



Magazine Issues Book Reviews Collections Feature Articles Hall of Fame
Labels Reviewers Want Lists

Composers & Works Conductors Ensembles & Orchestras Instrumentalists
Performers Singers

Levon Ambartsumian, violin Evgeny Rivkin, piano



...Ambartsumian is one of those violinists who has the capacity to accomplish everything technically and expressively, with such ease that his playing seems almost effortless. He is a greatly cultivated musician, always finding the right sound to convey his intentions.

...Rivkin manages to have fluidity in his phrasing without ever skating over the music's emotional substance. Technically he is an astounding player, with a warm yet robust sound that never obscures his digital bravura.

Dave Saemann, *Fanfare*

...This is an exceptionally beautiful album. The idea of pairing two concertos for violin and piano in contrasting styles makes for invigorating listening. The performers are outstanding.



Feature Article by [Jerry Dubins](#)

Levon Ambartsumian—Round Two

It was only seven months ago, in 42:3, that I interviewed violinist Levon Ambartsumian and reviewed his recording of Prokofiev's violin sonatas. That interview, while extensive, seemed on reflection to have begun somewhere in the middle of Levon's long and distinguished career,

leaving out his early years in Russia, his training, and his teaching experiences. Recently, Levon sat down for an interview with Ivan Semkin of Moscow's Philharmonic Magazine that fills in those gaps, and with Semkin's permission, and courtesy of Ambartsumian's daughter, who translated the interview into perfect English, we were able to use much of it for this follow-up Fanfare interview.

How did you first come to music and the violin?

On one side, it was ordinary, but on the other, not so much. My parents were not musicians. My mother was a pediatrician, and my father was a military engineer. I found music in an amusing way. We moved to our new Moscow apartment when I was three years old. There was a music school close by, that occupied an entire floor in a regular public school; my older sister went there to play piano. Since I was only three years old, I was led there by the hand to play in the sand by the school. So, I played. One day, an old man (I can imagine he was younger than I am now) happened to approach me, and asked me: "Little boy, do you want to play the violin?" "Of course, I do," was my answer. So, I went with him and began to play violin. He made a tiny violin for me and started teaching me in that school.

Who was he, that mystery man?

His name is not well known at all. He was an old orchestral musician. He just put the violin in my left hand (my three-year old hands), and that's how it all started. It was 1958, the year of the first Tchaikovsky Competition; in that atmosphere I began to study violin.

Who was one of your more influential teachers, and how did you come to study with him?

It is hard to say, since all of them have significantly influenced me, in different ways though. If to choose just one, probably it would be Yankelevich. I got into his studio when I was in seventh grade. Before that, I have studied in Gnessin Music School with a brilliant teacher, Mikhail Garlitzky, who began seriously to teach me how to play violin. I studied with him for a long time, but his health started to decline and he passed away soon after. Following the advice of some acquaintances, I played for Yankelevich and he immediately took me into his studio. That is how I got into the Moscow Conservatory Central Music School [CMS].

Who were some of your classmates?

My class at CMS was amazing. I'm not sure there has been a class like it since then. Some of my classmates included violinists Aleksei Bruni, the current concertmaster of the Russian National Orchestra; Il'ya Grubert, a winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition; Andrei Gavrilov, another winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition; and several more less well-known people, also winners of major competitions such as the Tchaikovsky and Queen Elisabeth.

Was there competition in your studio? Or were you all good friends?

I didn't think of the atmosphere there in that way. Of course, there was tough competition; it was a "star" school and a "star" class. I think we should have been competing with each other, but I

don't recall. We all played soccer, chased after girls, went skiing, and swimming together. The competition motivated us to do better and helped a lot. When someone close to you is "sawing" away on the violin better than you are, you need to match him.

So healthy competition, without any desire to belittle your peers?

Of course. One played Paganini better, the other played Tchaikovsky better. Everyone admitted it and no one was offended by it.

What were your personal feelings about practicing the violin? Was it easy to practice? Or did you have to force yourself?

I can speak for myself and for many others. Very few people enjoy practicing; it's inherent to not like to work. But when I was admitted to CMS, I became conscious of the importance of practicing, and I became much more motivated. That was when I began to enjoying practicing.

Did you listen to LP recordings?

I listened to a lot. There was no good equipment at the time, only our old-fashioned turntable, "Yubileynyi," that had two parts to it. There were a lot of LP recordings in our home, since my parents were music lovers. Most of it was vocal music. For me, it all started with the violin recordings of Leonid Kogan playing the Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1, and Heifetz playing Saint-Saëns's Rondo Capriccioso and Sarasate's Zigeunerwiesen. When I happened to have around two rubles in my pocket in the third or fourth grade, I could go to the record store with my mother. Everything that was available at that moment had to be bought.

When you were studying, did your teachers physically show you methods of technique or did they mostly explain with words?

These are very different teaching styles and it fully depends on the teacher and his or her individuality. I was lucky to encounter all different approaches at their best. And here I need to mention the names of my major professors.

Felix Andrievsky, who was an assistant to Yankelevich at that time and later became a professor of Royal College in London, who for some reason did not become a performer but dedicated himself instead to teaching, could demonstrate perfectly. But most importantly, he understood the nature and technology of the instrument. The combination of understanding of theory and practice: This balance in his teaching was close to perfect. This was my first exposure to true pedagogy.

After that, there was Yankelevich, who left a strong impression on me and greatly influenced me. Students came to lessons with him with already prepared programs. His assistants did some work prior to that, so with him there was only polishing and working on details, on a much higher level. He also played very well, and could take his violin and demonstrate some methods, maybe not perfectly, but clearly enough that you could just pick up on it and instantly play even better. Oftentimes it was even more helpful when he sang a phrase and asked you to play it like that.

You couldn't copy it exactly, but you could catch the main idea. So, this combination of explaining with words and showing with gestures and singing a phrase is what created great results with all his students.

Leonid Kogan had a very different approach to teaching. I think his violin was in his hands 24/7, and sometimes he played quite a lot during your lesson and made pretty discouraging comments, which did not allow much room for your personal feelings and musical ideas. But I learned a lot from him in regards to left-hand technique, fingering in particular, and also musical style, which is almost an unknown territory to many modern violinists.

Then it was a wonderful violinist, Igor Bezrodny, whose teacher, Yampolsky, basically placed the violin in his hands at a very early age, and he played perfectly from then on. When he later had his own students, and they played something incorrectly, Bezrodny didn't have much to suggest. Instead of giving direct advice or saying "Well, just go practice," he would look for alternative solutions, which not everybody could understand. However, he was a Musician (with a capital M) and an experienced conductor. He pushed my musical imagination a lot and broadened my musical horizons.

How important is it for a student to imitate?

You can't not imitate when you are young. Especially when you hear something you like, you want to copy it right away. We all copied someone. When Spivakov came onstage, all of us wanted to play like him, so we started to use intensive vibrato. When Tretyakov played, everybody wanted to play with the full bow, ambitiously. Boris Belkin came to our class. He had a high elbow, and instantly we all wanted to play with the same high elbow. However, our professor was not happy with that. But imitating is very important. I also tell my students, "This can't be explained with words; listen to Oistrakh and try to copy his phrasing. For sure you won't be able fully to copy it, but maybe later you will gain something from this." Then listen to Heifetz, whom you also can't fully imitate. But don't copy his glissando and all of the superficial effects, which to my regret happens most of the time. Imitation is one of the most important aspects in the development. When we don't know anything, what else but imitation is there?

How many concerts should a musician play to feel validated and physically in shape?

It depends. Gidon Kremer didn't feel quite himself if he wasn't playing 250 concerts per year. I think it shouldn't be more than 100 concerts per year. A tour of 10 concerts is normal. And there are six to seven tours like that.

Have you established ensembles with the pianists with whom you collaborated for a long time? Or did you have different pianists more often?

It depended on the program. For my concert tours to the further parts of Russia, I could not invite a laureate of the Tchaikovsky competition. There were collaborative pianists, different ones, amazing ones. And there were partners on an amicable level, as friends, such as pianist Nikolai Demidenko and Evgeny Rivkin, with whom I still play to this day.

There were a lot of political events happening from 1986 to 1991. Did they influence your life in any way?

They did in a very crucial way. We have to go back to 1979, when I became restricted from leaving. There were no exact reasons, but there are different explanations as to why I could not go to the West. Well before that, I'd performed at the international competition in Canada, and after that, it all ended. Probably, there was some kind of accusation against me, even though there was no such thing associated with me. I was loyal. It all started for me in the golden age for a musician, 25 years old. For nine years I was allowed to go only to the other Socialist countries. I accompanied the conservatory's delegations to Budapest and Berlin. But when I wanted to play at a chamber ensemble competition in Munich, they wouldn't let me go, saying I was restricted. Finally, I was free to go in 1988, but by that time, in terms of having a successful career, the train had long since left the station.

But then you began to receive invitations

Yes, I was invited to Indiana University. Its music department, the Jacobs School of Music, is one of the most prestigious in the States. There was an urgent need for a replacement for Joseph Gingold (Joshua Bell's teacher), who had fallen ill. There were a lot of big names discussed, but I was the only one who matched the criteria. So, I went to teach there, in a very prestigious place, for good money.

You are also a conductor. How did that happen?

Also by a sheer coincidence. It happened in Moscow during the years of Perestroika, around 1988 to 1989, when suddenly orchestras started growing like mushrooms. So, I was invited to conduct one of those orchestras, which mainly consisted of students. I didn't have that many concert tours, and started during my fourth year. My conservatory professor at the time asked me to guide his students, since he toured very often with the Moscow Chamber Orchestra and was gone for half a year at a time.

Meanwhile, I was teaching all of his students, even the ones who were older than myself. I liked the chamber orchestra. At first it was called All-Union Music Society Orchestra. Later, we changed the name to ARCO, got into the concert series of the Moscow Philharmonic, and went on tour to West Germany and Spain. At first I just played Vivaldi concertos. Then I invited friends, and we played double concertos with different instruments. Then I started to conduct a bit, and took several lessons from Vladimir Ziva, a talented young conductor who later earned quite a big name in Russia.

After that, there was quite a long period when Valery Gergiev was principal conductor of the Yerevan Philharmonic Orchestra and Temirkanov's assistant conductor at Saint Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater. He was constantly traveling between these two cities, and the half-way point between them was my Moscow apartment, and he would stop at my place when traveling. At the time, we performed together a lot in Yerevan, Minsk, and in Moscow. I would observe, and asked him to show me some things. Back then he conducted very differently, visually. But he is a

fantastically gifted man, and there was nothing better in my life than to play Mozart, Bartók, and Khachaturian with him. Formally, though, I did not study conducting with anyone.

Was the idea realized when you left for Indiana?

No, my orchestra stayed in Moscow, and I was coming back and playing concerts. When I left for Georgia and was able to get several generous stipends and a position for an assistant, I took five people from Moscow. They formed the core of my orchestra. At first, I engaged professors, and later on I developed some of my own advanced students. ARCO became a half-professional, half-student string orchestra, which has been around for 20 years now. We played everything that can be played from the Classical repertoire, not even talking about endless numbers of Baroque and contemporary compositions.

Have you invited woodwinds?

Yes, but every time it's quite problematic. Either you have to ask them to volunteer or you have to pay them. Sometimes we play Mozart or Haydn symphonies. We were able to perform compositions of my friends, the Moscow-based composers Efrem Podgaitis and Mikhail Bronner—everything they wrote for violin or chamber orchestra in the past 15 years. Almost everything was performed by me at the Moscow Autumn festival (a festival of world premieres), as well as performed and recorded in the U.S. We have released about 10 CDs.

Throughout your music career you had to perform all kinds of music. You mentioned Moscow composers, your friends, whose music you've performed. Can you name composers who are close to your heart, whose music you like to perform?

This changes with age. I like different music during different periods of my life. Like all normal young people, I was "crazy" about Romantic, virtuosic music. I played all Paganini, Sarasate, Wieniawski—it was impossible to stay away from that. That was one period. Then I had a period of more serious Romanticism: Brahms, Franck, Sibelius. After that there was a very long period when Bartók "inhabited" me. That was like an obsession; I just couldn't get rid of it. I've played his music everywhere, everything I could. It was on the verge of insanity. But that period also passed. At another point, I decided that I didn't like anyone except Schubert. And after that Brahms came again.

Do you listen to a lot of music now?

I don't listen to music intentionally. I listen a lot to the radio channel with classical music played 24/7—it's always on. Or when I'm driving—the satellite channel also playing classical music.

What would you wish for the young men and women of today?

