

Joseph ACHRON

Music for Violin and Piano

Hebrew Melody • Suite No. 1 • Stempenyu Suite

Michael Ludwig, Violin • Alison d'Amato, Piano



Joseph
ACHRON
 (1886-1943)

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When Joseph Achron was two years old, he composed his first melody on a home-built violin. Thinking their son would become a great violinist, his parents moved the family from their small village in Polish Lithuania to Warsaw, so that Yossel could take formal violin lessons at the Warsaw Conservatory. Five years later, after completing a concert tour of the Russian Empire, the ten-year-old prodigy performed in the royal palace at a birthday party for the Czar's brother, receiving in exchange a golden watch that he cherished for the rest of his life.

In 1899 Achron enrolled at the St Petersburg Conservatory, studying violin with the great Hungarian pedagogue, Leopold Auer, whose students numbered among the most famous violinists of the twentieth century: Jascha Heifetz, Efrem Zimbalist, Nathan Milstein, and Misha Elman, among others. Achron graduated in 1904 with the highest prize in violin performance and the position of concertmaster in the Conservatory's orchestra. In addition to performing, however, the young Achron took a strong interest in composition. As a teenager he composed a concerto, several sets of variations, and numerous miniatures, all for the violin.

One day, before his graduation, Achron brought in a newly-composed prelude to his professor of harmony, Anatoly Liadov. Liadov was deeply impressed, even though Achron, desiring a certain effect, had intentionally broken the rules of counterpoint: "If you will write on your examination in harmony a prelude as good as this", Liadov reportedly told him, "you will receive the highest marks, in spite of the 'parallel fifths!'" Whether or not this story refers to the *Prelude, Op. 13*, as at least one source has suggested, is anyone's guess, but it is a remarkable, deeply passionate work, full of musical drama.

Achron's *Prelude* begins with two contrasting themes – the first darkly chromatic, in B flat minor, followed by a lighter theme in D flat major. As far as the form is concerned, that is perfectly typical and to be expected. But then we get a surprise: while the opening theme in B flat minor is then repeated, note-for-note, by

the violinist, it is completely transformed by the presence of a radically new piano part. Or rather, the lack of a piano part: while the violinist repeats the opening rising gesture, the pianist is silent. The resulting extremely thin texture gives the violin part a sense of solitude, of being lost and wandering and not quite knowing where it is going. Two bars later a second transformation occurs, as the piano comes crashing in with descending chromatic scales – a classic symbol of destruction and loss, and a sharp contrast to the ascending scales that the pianist had originally played in the beginning of the piece. Four bars later, the piano part further transforms the mood of the theme, once again through the use of silence: the violinist and pianist perform in alternation, each one silent while the other plays, increasing the sense of uncertainty and wandering. From that point on, until the end of the piece, the pianist rests on a B flat pedal: the music's hero has fallen beyond the possibility of redemption. The light, second theme in D flat major never returns; the music concludes with a funeral march.

Despite his early success as a composer, Achron still felt that his destiny lay more as a concertizing violinist. So, following his graduation in 1904, he set off for a concert tour in Germany, eliciting rave reviews from the press. After a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Concerto* in Berlin, for instance, one reviewer safely placed him "among the top-rank performers of his instrument, not only as a brilliant technician, but as a remarkable interpreter". Another praised "his astonishing control over the instrument and elegant use of the bow, not to mention his famously warm, deep tone and incredible musicality". Yet neither Achron himself nor those who knew him could deny his promise as a composer. He continued to compose prolifically and, two years later, in 1906, Achron was introduced to the well-known music publisher Julius Heinrich Zimmermann, who immediately published the above-mentioned *Prelude, Op. 13*, along with Achron's *Les Sylphides, Op. 18*, *Second Berceuse, Op. 20*, and several other works.

The very existence of Achron's *Les Sylphides* invites us to explore the pre-history of a famous ballet. Search on Google for *Les Sylphides* and you will discover a well-known ballet of that title, with music by the Russian composer Alexander Glazunov, which was premièred in Paris in 1909 by the hugely influential Diaghilev Ballet. Some sources point to an earlier première in 1907. Yet Achron had already published his violin piece even earlier than that, in 1906. It turns out that, in the year Achron published his violin piece, an early version of the ballet was privately given its first full performance in St Petersburg, where its choreographer, Michel Fokine, was teaching at the Imperial School of Ballet. Achron might have seen that performance and thereafter composed his violin piece.

Originally titled *Chopiniana*, the 1906 version of Fokine's ballet imagined the composer Chopin sitting at his piano, daydreaming about various scenes: a *mazurka* danced at a Polish wedding; a Neapolitan *tarantella*. Achron colourfully evoked the spirit of these dances in his own composition, through the use of playful leaps and *glissandi*, spritely *staccati*, graceful trills, brief flourishes of sixteenth notes, and a keen sense of musical drama. How different in mood, indeed, is Achron's *Les Sylphides* from his *Prelude*!

Another work published in 1906 was Achron's *Second Berceuse*, *Op. 20*. As a genre, *berceuses* are remarkably diverse. For example, while they are generally thought of as lullabies, something for putting a baby to sleep, Fauré and Saint-Saëns marked their own very lively *berceuses* *Allegretto*. Both in major keys, they portray a parent and child full of life and joy. On the other hand, Balakirev's deeply chromatic and wandering *Berceuse* climaxes with a funeral march, Debussy's *Berceuse héroïque* mourns the tragedies of war, and Sibelius's orchestral *Berceuse* (from his incidental music to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) carries a mood of struggle and ultimate failure to achieve inner peace. In this sense, Achron's major-key *Berceuse*, *Op. 20*, marked *Calmato e dolcissimo* (calm and extremely sweet) has more in common with Chopin's classic example of the genre than it does with either Balakirev or Fauré. Something that Achron's work does share with some of

the above-mentioned examples, however, is a constant rocking motion, symbolizing the rocking of a baby. Achron embedded this gesture in multiple layers: in the pianist's gently rocking, syncopated left-hand part; in the pianist's right-hand alternation between two different registers; and in the lilting violin melody. Achron permeated his work with a sense of *calmato e dolcissimo* through the use of a violin mute; very soft dynamics (never louder than mezzo-forte); a final repetition of the melody in a higher register; the consistency of the piano accompaniment; and the use of tonic-dominant pedal points.

Also in 1906, Achron composed both his *Suite No. 1 in the Old Style* and *Suite No. 2 in the Modern Style*. Why 'old' and 'modern'? On one hand, these titles carry biographical significance: Achron dedicated his "old-school" *Suite* to his childhood violin teacher and the modern *Suite* to his teacher at the St Petersburg Conservatory. Thus, as one source does, one can read into the juxtaposition of these two suites Achron's own personal growth and development as a composer and violinist. Yet, Achron was not only a gifted composer and violinist, but a curious intellectual as well. Throughout his life, he explored and admired both the old and the radically new. Indeed, he combined the two to such an extent in his works that it is not always possible to separate one from the other, even in such a clearly labeled work as his *Suite in the Old Style*. In this intentionally old-styled composition, baroque dance forms, contrapuntal imitation, and *fortspinnung* intermingle with modern structural chromaticism, bursts of pianistic independence, and a particularly Russian reluctance to repeat any melodies without changing the accompaniment. Achron's construction of the *fughetta* theme, in particular, is thoroughly baroque – almost something you would see in a textbook – yet the octave runs in the piano, the huge dynamic range, and the dramatic intensity reveal Achron's training in turn-of-the-century Russia. In other words, Achron's *Suite in the Old Style* reveals not a precise imitation, but rather a very personal understanding of and interaction with the past, one that is both heavily rooted in tradition and inevitably filtered through a modern lens.

Inspired by this burst of compositional creativity, and encouraged by his former professors, Achron returned to the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1907 for a second degree. He studied orchestration with Maximilian Steinberg, while applying himself to an intensive self-study of counterpoint, fugue, and form. From this point on, he developed a particular love for contrapuntal writing; indeed, nearly everything he wrote for the rest of his life includes at least one canon, and he even went so far in his remarkable *Piano Sonata*, *Op. 39* as to write a six-part fugue.

It was during this time that Achron began to compose his four *Stimmungen*, *Opp. 32* and *36*. The unusual German title, meaning "moods", refers to an unusual aspect of the musical form. Typically, most classical compositions had been structured around multiple, contrasting themes, each with its own particular mood. Thus, in many works, a sad theme might be followed by a happy one, or a peaceful theme might be followed by something frightening. Instead of this, however, Achron chose to focus in each of his *Stimmungen* on just one theme, with just one mood. In these works, he never changed keys or tempos, nor did he introduce any contrasting melodic ideas. In *Op. 32, No. 1*, marked *Andantino malinconico*, Achron repeated the same melody over and over, each time with a new accompaniment, but never introduced a second theme. In *Op. 32, No. 2*, marked *molto espressivo* (very expressive), he developed a rather long tune from a set of motifs and then repeated the whole thing an octave higher. *Op. 36, Nos. 1* (sweet and dreamy) and *2* (delicate and thin) feel like improvisations: from a tiny kernel of rhythms and motifs, presented in the opening measures, the music continually grows and expands until it arrives at a natural conclusion. In all of these *Stimmungen*, as, indeed, in most of his works, Achron frequently changed up the piano accompaniment, introducing new rhythms, textures, dynamics, and gestures every few measures. Yet, even with the variety in the piano part, the overall mood stays the same.

In 1911, on a fateful night that would sharply influence the rest of his career, Achron was approached backstage after a concert by a member of the St Petersburg Society

for Jewish Folk Music, a young organization devoted to the radical new concept of a Jewish style in classical music. Achron was so excited and inspired by this idea that in half an hour he sketched what would later become his most famous composition, the *Hebrew Melody*, *Op. 33*, for violin and piano (or orchestra). For the theme, Achron took a fast, Jewish dance-like tune that he had heard as a child, slowed it down, added a melancholic piano accompaniment, and crafted an intense, dramatic arc. Reviewers hailed the piece for its tearful representation of Jewish suffering and wandering. Indeed, years later when Achron published a vocal transcription, his wife, a Russian singer and poet, captured this theme in her freshly-penned lyrics: "Israel's pain fills the earth [...] and the flooding tears, the ancient groan, welling upward reach to Heaven's throne, where the Lord of Earth and Sky harks to that exceeding bitter cry."

That Achron's *Hebrew Dance*, *Hebrew Lullaby*, and *Dance Improvisation on a Hebrew Folksong* also display Achron's newfound interest in Jewish folklore is well-known. Like the *Hebrew Melody*, they are all based on Jewish folk melodies, which Achron notated separately at the top of the sheet music. What is more, all of the melodies, replete with augmented seconds, are in that stereotypically Jewish mode called *freygish* or *ahavah rabbah* (e.g. C – D flat – E – F – G – A flat – B – C). Following in the footsteps of his non-Jewish colleagues, who had similarly striven to compose folk-based Russian, Norwegian, or American compositions, Achron filled these works with folksy drones, dance rhythms, syncopations, and modal harmonies.

There is, however, another profound influence to be seen in these "Hebrew" pieces, which has rarely been noted by scholars: that of Achron's recent, intensive study of counterpoint, fugue, and form. In this respect these pieces mark both a strong shift from Achron's earlier work and a prophetic sign of things to come. For example, all three pieces include at least one canon; the *Dance Improvisation*, in particular, is full of canonic imitation, venturing as thick as three and four parts. Furthermore, instead of providing a simple accompaniment for an unaltered theme, Achron chopped up the melodies into

smaller motifs: layering them, combining them, inverting them, re-arranging them, converting them into sequences, and stretching both the rhythms and the intervals. In fact, with only one exception, the *Hebrew Lullaby's* piano part is made up exclusively of motifs from the theme. Another fascinating result of his recent studies is the way that Achron infused each of the forms with drama and purpose. Like the *Hebrew Melody*, the *Hebrew Dance* builds to a ravid climax full of tremolos, sequences, and highly virtuosic, quicksilver runs followed by a cadenza. After a brief moment of calm, Achron marks the final two pages 'as fast as possible and orgiastic'. In the *Hebrew Lullaby*, each repetition of the theme not only jumps a fourth or fifth higher, but grows in contrapuntal intensity: appearing first in dialogue with the piano's counter-melody; then as a canon in both instruments; and then with free two-voice counterpoint in the violin over a multi-layered accompaniment. The final descending scale serves to undermine the dramatic growth, returning us to the same low register and simplicity of the opening measures. The *Dance Improvisation*, highly virtuosic for both instruments, passes through a wide range of emotions, including such colourful performance markings as "very flirtatious", "jubilant", "elegant", "dreamy", "with radiance", and "calm".

Achron's newfound interest in both folklore and music theory coincided with another growing interest in transcriptions. Over the course of his life, Achron freely transcribed over thirty works by more than fifteen composers, including Grieg, Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt, Paganini, Vivaldi, Mendelssohn, Fiorillo, Sulzer, Gerowitsch, Rudinov, Rameau, and even Stephen Foster. As with his Hebrew pieces, however, Achron was never content simply to arrange the originals, but rather transformed them into something unique.

A good example of this is Achron's transcription of *La Romanesca*, an anonymous sixteenth-century Spanish dance-tune that he arranged in 1913. At first the structure of the piece seems pretty straightforward: introduction (without piano); play the melody once; play the melody again; conclusion (also without piano). Yet, the two appearances of the theme sound completely different from each other. The first time through, the melody sounds

wistful and nostalgic, like a memory of an old noble dance: owing to the violin's lower, full-bodied register; the slow, dance-like rhythms in the piano; and the rumbling, low-pitched drone. The second time through, by contrast, the melody sounds much more determined, free, and driven. Achron directs the violinist to play in a higher register, bringing out a sharper, more piercing timbre from the instrument. The much more active and chromatic piano part, sliding around the keyboard and getting progressively faster and faster, moves the music forward in an artistic and unpredictable way. In other words, the piano part does not simply provide a nice accompaniment, nor is the choice of violin register haphazard. Rather, the two different settings cast the original theme in a new light, giving it an entirely new meaning, even though the melody itself has not changed. But the piano does something else as well: since Achron only used the piano in the middle of the piece, it reminds us that he had chosen to begin and end his transcription without it, with only the sound of the solo violin. Why? Why did he not use the piano from start to finish? And why, in the middle of the solo conclusion, did he indeed choose to add the piano back in for just a few chords, even while allowing the violin to ultimately have the final, solo word? As for the violin, why did Achron ask the violinist to play the introduction and conclusion in a full-bodied lower register, instead of the piercing higher register? The greatness of Achron's transcriptions lies in the way that they invite us to ask questions, to think of the original work in new and diverse ways, and to actively engage with the genre of arrangement as a process of original creation.

Even after all of this, Achron still did not think he would become a composer. Following World War I, during which he was drafted into the Russian army as a performer for front-line troops, he embarked on a massive concert tour of Russia, Europe and the Middle East, performing over a thousand concerts in a five-year period. He taught violin at multiple schools and penned a highly influential treatise on the playing of chromatic scales. Yet, when he emigrated to the United States in 1924, he was shocked to discover that "everyone hailed me as a composer, and no one seemed to know I even played the

violin!" The eminent violinist Jascha Heifetz called him "one of our foremost modern composers", and he quickly earned the respect and friendship of such well-known composers as Gershwin and Schoenberg.

In New York as in Russia, Achron composed incidental music for the local Yiddish art theatre, including for a production of Sholem Aleichem's famous *Stempenyu*. The love story revolves around an itinerant klezmer violinist, named Stempenyu, who enchants the women wherever he goes with his mesmerizing fiddling. One day he falls in love with a girl he meets at a wedding; they plan to get married, but the problem is that both of them are already married (and not to each other). The story ends in misery, as the two lovers leave each other forever, returning home to their equally unhappy spouses. Recently, scholars have speculated that Stempenyu was the inspiration for Marc Chagall's famous painting of a fiddler on the roof.

Achron adapted three excerpts from his incidental music to form the brilliant *Stempenyu Suite* (1930). The first movement, entitled *Stempenyu Plays*, displays the klezmer musician's improvisatory style, passing through a range of rhythms and virtuosic gestures. Yet Achron's music also carries a spiritual aspect. As the music soars to a higher register, *pp e dolce*, we can imagine the otherworldly Stempenyu floating in the air, his music rising to the heavens. His audience of wedding guests and passers-by on the street forget their physical surroundings, as they are captivated by his magical playing. But in the final three measures, both the violin and the piano drop lower and lower, with the pianist ending on almost the lowest possible note, reminding the listeners that, in fact, Stempenyu is a mere human being after all. Achron modeled the second and third movements after traditional Jewish wedding dances. *Sher* (the Yiddish word for "scissors", a metaphor for the dance steps) is a popular Russian-Jewish square dance for four couples, characterized by a march-like rhythm in 2/4 time. *Freylekhs* (the Yiddish word for "joy") is a 3+3+2 circle dance, highly popular both as a dance form and as a musical genre. Chock full of syncopated dance rhythms

on the piano, and joyful leaps and runs on the violin, the *Sher* once again climbs to a higher and higher register before falling to the absolute lowest possible note on the piano, reminding us that this miraculous violinist is still just flesh and blood. The *Freylekhs* is wildly virtuosic: Achron even included a footnote in the sheet music, explaining how to perform an unusual method of plucking the strings. Here, Stempenyu throws it all to the wind and shows us what he is worth: quadruple-stops; two-handed *pizzicato*; page-long *spiccato*; difficult rhythms; both short and very long trills; passages in multiple registers; and an incredibly fast tempo marking (176-192 quarter notes per minute).

