times over the last century).

The *Solo de concours* is quite short (just over five minutes), and it falls into different sections at different tempos. The opening *Allegro non troppo* lets the clarinet introduce the genial opening and a *cantabile* second subject. The tempo relaxes at the *Andante*, where Messager tests the lyric capabilities of the clarinetist with an elegant theme marked both *espressivo* and *pianissimo*: the clarinet states this theme, and when the piano takes it up, the clarinet accompanies with quiet swirls of sixteenths. At this point the piano drops out entirely, and the clarinetist has a brilliant solo cadenza, which in turn leads to the *Allegro vivo* coda.

The *Solo de concours* is an ideal test-piece: it shows off the many sides of the clarinet while requiring clarinetists to demon-

strate their abilities in lyric music and in virtuoso passages.

It's also a lot of fun.

## Sonata in E-flat Major for Clarinet and Piano, Opus 167

### CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

(1835–1921)

Saint-Saëns was a piano virtuoso of the first order, a musician so naturally gifted that after a recital at the age of ten, he is reported to have offered to play any of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas as an encore—from memory. He was just as adept as a composer: the young man once bragged that he could compose music “as easily as an apple tree produces apples.” Saint-Saëns did not lose that ability—he continued to compose right up to his death at 86, and his list of opus numbers runs to 168.

And that makes the present *Sonata*, Opus 167, one of his very final works. In the spring of 1921, at the age of 85, Saint-Saëns crossed the Mediterranean for a visit to one of his favorite places, Algiers. There he embarked on what would be his final compositional effort, a series of three sonatas for woodwinds: for oboe, for clarinet, and for bassoon. To a friend he wrote: “At the moment I am concentrating my last reserves on giving rarely considered instruments the chance to be heard.” (Saint-Saëns actually intended to write a fourth sonata, for English horn, but did not live to complete that plan.)

The *Sonata in E-flat Major for Clarinet and Piano*, which Saint-Saëns completed in May 1921 after he returned to Paris, is a lovely piece, perfectly conceived for the strengths of the clarinet. It is a compact work: its four movements span just over a quarter of an hour. The opening *Allegretto* rocks smoothly along its 12/8 meter, built on a flowing first theme—heard immediately—and a falling second idea, just as graceful as the first. The development is quite active, though, full of long runs and chromatic writing, and after all this energy the movement makes a nice fade into silence. The brief *Allegro animato*, the sonata's scherzo, rushes along its two-beat measures before it too comes to a nicely understated conclusion.

The third movement may be the most original. Saint-Saëns sets this *Lento* in the somber key of E-flat minor and then makes some unusual compositional choic-

es. The first part of this movement is dark. Saint-Saëns sets both instruments in their deepest register (both the pianist's hands are in bass clef throughout this section), and there is something almost lugubrious about this dark opening processional in 3/2. Then comes a complete change: seven slow rolled chords from the piano take us into the second half of the movement, which now takes both instruments into their upper register (both the pianist's hands are in treble clef here). A harp-like passage for the piano makes the transition to the finale, which follows without pause. This *Molto allegro* is full of energy, and it sends the clarinetist through a series of dizzying runs. After all this energy, the very ending brings a pleasing surprise: Saint-Saëns goes back to the very beginning of the first movement and closes this sonata with the gently rocking melody that opened it.

Saint-Saëns dedicated this sonata to Auguste Périer (1883–1947), who was then professor of clarinet at the Paris Conservatory.

## Fantasiestücke, Opus 73

### ROBERT SCHUMANN

(1810–1856)

The *Fantasiestücke* (or *Fantasy Pieces*, a title denoting short and expressive pieces without specified form) were originally written for clarinet and piano; Schumann later made arrangements for cello and for violin. This music was composed with incredible speed, being completed in two days: February 11–12, 1849. This was the period of revolution throughout Germany and all of Europe, and Schumann was alternately fired with revolutionary passion and appalled by the breakdown in order. In May of 1849, he and his wife fled Dresden to escape the unrest. Perhaps some of the fervor of this period makes itself felt in the *Fantasiestücke*; perhaps not. In any case, one should be careful of taking the free-form aspect of fantasies too seriously here; as he often did in his chamber works, Schumann makes subtle links (in this case, rhythmic links) between the movements.

The first movement (“Tender and with expression”) features a soaring melody and comes to a quiet close. In the second (“Lively, happy”), the instruments take turns leading. In the outer sections, the piano leads and is joined in mid-phrase by the clarinet; in the center section the clarinet dominates. The final piece (“Quick and with fire”) opens with a violent outburst

from the clarinet, which quickly turns lyric. The gentle middle section—haunting, dark, yearning—is Schumann at his finest.

## Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in E-flat Major, Opus 120, No. 2

**JOHANNES BRAHMS**  
(1833–1897)

In the fall of 1890, Brahms decided that he was through composing. He was 57 years old, he felt that he had said the things he wanted to, and he intended that his *String Quintet in G Major*, completed the summer before, should be his last work. He had made vague plans to begin work on a *Symphony No. 5* during a projected trip to Italy the next spring, but now he canceled plans for both the trip and for a new symphony and instead began clearing out his files, destroying old manuscripts he did not want to keep and publishing a few pieces he did. But he was fairly sure there would be no new music.

Then in 1891 Brahms met the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld and was captivated by his playing. Mühlfeld (1856–1907) had originally joined the fine Meiningen orchestra as a violinist. He taught himself to play the clarinet and soon became the principal clarinetist of that orchestra (which gave the first performance of Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*) and served as principal clarinet of the Bayreuth orchestra from 1884 until 1896. So enthusiastic was Brahms about Mühlfeld's playing that he came out of retirement and began to compose for him: from 1891 came a *Clarinet Trio* and then the great *Clarinet Quintet*. Three years later, in 1894, Brahms wrote his final instrumental works for Mühlfeld, two sonatas for clarinet and piano.

Both sonatas share the somewhat severe and autumnal quality of Brahms' late music, though the *Second Sonata* is the more immediately friendly of the two. The opening tempo marking, *Allegro amabile*, sets the tone for the entire work, for this is indeed music full of love. The clarinet enters immediately with a lyric theme that seems to flow endlessly, and this quality of continuous lyricism extends throughout

the movement. The poised and noble second subject (Brahms marks it *sotto voce*) helps maintain the mood of calm acceptance that characterizes this sonata. The *Allegro appassionato* is in the standard scherzo-and-trio form. The clarinet's surging, twisting opening establishes the high energy level of this movement, and the trio section of characteristically Brahmsian nobility is all the more effective by contrast. The concluding *Andante con moto* is a set of variations based on the clarinet's opening theme, which preserves some of the *amabile* spirit of the first movement. The theme undergoes four variations, all in 6/8 time, and then Brahms provides an unusual conclusion by shifting to 2/4 for the final variation and suddenly speeding the music up. In effect, the final movement performs the function of both slow movement and finale, and the last of Brahms' chamber works comes to its conclusion in a great rush of energy.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger