

Ensemble for the Romantic Century
and FI:AF (French Institute Alliance Française)
in collaboration with
MIFA: Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts

present

From the Earth to the Moon
a theatrical concert

Thursday, June 5, 2008 at 8PM
at FIAF's Florence Gould Hall

by **Eve Wolf**

Music by **Chausson, Chaminade, Stephen Foster, Gottschalk**

Directed by **Donald T. Sanders**
Set & Costume Design by **Vanessa James**
Lighting Design by **Beverly Emmons**

Eve Wolf & Max Barros ERC Artistic Directors
James Melo ERC Musicologist in Residence
Donald T. Sanders MIFA Executive Artistic Director

Jules Verne	Simon Fortin
Nelly Bly	Jennifer Aylmer
Honorine Verne	Ultra Violet

Arnaud Sussmann, violin
Maurycy Banaszek, viola
Karen Ouzounian, cello
Eve Wolf, piano
Max Barros, piano
Jennifer Aylmer, soprano

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sponsorship of this concert.

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City Department of Cultural Affairs.

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PROGRAM

- ERNEST CHAUSSON Piano Trio in G minor, op. 3
-- Animé
- ERNEST CHAUSSON Piano Quartet in A major, op. 30
-- Simple et sans hâte
- STEPHEN FOSTER *Nelly Bly*, arr. for piano, banjo, and strings
- CÉCILE CHAMINADE Piano Trio in G minor, op. 11
-- Presto leggiero

LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK *Union: Paraphrase de concert*

- CÉCILE CHAMINADE Piano Trio in A minor, op. 34
-- Allegro energico

INTERMISSION

- CÉCILE CHAMINADE Piano Trio in A minor, op. 34
-- Lento
- STEPHEN FOSTER *Nelly Bly*
- JOE HART *The Globe-Trotting Nelly Bly*, arr. for violin, cello, piano,
banjo, harmonica
- STEPHEN FOSTER *Beautiful Dreamer*
- ERNEST CHAUSSON Piano Trio in G minor, op. 3
-- Assez lent
- ERNEST CHAUSSON Piano Quartet in A major, op. 30
-- Animé

PROGRAM NOTES

Without Jules Verne, there is a strong possibility that we would never have romanced our way to the moon.

(Ray Bradbury, science-fiction writer)

I am the only living thing in the world; all life is concentrated in my beating heart alone!
(Axel, in Jules Verne's *The Journey to the Center of the Earth*)

The most paradoxical fact about the life and career of Jules Verne (1828-1905), author of some of the most fantastic and visionary adventures ever written, is that he was little more than an armchair traveler. Except for three brief excursions abroad in his youth (to England and Scotland, then to Scandinavia, and lastly to the United States) and a famous trip around the Mediterranean later in his life, Jules Verne never set foot in any environment exotic enough to inspire the settings of his most adventurous novels. A combination of circumstances conspired to render him all but unable to explore the world with the same zest displayed by his most memorable characters. His health was never very good, and he suffered throughout his life from persistent digestive problems that were probably the result of Crohn's disease. He settled very early in his life into that kind of bourgeois marriage that was convenient but devoid of passion. He had been looking for a young marriageable woman of means, and he found it in the person of Honorine de Viane Morel, a young widow whom he married in 1857 and who became important in fostering his literary career. Honorine had a brother with connections to the Paris stock exchange, and through him Verne found work as a stockbroker. His marital arrangements allowed Verne to lay aside financial considerations, and his comfortable situation made it easier for him to embrace a routine that remained remarkably consistent for the rest of his life. As a third factor, in 1886 Verne's favorite nephew, Gaston, attacked him in a fit of dementia and shot him in the shin, which caused Verne to limp for the rest of his life and severely limited his ability to walk. All in all, the creator of some of the most brashly adventurous characters in literature was bound to live a remarkably uneventful life. Through the sheer power of his imagination, however, Jules Verne created a rich alternative reality, vicariously expanding his comfortable and secure existence through the fantastic experiences of his characters. One of Verne's earliest biographers offered a perceptive summary of his aesthetic outlook:

Verne was a Peter Pan, who created a self-consistent world in which real evil or real women had no place; in which the man of action was both the ideal and the norm, and adventure the prevailing pattern; in which a peripatetic curiosity, a love of the mysterious and a penchant for practical jokes were an accepted part of human behavior. (Kenneth Allott, *Jules Verne*, 1954; reprinted in 1970).