I would wish for today's youth what our parents wished for us—to be educated, respectable, honest, and healthy.

This ends the major portions we've excerpted from your Philharmonic Magazine interview. I would like now to bring us to the present and ask you to answer a few questions about your recently released Centaur CD, which contains performances of Mendelssohn's Concerto for Violin, Piano, and Strings and Chausson's Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet in your own orchestral arrangement. Let's start with the Chausson. What exactly did you do to "arrange" it, and what was your motivation for doing so?

I will start with motivation. Chausson was considered a composer of just one work, at least that's how we thought of him in Russia. His adored Poème has been performed by virtually all famous violinists and was one of the most beloved compositions in this format.

When I first came across a recording of his Double Concerto with String Quartet, it didn't impress me too much, probably because of a poor performance. The music seemed weak and the solo instruments felt excessively dominant. Later, after playing Mendelssohn's Double Concerto many times, I decided to take a second look at the Chausson. It was then that I realized the music wasn't as weak as I thought earlier. So, I came up with an idea to reinforce the sound of the quartet by adding a double bass part, and to increase the number of players in the orchestra to a full complement of strings, making some small adjustments to the existing parts. It was easy to do, and it paid off. It was a huge success.

Earlier in our interview, you mentioned Evgeny Rivkin, a friend and pianist you've been playing with for a long time. He is the pianist in both the Mendelssohn and Chausson on your CD. Tell me more about your relationship with him. How far back do the two of you go? Did you originally meet in Russia?

Yes, we had been studying at the same time at the Moscow Conservatory, and we started to play together soon after. You can check out quite a lot of our performances on my YouTube channel dating back to 1990s. Now he is my colleague at the University of Georgia, and he continues to teach, perform, and record CDs. To date, we've made quite a few duo CDs of music by Brahms, Schubert, and Bartók.

Mendelssohn composed his so-called "Double" Concerto, the one for violin, piano, and strings, in 1823, when he was 14 years old, and it's not even his first concerted work for solo instrument(s) and orchestra. His famous Violin Concerto, of course, the one in E Minor, op. 64, didn't come until 22 years later in 1845, and it's actually his last major orchestral work, a fact belied by the chronologically messed-up opus numbering of his catalog. How does the solo violin part in the early "Double" Concerto compare to the solo part in the much later, mature concerto?

This concerto, by all means, is related to his other Violin Concerto in D Minor (MWV O3), which he wrote at about the same age. Both are in same key, and both show that he was such a genius/prodigy, comparable maybe only to Mozart.

You might be surprised, but I find some melodies from both youthful concertos at some points more beautiful than in the later one. There are some places that almost bring tears to my eyes while I'm playing. I can tell you that a few times after my performances, people came backstage,

telling me it was the first time they heard this music, and that they liked it even more than the famous E-Minor Concerto.

Of course, the E-Minor concerto is a gem, perfectly composed and orchestrated, and the quality of the music is unbelievable throughout. His youthful concertos, on the contrary, have some musically “empty” spots and some primitive passages, but they’re still worth playing for the fantastic melodies.

Not too many violinists have recorded Mendelssohn’s Double Concerto. What prompted you to record it?

The answer is very simple. There is an outstanding recording made by Kremer and Argerich, so Rivkin and I took the challenge to see if we could do it as well as they did.

In both the Mendelssohn and Chausson, it’s your ARCO Chamber Orchestra we hear. What future plans do you have for the ensemble, and also for yourself in your multiple roles as violin soloist, conductor, arranger, and educator?

I am not traveling much these days. I’ve limited myself to regular appearances, mainly here in the U.S., in Russia, and Brazil, where I play, teach, and conduct.

Here at UGA, I’ve been fortunate be able to record as much as I like, so I can produce an average of two CDs per year. My very next project is an all-Russian CD of orchestral music. It will come out this year on Centaur and includes music by Glinka, Arensky, and Mussorgsky. It is going to be a kind of world premiere recording, which I would like to explain. Two very popular compositions, Valse-fantasia by Glinka and Pictures at an Exhibition by Mussorgsky, have been arranged for chamber/string orchestra by the talented young Russian composer Igor Kholopov. He is a rising star in Russia now, and very successful in instrumental and theatrical music.