When Achron died at an early age from illness, his close friend Arnold Schoenberg declared with certainty that Achron's music would always remain in the repertoire. Instead, Achron's music has fallen into obscurity. In the economic upheaval of the Russian Revolution and World War I, Achron's major publishers went out of business. In the 1930s he was blacklisted by the Nazis, forcing out of print nearly a dozen works published by Universal Edition. And his passion for composing specifically Jewish classical music fell on deaf ears in America, where most Jewish immigrants strove to assimilate, leaving behind their old European-Jewish identities to become full "Americans". To this day, most of his works have never been published.

In recent years, however, there has begun a small revival. Several recordings devoted entirely to Achron's music have been released, and musicians around the world are beginning to programme his works in festivals and recitals. The Joseph Achron Society, founded in 2010, is publishing first editions of Achron's manuscript works, networking musicians and scholars, and commissioning new scholarship. With their present recording, Michael Ludwig and Alison d'Amato have done us all a tremendous service, bringing to life remarkable works by a brilliant, if forgotten composer, whose music deserves to be heard much more often.

Samuel Elliot Zerlin

Michael Ludwig



Photo: Mark Dellas

Hailed by *The Strad* magazine for his "effortless, envy-provoking technique ... sweet tone, brilliant expression, and grand style," Michael Ludwig enjoys a multi-faceted career as a soloist, recording artist and chamber musician. As a soloist, he has performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Boston Pops, KBS Symphony in Seoul, Korea, Beijing Symphony, and the Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra, collaborating with such conductors as JoAnn Falletta, Sir Georg Solti and John Williams. He has recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Lithuanian National Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic and Virginia Symphony. As a chamber musician, he has performed with Christoph Eschenbach, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Yefim Bronfman, Sarah Chang and Jean-Yves Thibaudet. His chamber music performances include appearances at the Prague Spring Music Festival, New Hampshire Music Festival, and a benefit appearance for the Terezin Music Foundation at Symphony Hall in Boston. Michael Ludwig studied violin with his father, Irving Ludwig, who was a violinist in The Philadelphia Orchestra and Music Director of the Lansdowne Symphony Orchestra. For more information, see: www.michaelludwig.com

Alison d'Amato

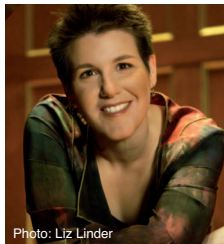


Photo: Liz Linder

Pianist Alison d'Amato is a dynamic and versatile musician, committed to performing and teaching the full spectrum of solo and chamber music genres. A member of several pioneering organizations, she is Artistic Co-Director of Florestan Recital Project and Founding Faculty Artist of the Vancouver International Song Institute (VISI). In 2011, she joined the faculty at Eastman School of Music as Assistant Professor of Vocal Coaching. Alison d'Amato enjoys a variety of projects that celebrate collaborations across disciplines. She is Program Co-Director of Art Song Lab, an intensive workshop that brings together composers and writers for new song creation. In 2014, she inaugurates the Academy of Collaborative Performance, a new summer program with Florestan Recital Project that explores interdisciplinary collaborations and new approaches to the performer-audience relationship. She has performed at venues across North America, including Boston's Jordan and Symphony Halls and New York's Weill Recital Hall. She has been a guest artist at schools including the American University in Bulgaria, University of Toronto, Tufts University, Royal Conservatory of Music, Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, SUNY Fredonia, Boston University, and Boston Conservatory. From 2006-2011, she was Visiting Assistant Professor at University at Buffalo.

Joseph Achron was a child prodigy as a violinist, and despite great success as a composer he considered himself a performer for most of his life. His most famous composition is the intense and dramatic *Hebrew Melody*, but the riches in this programme range from the deeply passionate early *Prelude*, the spirit of dance in *Les Sylphides*, the various moods of the *Stimmungen* and the theatrical *Stempenyu*, speculated to be the inspiration for Marc Chagall's famous painting of a fiddler on the roof. Achron's remarkable music fell into obscurity, but its recent revival includes a recording of his *First Violin Concerto* available on Naxos 8.559408.

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A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

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