Paul Huang, violin
Roman Rabinovich, piano

VIOLIN SONATA IN F MAJOR, MWV Q26 (1838)
Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47)
Allegro vivace
Adagio
Assai vivace

VIOLIN SONATA IN B MINOR, P.110 (1916-17)
Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936)
Moderato
Andante espressivo
Passacaglia: Allegro moderato ma energico

:: INTERMISSION ::

SONATA IN D MINOR, FOR SOLO VIOLIN,
OP. 27 NO. 3 BALLADE (1924)
Eugène Ysaïe (1858–1931)

VIOLIN SONATA NO. 1, IN D MINOR, OP. 75 (1885)
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)
Allegro agitato –
Adagio
Allegretto moderato –
Allegro molto

This concert is made possible by contributing sponsors Lois Byrnes and Serena Hilsinger.
VIOLIN SONATA IN F MAJOR, MWV Q.26
Felix Mendelssohn (b. Hamburg, Germany, February 3, 1809; d. Leipzig, November 4, 1847)
Composed 1838; 24 minutes

Dated June 15, 1838, this three-movement sonata from Mendelssohn’s maturity never saw its way into print during the composer’s lifetime. Only in 1953, under the guidance of Yehudi Menuhin, did the manuscript find a publisher. Menuhin’s enthusiasm for both this sonata and for the hitherto unknown D minor Concerto for Violin and Strings (1823) is reflected in his description of the “ideal violin writing” in its preface to the score. In addition, Menuhin adds that the sonata, the last of three, “has the chivalrous romantic quality of the age that produced Schumann, the elegance and lightness of touch of the age inherited from Mozart, and in addition the perfect formal presentation which Mendelssohn himself drew from Bach.”

Mendelssohn, however, declared it a “wretched sonata” in a letter to his friend Karl Klingemann on New Year’s Day, 1839, and began to revise its opening movement. He only completed 151 measures, leaving it to Menuhin to confine the two versions in his edition. Mendelssohn intended the score, written at a time of feverish activity as both conductor and pianist, for Ferdinand David, his concertmaster in Leipzig and a distinguished soloist who was to procure the well-known D minor Violin Concerto seven years later. Both violinists and pianists were virtuoso performers, and this is reflected in the exhilaration of an urgently driven opening movement and a whirlwind finale in which both instruments share musical ideas in a true duo-sonata manner. In-between, by way of contrast, Mendelssohn gives us a song-without-words-like sequence of variations on a soulful, reflective theme.

VIOLIN SONATA IN B MINOR, P.110
Otto Rimée Respighi (b. Bologna, Italy, July 9, 1879; d. Rome, April 18, 1936)
Composed 1916-17; 26 minutes

As a string player at a professional level (violin and viola) and as the pianist who gave the première of this sonata in Bologna in 1918, Ottorino Respighi brought a wealth of technique, experience and invention to its creation. He wrote it at the time that he, like Stravinsky, was working with Diaghilev (Le ballets russes) and writing the first of a colorful trilogy portraying Roman fountains, pines and festivals that would bring him international fame (Fountains of Rome, 1916). The sonata, his second, following a confident, impressive student work (1897), is an imposing piece of full-throated romanticism. It has had its champions in Mendelssohn’s lifetime since its creation, including Heifetz, but it has, nevertheless, remained on the side-lines of the repertoire. Its opening theme, restlessly ebbing and flowing over a brooding piano line, unsparingly wears its heart on its sleeve. Its harmonies occasionally reveal the modal inflections that would shortly become an integral feature of Respighi’s style. Together with the passacaglia structure of the finale (a sequence of variations over a recurring bass line), they look to the past — an era of musical history that the composer would avowly mince in the years to come, and to a heritage of baroque music that other Italian composers of the time were similarly beginning to re-work in a neoclassic manner. Four years later, Respighi would write his Concerto Gregoriano for violin, inspired by the even older Italian heritage of plainchant.

The violin sonata inhabits a late romantic sound-world where the violin’s high-singing second theme soars ever higher, often over symphonic-like sonorities from the piano. Throughout, with economical, purposeful development of his musical ideas, Respighi incorporates much rhythmic and metrical interest within his melodic writing, even in the generously lyrical, intensely emotional slow movement. The 20 variations of the finale are heralded by a vigorous declaration of its dotted-note theme low in the piano. The mood varies widely throughout and builds to a tremendous climax, at the beginning of which the violin double- and triple-stops its way through the theme to an impressive close.

SONATA IN D MINOR, FOR SOLO VIOLIN, OP. 27, No. 3 (BALLADE)
Eugène Ysaÿe (b. Liège, Belgium, July 16, 1858; d. Brussels, May 12, 1931)
Composed 1924; 8 minutes

Ysaÿe’s eight violin concertos remain unpublished. His best-known compositions include a set of six violin sonatas, Op. 27 from 1924. They were inspired by a performance of a solo Bach sonata by the young Joseph Szegi. The two musicians discussed the small amount of substantial music in the solo violin repertoire. Ysaÿe wished to rise to the challenge and retreated to his seaside villa at La Zoute and within 24 hours came up with an outline of six new sonatas, “conceived through and for the violin.” He spent the next few weeks preparing the works for publication. Each sonata is dedicated to and, to some degree, inspired by a leading violinist of the younger generation. Stylistically progressive, Ysaÿe’s violin writing poses technical challenges that had not been encountered since Paganini almost a century earlier. The third and shortest sonata is dedicated to Romanini composer and violinist Georges Enesco and, by design, it reflects the character of its dedicatee. “I have let my imagination wander at will,” Ysaÿe wrote of this single-movement sonata. “The memory of my friendship and admiration for Georges Enesco and the performances we gave together . . . have done the rest.” The effect of this quasi-improvisatory music is cumulative, and the music builds to an intense and virtuoso conclusion.

VIOLIN SONATA NO. 1, IN D MINOR, OP. 75
Camille Saint-Saëns (b. Paris, France, October 9, 1835; d. Algiers, Algeria, December 16, 1921)
Composed 1885; 23 minutes

Like Franck, Saint-Saëns incorporates the idea of cyclical reworking of a musical idea in the D minor Violin Sonata, which he wrote in 1885, after he had already composed three violin concertos. The first two and the last two movements are related and played attacca, with the only break falling after the slow movement. The opening Allegro agitato introduces two themes, of which the second is brought back in varying appearances. After several such appearances, the movement fades away into the lyrical, improvisation-like Adagio. An idea from this slow movement is taken up as the five-note theme of the dedicately drawn Scherzo, itself built, unusually, from five-bar phrases. The main cyclical theme of the sonata recurs throughout the whirlwind, moto perpetuo finale.

While concert audiences have often favored Carnival of the Animals over his more serious work, Saint-Saëns dashed the piece off as a witty joke while on vacation. He suppressed it throughout his lifetime to maintain a reputation as a serious composer. Gounod saw his fellow countryman as “the French Beethoven,” a comparison that would have pleased the proud, ambitious Saint-Saëns, who became increasingly intolerant of modern music as he got older. Debussy, on the other hand, recognized that Saint-Saëns essentially re-created and amalgamated existing styles. He summed up the older composer as “the musician of tradition.” Much of Saint-Saëns’s music is unmistakably French in character. It is finely crafted and proportioned, polished and balanced, with a keen sense of where it belongs in the order of things.