The other project would be released in Russia by Artservice, a small recording company, and a recording partner of mine for about 20 years. It is again all about arrangements, but unlike the Chausson, it’s much more than a little adjustment of the original. Therefore, I did not take on the responsibility for doing it myself. Instead, I asked my composer friends to do it for me. Needless to say, it would also be a world premiere recording: a Mozart Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, based on the violin/viola Duo G Major. Another young composer from Moscow, Ruslan Mursyakaev, was a co-arranger. Then there’s the Brahms Clarinet Sonata in F Minor, arranged for violin with orchestra by the same person, and Schubert’s Piano Fantasie in F Minor for Four Hands, turned into a violin concerto by Efram Podgaitis.

As for teaching, I would say it makes my life worthwhile.

Levon Ambartsumian, violin
Evgeny Rivkin, piano



...Ambartsumian is one of those violinists who has the capacity to accomplish everything technically and expressively, with such ease that his playing seems almost effortless. He is a greatly cultivated musician, always finding the right sound to convey his intentions.

...Rivkin manages to have fluidity in his phrasing without ever skating over the music's emotional substance. Technically he is an astounding player, with a warm yet robust sound that never obscures his digital bravura.

Dave Saemann, *Fanfare*

...This is an exceptionally beautiful album. The idea of pairing two concertos for violin and piano in contrasting styles makes for invigorating listening. The performers are outstanding.



 MENDELSSOHN Concerto for Violin, Piano, and Strings in d, MWV O4.1 CHAUSSON Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet in D, op. 21 (arr. Ambartsumian)2 • Levon Ambartsumian (vn, 1cond); 2Vladislav Bulakhov, cond; Evgeny Rivkin (pn); ARCO CO • CENTAUR 3707 (75:36) 1Live: Athens, Georgia 3/29/2008

It's hard to disagree with Levon Ambartsumian about the beauties of Mendelssohn's early Concerto in D Minor for Violin, Piano, and Strings. Clearly, the ease with which its melodic inspiration tumbles forth from the page, as if effortlessly and unbidden, gives us a glimpse into that mysterious power we call genius. But one also has to admit—and Levon does—that there are musically “empty” spots and some primitive passages in the concerto, which is hardly surprising, considering that the piece was written by a 14-year-old still under the influence of his teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter, with whom Mendelssohn had begun his studies of counterpoint and composition in 1819. Zelter introduced the teen to the works of Bach and others of the Baroque and Classical periods, which made an indelible impression on the budding young composer. But the reconciling of seemingly opposing interests—formal discipline vs. innovation—would not come until later.

By the time Mendelssohn got around to composing his much more famous and beloved Violin Concerto in E Minor, op. 64, in 1844—his last large-scale orchestral work—two of its oft-cited “innovations” were not new anymore to his concerted works for a solo instrument and orchestra. Those two innovations were 1) the entry of the soloist at the beginning, without the lengthy orchestral exposition; and 2) the bridging of the end of the first movement and the beginning of the second by means of an orchestral transition, thereby eliminating a big final cadence and full stop at the end of the first movement. Both of those novelties (was Mendelssohn the first to

introduce them? I don't know) are already present in the composer's two mature, numbered piano concertos, No. 1 in G Minor, op. 25 (1830–31), and No. 2 in D Minor, op. 40 (1837).

There was one major innovation, however, in the E-Minor Violin Concerto, though based on the two previous piano concertos, it was not only brilliant but inevitable. And that was the totally integrated cadenza, which, of necessity, now became the conclusion of the development section and the lead-in to the recapitulation. The brilliance of it, at least the string-crossing arpeggio part of it, may have been as much the brainchild of Ferdinand David as it was of Mendelssohn, but the cadenza's shift in location from its traditional place at the end of the movement was made inevitable by those two previous piano concertos.

Interestingly, neither of those has a cadenza. Mendelssohn hadn't figured out yet where to put them. If the first and second movements are now joined by a bridging transition, so that there is no pause between them, a traditional cadenza at the end of the first movement won't work. When he got to the E-Minor Violin Concerto, possibly with David throwing the light switch for him, the lightbulb came on for Mendelssohn. The cadenza didn't have to come at the end of the movement after all.