Another interpretation points to the paradoxes that informed Verne's fiction, and which were in many ways a sublimation of the paradoxes of his own life:

Verne shows man as caught between salvation and desire, the beaten track and the unexplored horizon, the contentment of closure and the voluptuousness of open space, phlegm and passion, and the word and the spirit. His prophetic literal-mindedness topples over into poetic ecstasy, and effects a subtle but far-reaching shift in our ways of seeing and feeling the world. (William Butcher, *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography*, 2006).

In Verne's early years, there was no hint of the kind of writer he would eventually become. He rebelled against his father by refusing to embrace a legal career, and went on to cultivate his interests in music, theater, and writing in general. In his youth, he achieved some success with light comedies, satirical plays, and a few operettas, but there is no trace of these early efforts in the adventure novels for which he became best known.

Music was to remain an important component of Verne's life. He was himself an amateur pianist, wrote librettos for operettas (his favorite musical genre) and comic operas by his friend Aristide Hignard (1822-1898), and was consistently attuned to the musical trends of his time, some of which are reflected in the preferences and lifestyles of his fictional characters. For instance, the hero of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Captain Nemo, carries interesting autobiographical overtones. Like Verne himself, Nemo nurtures a passion for freedom, music, and the sea. The library of the *Nautilus*, the submarine in which Nemo sets out to explore the depths of the sea, contains musical scores that may reflect Verne's taste, including works by Weber, Rossini, Mozart, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, Gounod, and Victor Massé. Wagner is also represented, even though Verne was a lifelong anti-Wagnerian. In moments of great tension Nemo would improvise on his fantastic piano-organ, an activity that was an important part of his routine, just a piano playing was important for Verne. Music features prominently in many other novels by Verne. In *Propeller Island* (1895) he traces the adventures of a group of French musicians (a string quartet) aboard a ship floating in the Pacific and inhabited only by millionaires. The novel includes passages where several characters reflect on the aesthetics of Western music and some of its major composers, as they come into contact with the exotic musical practices of an indigenous people whom they meet. In the little-known short story *Mr. D-sharp and Ms. E-flat*, published in *Le Figaro* in 1893, Verne provides a discussion of quarter-tones that is strikingly prescient in its foreshadowing of future compositional trends. Another example is *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, a novel that remained unpublished in Verne's lifetime, and whose central character is a prize-winning musician through whose eyes the imagined life of the modern metropolis is envisioned.

Verne's conversion to science fiction led to a dramatic change in his career. According to a much-quoted anecdote, one day Verne announced to his colleagues at the stock market that he was quitting his job to write a kind of novel that would make him much richer than any of them. It is said that his colleagues laughed at him, but Verne warned them to wait and see who would laugh the longest. The anecdote has not been proved, but Verne's debut novel, *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1862), was indeed an immediate success. It was published by Pierre-Jules Hetzel, by then the foremost publisher of literature in

France. Hetzel became Verne's lifelong mentor, friend, and promoter. Their collaboration was an example of perfect symbiosis between a creative artist and the publicity apparatus on which fame is often based. Together, they seemed to demonstrate in practice the famous dictum by Seneca, according to which "luck happens when opportunity meets preparedness." Hetzel not only provided Verne with a dependable publishing arrangement, but he also saw to it that Verne's writing met the expectations of his readers through a sustained and self-renewing publicity machine. The basic ingredients of Verne's fiction were fully established at the very outset of his career: there is always a group of male adventurers with sharply differentiated personalities, placed in an exotic and sometimes fantastic setting (which is described in minute detail), who undergo a succession of dangers and challenges, all of which they overcome through the use of some ingenious means of transportation and the mastery of complex technical difficulties. This formula was recycled in Verne's novels through a perpetually varied combination of all the ingredients, in a "complete marriage of romantic poetry and nineteenth-century science," in the words of Kenneth Allott.

Following the success of *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, Verne settled into a strict creative routine from which he almost never wavered. He wrote every morning, in spite of several physical ailments that plagued him for most of his life. In addition to short stories and essays, he produced approximately 60 novels, 54 of which were grouped under the general title *Extraordinary Voyages*, and most of which met with great public success. His reputation underwent constant reevaluation. Although he was viewed with condescension by French literary critics of the early 20th century, today he is firmly established in the French literary canon.