That was all in the future, of course, when a 14-year-old boy wrote the most amazing piece of music, a double concerto for violin, piano, and string orchestra. It is here performed with the amazing grace, sweetness of temperament, stylish flair, and technical aplomb the music calls for. In our interview, Levon cites the outstanding recording made by Gidon Kremer and Martha Argerich, and says that he and Evgeny Rivkin took up the challenge "to see if we could do it as well as they did." Levon is too modest. I have the Kremer/Argerich recording, and in my opinion, Ambartsumian and Rivkin surpass it, if not necessarily on the level of technical execution, surely in matters of grasping and projecting the period appropriate scale and musical style that inform the piece.

Chausson's Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet is a gorgeous piece of music; I don't think there's much argument about that. But it is a bit of a frustration for those of us who like to compartmentalize things into neatly predefined categories. Chausson's score poses the proverbial round-peg/square-hole dilemma. It doesn't seem to fit into any of the standard musical genres. Is it a concerted work for violin and piano with the orchestra reduced to a string quartet? Mozart did that in three of his piano concertos, so that wouldn't be new. Or is it some sort of hybrid chamber work, a string quartet with additional obbligato parts for a solo violin and piano?

In a happy coincidence of unintended consequences, Levon Ambartsumian solves the problem and answers the question for us. By adding a part for double bass and having the full string complement of his ARCO Chamber Orchestra take the place of the string quartet, he moves the piece into the same category as the Mendelssohn on this disc—i.e., the same category as any double concerto for two solo instruments and orchestra.

In general, as I think readers know, I'm not a big fan of arrangements or transcriptions of works, believing that the composer's final intentions are best respected and left as is. That doesn't mean, however, that I can't recognize a good arrangement or transcription when I hear one, and this one of the Chausson by Ambartsumian is very effective and as good as they get. It's easy to

understand why, for Levon tells us in his own words that he was respectful of the composer's original version. When you add a double bass part that doubles the cello or bass line, and then simply make photocopies of the string quartet's violin, viola, and cello parts and pass them out to your orchestral players, with maybe a few "small adjustments to the existing parts," what you've done, essentially, is simply beef up, bulk up, or volumize the sonic image, which increases its potential dynamic response in the forte range, while decreasing its potential response in the piano range. It's not rocket science: Nineteen string players (the number I count in the Arco Chamber Orchestra) can play louder than a string quartet, but they can't play as softly.

No doubt there are hundreds of such string quartet to string orchestra conversions, some made by the original composers themselves, others by other hands. One of the most arrestingly beautiful and the one that comes immediately to mind is Samuel Barber's own string orchestration of the slow movement of his String Quartet, op. 11, which has ever since been known as Barber's Adagio for Strings.

Chausson's Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet is relatively well represented on disc in its original scoring, but there is at least one version I know of that takes Ambartsumian's tack of performing the work in an arrangement for string orchestra. It's on a Cascavelle CD featuring Augustin Dumay and Jean-Philippe Collard with the Wallonie Royal Chamber Orchestra, reviewed by Adrian Corleonis in 30:2.

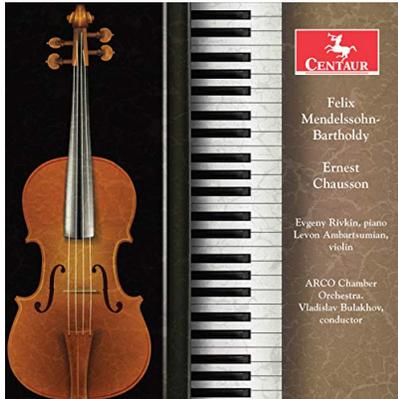
Corleonis's reaction to the uncredited Chausson arrangement was very interesting. At first, he felt that "the swelling of the Concert's string complement from quartet to string orchestra robs the work of its virtuosic eloquence—the astounding way in which Chausson suggests orchestral fullness with chamber music intimacy and compositional linearity." But by two sentences later, Corleonis seems to have been won over, writing, "Indeed, one may well return to favorite performances of the original with the nagging sensation of something lacking."

That observation seemed to echo something Ambartsumian said in our interview, to wit, that initially, "The music seemed weak and the solo instruments felt excessively dominant." I haven't heard the performance that Corleonis reviewed, but in any case, this version of the Concert as realized by Ambartsumian is his own and therefore unique. I can also say that for me, personally, it enhances rather than detracts from the original. I think Chausson would have given it his blessing, and perhaps even made the arrangement himself, had he thought of it in time, before pedaling his bicycle into a brick wall.