THE ELEMENTS OF *FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON*

From the Earth to the Moon, the closing concert in ERC's series *Imaginings*, is a multi-level production in which textual, musical, and visual elements coalesce in order to unleash an imaginary voyage through time and space. Each of these elements spring from a common ground, namely, the human desire to transcend physical boundaries and explore the limits of imagination. This is especially true in the project of the American enterprising journalist Nelly Bly (1864-1922), who set out to recreate in practice (and even surpass) the journey depicted in Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Bly, whose real name was Elizabeth Jane Cochrane, worked first for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* and, later, for the *New York World*. At the time, female journalists wrote under a pen name, and "Nelly Bly" was chosen for her by the editor of the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, inspired by the character in the popular song by Stephen Foster. Bly became known for her unorthodox methods and her almost militant feminism. She favored a hands-on approach, preferring to enter into the experiences of her subjects, most famously when she feigned insanity in order to enter the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island and expose the brutal treatment to which the patients were subjected. This headlong approach characterized her entire journalistic career, and it should be no surprise that in 1889 she set out to prove the possibilities of Verne's fictional voyage around the world. She departed for her 24,899-mile journey on 14 November 1889 from Hoboken, and returned to New York "seventy-two days, six hours, eleven minutes and fourteen

seconds” later, thus setting a record for such an enterprise. During her journey, which she undertook alone, she traveled by every conceivable means of transportation, and her prowess in overcoming adverse conditions mimicked the adventures of many of Verne’s characters, none of whom is female. She kept the readers of the *New York World* continuously informed of her progress, and a trip to Europe was offered to the person who could come closest to guessing her finish time. Reportedly, almost one million entries were submitted to the newspaper, which sold more copies than ever before.

In some sense, Nelly Bly showed in practice that women were as equally capable as men of broaching unsuspected frontiers, a notion that was certainly not lost on Jules Verne himself, whom she met face-to-face at his home in Amiens on 23 November 1889. This historical encounter is embedded in tonight’s script, providing a real counterpart to another voyage inspired by Jules Verne’s writings, this time the visionary film by Georges Méliès, *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902), based on Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon Direct in 97 Hours* (1865) and elements from H.G. Wells’ *First Men in the Moon* (1901). The film is the first example of cinematic science fiction, a 14-minute masterpiece that displays a bewildering array of technical devices. It was Méliès who developed the art of special effects in the early years of cinema, and *Le voyage dans la lune* provides a template for some of these techniques, such as double exposure, actors performing with themselves over split screens, and the use of dissolve and fadeout. The film is composed of approximately thirty scenes or skits, all without any dialogue or closeups. Méliès himself wrote the script, acted in the film in the lead role, and designed all the sets and costumes. It is remarkable how accurate Verne’s predictions were. The real Apollo program is foreshadowed almost verbatim in the novel: that it would be done by Americans, that they would quarrel about the proper technological means, that Texas and Florida would compete for the program, that three astronauts would be onboard of cone-shaped capsule, that they would use rockets to escape the gravity of the moon, and that they would splash into the Pacific Ocean, from which they were recovered by the Navy. The novel, and the predictions it embodied, is one of the many examples in Verne’s oeuvre that reflect his lifelong fascination with American culture.

Verne’s fiction abounds in visual and fantastic imagery, to which the highly associative, sensorial, and coloristic French music of his time offers a fitting counterpart. During the late 19th century, when Verne was at the peak of his career, French music was undergoing significant transformations, of a kind that set it apart from other musical traditions in Europe. While post-Romanticism was spreading throughout Europe, France was embarking on an unprecedented wave of experimentation for which the several Expositions Universelles held in Paris provided an important catalyst. It was in France that the influx of exoticism was stronger than in any other European nation, and the exposure of French composers and artists to the bewildering array of trends and artifacts paraded in the Expositions Universelles opened the door to unsuspected aesthetic possibilities. Musical exoticism had always been a component of European music in the Romantic period, but in the late 19th and early 20th centuries it became one of the central features of French music. It was in the Expositions Universelles that composers became aware of musical traditions such as the Javanese gamelan, the classical music of the Far and Near East, and ethnic music from South America and many other places that were

deemed exotic at the time. In some respect, the attention given to these exotic musical cultures is part of the same milieu that was so receptive to Verne's fantastic voyages, all of which are set in distant, strange, exotic, or wholly imaginative environments. Exoticism provides an answer to the Romantic longing to transcend physical and geographical boundaries, insofar as it unveils worlds that are fragmentarily glimpsed in reality, but fully realized through the power of imagination. Verne was the quintessential visionary writer of his time, and his writings are informed by the same desire to explore alternative worlds that prompted the development of French music towards the extremely eclectic styles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nowhere else in Europe was such a drive towards experimentation, absorption of non-Western elements, and incorporation of new sound techniques as strong as in France. Later, these developments eventually led to the first explorations of music of an industrial and mechanical age, as in the *Ballet mécanique* of George Antheil and the concrete sound experiments of Varèse, Milhaud, Theremin, and Honegger, among others.

French composers have always had an innate talent for coloristic harmony, and this delight in the sensorial aspects of the sound gives French music a highly evocative character. It has been remarked that the French view of music can be summarized as "spraying the ears with rosewater and pepper" while some critics and literary scholars have also suggested that the richness of adjectives and descriptors in French literature can be compared to the varied harmonic palette of French music. Both techniques answer to the same need for sensorial association. Thus, Verne's literary visions are on a par with the contemporary tendency of French music to unveil new worlds of sound, extra-musical imagery, and forward-looking experimentation.

In general, French chamber music of the late 19th century emulated traditional models from the Classic and early Romantic periods. With very few exceptions, composers opted for recognized genres such as the sonata for solo instrument and piano, the string quartet, and various combinations of piano and strings. Within this traditional framework, however, French composers achieved a style of great subtlety and refinement, expressed through glimmering musical textures and dazzling sonorities. This chamber music tradition is perfectly embodied in the works by Ernest Chausson (1855-1899) and Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944).

Chausson's style evolved through a combination of Wagnerian influences and the revitalization of French music carried out by César Franck. Like Verne, Chausson settled into a domestic routine and led an uneventful existence that allowed him to tirelessly devote himself to his work, composing diligently every day. In his works, he attempted a synthesis between formal Classicism and the introspective element of Romanticism, which later were refashioned according to clearly Symbolist principles. An important feature of Chausson's style is his adventurous and forward-looking treatment of harmony, as he developed a harmonic palette that carried a strong potential for visual and symbolic associations. Chausson's chamber music is not very extensive, but whatever he composed in this medium is characterized by unflinching elegance and subtlety. The early *Piano Trio, op. 3*, offers a clear example of how Chausson was able to balance depth of expression with formal clarity. Composed in 1881, it is characterized by shapely melodic

lines supported by elegant harmonies. The emotional complexity of this early work is a remarkable achievement for a composer who had virtually no experience in composing chamber music at the time. By the time he composed the *Piano Quartet in A major, op. 30* (1897) Chausson was the peak of his career. He was buoyed by an increasingly enthusiastic reception of his works, and the premiere of the *Piano Quartet* met with widespread recognition by critics and public alike. The vitality and power of the music was remarked upon by many critics, and there was a general sense that Chausson's style had finally crystallized into the blend of formal clarity and emotional intensity, an atmosphere of passionate reverie that had been his goal as a composer. Sadly, he died 18 months later as a consequence of a trivial bicycle accident, leaving the world to speculate on what directions his music would have taken had he lived longer.

Like Nelly Bly in the field of journalism, Cécile Chaminade was also a pioneer as a professional woman composer in the context of fin-de-siècle Europe. In a field dominated by men, Chaminade reached impressive heights in a compositional career that was remarkable by all accounts. Almost all her compositions were published in her lifetime, and the popularity of her music was enhanced by her extensive concert tours. And yet, as the 20th century progressed, her music fell into continuing neglect, overshadowed by avant-garde trends, a growing dislike of post-Romantic French music, and the vagaries of social and aesthetic parameters attached to women composers. For example, while her concert tour of 12 American cities in 1908 met with general public success, critics fell back on the dual standards tainted by gendered aesthetics: pieces were either too sweet and charming (hence feminine) or too virile and intellectual to be typical of a woman. Chaminade's two *Piano Trios* (op. 11, from 181 and op. 34, from 1887) are steeped in the same tradition of French chamber music that nurtured the works of Chausson and many of her other contemporaries. There is nothing inherently feminine about these works, but rather a demonstration of strong individual talent brought to bear on a common musical heritage. Inevitably, but not detrimentally, echoes of Franck and Fauré are discernible in her music, but that is true of many other composers of the time. The accomplished musical forms and the expert handling of thematic materials in these two *Piano Trios* should be enough to dismiss the erroneous perception of Chaminade as nothing more than a charming composer of agreeable salon pieces.

Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880), undoubtedly the most successful French composer of operettas and comic operas, had an infallible instinct for the theatrical and the spectacular. These gifts are evident in the operetta *Le voyage dans la lune* (1875), loosely based on Verne's eponymous novel. The motivation for the composition of the operetta was the success of Verne's own theatrical adaptation of his novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*, which was staged at the Théâtre de Porte-Saint-Martin in 1874. Offenbach structured the operetta in 4 acts and 23 scenes, each with a highly distinct character. The excerpt in tonight's program, *Valse chantée*, represents the last moment before the rocket is propelled in its voyage to the moon. In the aria, the character Caprice envisions the world that she is about to encounter, in the company of fellow voyagers Vlan and Microscope. Offenbach called *Le voyage dans la lune* an *opéra-féerie* (a fairy-tale opera), a title that is in keeping with the visionary nature of its subject, and which is fully expressed in the charming *Valse chantée*.

American music in *From the Earth to the Moon* is represented by works of the pre-eminent American songwriter of the 19th century, Stephen Foster (1826-1864), dubbed by some “the father of American music,” and the most flamboyantly successful of all the American pianists of the Romantic period, Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869). Stephen Foster died young and impoverished, in spite of the great success achieved by his songs, many of which went on to become an indelible part of the American collective consciousness. Although many of his songs emulate the life of the South, Foster himself visited the region only once in his life. But the character of his music, blending folk traditions with a spontaneous handling of musical form, cuts across all regional boundaries. He made almost no money from the publication of his songs, since the concept of copyright did not exist at the time, and publishers indiscriminately issued multiple copies of his songs without paying him anything for the sales. To complicate matters, when Foster was beginning to carve a career in New York, the outbreak of the Civil War severely affected the market for music. *Beautiful Dreamer*, one of his most beloved and iconic songs, was published shortly after his death. As for *Nelly Bly*, which became extremely popular, it can be said to stand at the inception of Nelly Bly’s remarkable career by providing her with her pen name; as another expression of her fame, Joe Hart’s *Globe-trotting Nelly Bly*, written in honor of her groundbreaking voyage, reflects the fascination of her public with Bly’s enterprising spirit.

Gottschalk’s career as a composer was hindered by the prejudice that Europeans attached to American music, a bias that lasted for the entire 19th century. For instance, when he applied for a place at the Paris Conservatoire in 1842, Gottschalk was rejected by Pierre Zimmermann, the director of piano classes, without even being granted an audition. According to an entry in Gottschalk’s diary, Zimmermann had remarked that “the Conservatoire was no place for an American, since this country was only a land of steam engines, a country of railroads but not of musicians.” However, during his ten-year residence in Europe, Gottschalk overcame all these prejudices to become one of the most successful pianists of the time. He soon became a regular at the most prestigious salons and concert halls, dazzling audiences with his phenomenal technique. By all accounts, Gottschalk and his music were exotic to the Europeans, who had at once a distrustful and fascinated attitude toward faraway and exotic places. In 1848, a review in *La France musicale* offered a glimpse into this frame of mind, as the writer remarked: “We have discovered a Creole composer; an American composer, *mon Dieu!*... [his music] is wild, languishing, indescribable, and has no resemblance to any other European music.” *Union*, a piece written in the model of the *paraphrase de concert* that was typical of European salon music, encapsulates all the elements of Gottschalk’s style: accessibility, dazzling virtuosity, simple and memorable tunes, and brilliant sound effects. The piece incorporates some immediately recognizable American tunes (such as “Yankee Doodle”) into a pianistic texture that covers the entire gamut of the keyboard. *Union* was written as a contribution to the Civil War efforts and was dedicated to General George McClellan. Gottschalk was an abolitionist, and during the war he performed *Union* at several concerts in the North and East. He performed the piece for President Lincoln in 1864, and then in 1865 as part of a memorial service following Lincoln’s assassination.

The imaginative quality of Verne's writings continues to appeal to a wide audience, not only to the juvenile public who is introduced to the unsuspected worlds captured in Verne's vividly evocative prose, but to mature readers and fellow writers who value the unbounded nature of his visions. The alluring power of Verne's fiction was demonstrated very early in his career, as when he received a note from the celebrated writer George Sand in 1865:

I have only one regret concerning your stories, which is to have finished them and not to have a dozen more to read... I hope that you will soon take us to the depths of the sea and have your characters navigate in diving vessels that your science and imagination will manage to improve.

Obviously, Jules Verne did more than that. His adventures created a parallel universe where the imagination runs free, perpetually reaffirming humanity's desire to transcend its limits.

James Melo
Musicologist in residence