Ambartsumian and Rivkin make a superb duo, and conductor Vladislav Bulakhov leads the ARCO's players in a performance of limpid, shimmering beauty. I think this is the way I'm going to want to hear this work from now on. Urgently recommended. Jerry Dubins

 MENDELSSOHN Concerto for Violin, Piano, and Strings in d, MWV O4.1 CHAUSSON Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet in D, op. 21 (arr. Ambartsumian)2 • Levon

Ambartsumian (vn, 1cond); 2Vladislav Bulakhov, cond; Evgeny Rivkin (pn); ARCO CO • CENTAUR 3707 (75:36) 1Live: Athens, Georgia 3/29/2008



[Mendelssohn-Bartholdy: Concerto for Violin, Piano & Chamber Orchestra in D Minor; Chausson: Concerto for Violin, Piano & String Quartet \(arr. Ambartsumian\)](#)
[Audio CD](#)
[Centaur Records](#)



It's a nice idea to juxtapose two works that feature violin and piano as joint solo instruments with orchestra, and Mendelssohn and Chausson (the latter in an arrangement by Levon Ambartsumian) make for fine disc bedfellows.

The performance of the Mendelssohn is superb; it's a pity, then, that the recording errs on the reverberant side. The Concerto for Violin, Piano, and Chamber Orchestra is a delightful piece, in particular well served here by Ambartsumian's fine, singing tone and Rivkin's easy virtuosity. Both soloists are clearly fine chamber musicians, as they radiantly show in the cadenza at the very end of the first movement, the two being clearly of one mind. Mendelssohn's formal freedom in this piece, in which he effectively emancipates the soloists from the expected trajectory in the first movement by only having them share the second theme with the orchestra, is reflected in the sheer exuberance of his writing. The central Adagio, a bejeweled song for violin and piano, is magnificently done; it is here that Evgeny Rivkin shines. The finale opens as light as a soufflé, so that when the shadows come in the form of a chorale-like passage, they make all the more effect. The ARCO Chamber Orchestra is on bouncy, lively form throughout, most importantly able to be there with the soloists with millisecond precision. String articulation, too, is notable for its unanimity.

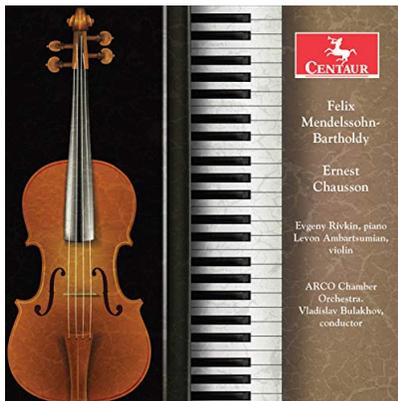
There are quite a few rival recordings of this piece available, prime among them Argerich/Kremer; but Ambartsumian and Rivkin offer their own form of magic, and the ear does acclimatize somewhat to the recording.

The Chausson offers a complementary performance to Centaur's recording of the original scoring by Bruno Monteiro and João Paulo Santos (see Fanfare 36:1); the recording itself is

tauter, more focused, than the Mendelssohn. Looking elsewhere for fine recordings of the original, Chandos offers a splendid performance via the Doric Quartet with Jennifer Pike and Tom Poster as soloists. In the present performance, the extended first movement is sustained through real intensity; the violinist's transcription is expertly managed, enhancing contrasts so that the tender moments really speak. This is especially true around the close of the movement. Another achievement of the transcription is to maintain the headiness of the chromatically inclined Sicilienne (the second movement); but it is in the violin/piano dialogue of the third panel that the resonance between Ambartsumian and Rivkin really comes to the fore. Here there is an harmonic darkening of the picture, relished to the full by the two soloists. This movement works to a white-heat climax. The finale is full of energy, the sense of danger in performance around the nine-minute mark adding to the experience. Arguably, transcribing the work foregrounds the soloistic element too much, as an effective way with the score is to see the violin and piano parts as privileged members of the ensemble as opposed to traditional "soloists"; yet the result is undeniably effective. Ambartsumian is an expert orchestrator, as textures are transparent throughout. The fact this is a live performance adds to the sense of all-round involvement (applause is retained at the work's close).

The recording dates of the works are very different: 1995 for the Mendelssohn (in Moscow) and 2008 for the Chausson (Athens), which of course accounts for the difference in recording approaches. This remains, however, a most satisfying coupling Colin Clarke

 MENDELSSOHN Concerto for Violin, Piano, and Strings in d, MWV O4.1 CHAUSSON Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet in D, op. 21 (arr. Ambartsumian) • Levon Ambartsumian (vn, 1cond); 2Vladislav Bulakhov, cond; Evgeny Rivkin (pn); ARCO CO • CENTAUR 3707 (75:36) 1Live: Athens, Georgia 3/29/2008



[Mendelssohn-Bartholdy: Concerto for Violin, Piano & Chamber Orchestra in D Minor; Chausson: Concerto for Violin, Piano & String Quartet \(arr. Ambartsumian\)](#)

[Audio CD](#)

[Centaur Records](#)



This is an exceptionally beautiful album. The idea of pairing two concertos for violin and piano in contrasting styles makes for invigorating listening. The performers are outstanding. I had the distinct pleasure of reviewing Levon Ambartsumian's CD of Prokofiev's two violin sonatas and Five Melodies in 42:3. Ambartsumian is one of those violinists who has the capacity to accomplish everything technically and expressively, with such ease that his playing seems almost effortless. He is a greatly cultivated musician, always finding the right sound to convey his intentions. In the Mendelssohn here, he plays with a focused but full tone, reminding me of Igor Oistrakh's wonderful monaural recording of Mendelssohn's mature Violin Concerto, conducted by the great Franz Konwitschny. For the Chausson, Ambartsumian espouses a sound reminiscent of the Franco-Belgian school of violin playing, with a tang somewhat like that of Augustin Dumay. This album also finds Ambartsumian in the capacity of arranger. Ernest Chausson was disappointed with his Concerto for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet, despite its favorable reception by the public. I must admit I always have found the instrumental balance in this work somewhat problematic. This orchestral arrangement by Ambartsumian for me presents a completion of Chausson's original concept. Now there is a gorgeous ebb and flow between soloists and orchestra, with a sonority reminiscent of Chausson's early symphonic movement *Viviane*. The ARCO Chamber Orchestra, a blend of professionals, students, and recent conservatory graduates, creates an atmosphere under Vladislav Bulakhov in the Chausson that shares the Pointillistic romance of the paintings of Georges Seurat. In the Mendelssohn, ARCO plays with a luminosity that gives an uncommon vibrance to the work.

Now I must focus on the amazing playing of pianist Evgeny Rivkin. He was a student of Evgeny Malinin, whom I heard give a deeply moving all-Chopin recital at Rutgers University in 1990. Like Malinin, Rivkin manages to have fluidity in his phrasing without ever skating over the music's emotional substance. Technically he is an astounding player, with a warm yet robust sound that never obscures his digital bravura. In the Mendelssohn, Rivkin has all the style of such great interpreters of this composer as Rudolf Serkin and Peter Katin. His Chausson never lets you forget that this Frenchman studied with one of the greatest of French keyboard artists, César Franck. Ambartsumian and Rivkin have collaborated for decades, and their duo playing in these concertos is thrilling, while always maintaining a due sense of proportion. I should add that in the Mendelssohn Double Concerto, ARCO uses the original version for strings, lacking the wind and timpani parts the composer added later. The sonority of the present version is truly miraculous, a testimony to the maturity and sensitivity of the 14-year-old prodigy. His study of Bach is strongly evident, yet it is combined with the flavor of the burgeoning Romantic school, showing perhaps the influence of Carl Maria von Weber, then at the height of his fame. The concluding *Allegro molto* includes a hint of Gypsy music, which must be one of the earliest examples of this in the classical repertoire.

In the *Sicilienne* of the Chausson, there is an atmosphere reminiscent of Gabriel Fauré, yet with a rapt and forward looking harmonization that makes me think of Ralph Vaughan Williams. The third movement possesses some of the characteristics of Chausson's famous *Poème* for violin and orchestra, but with a bleaker, more sorrowful outlook. The soloists are at their peak here—I was teary-eyed the fourth time I heard it. The CD's sound engineering is excellent. Mendelssohn and Chausson were two Romantics of fastidious technique and strikingly individual sensibilities. This album just blew me away. Highly recommended. Dave Saemann

