

Tambourin chinois, Op. 3

Fritz Kreisler

Ask a violinist his or her impression of Fritz Kreisler, and you are almost sure to receive a response saturated with reverence. He was among the greatest of the great ones — a legend in his own time and a fiddler for the ages. His destiny seemed clear practically from the outset, when at the age of seven he became the youngest student ever admitted to the Vienna Conservatory, where Anton Bruckner taught him music theory and Joseph Hellmesberger, Jr. (remembered for his Brahms connections) served as his violin professor.

Three years later he graduated with a gold medal. He moved on to the Paris Conservatoire, where his violin teacher was the aged Joseph Lambert Massart (by then famous as the teacher of Henryk Wieniawski), and at age 12, Kreisler was awarded the Conservatoire's *premier prix*. Before long, Kreisler laid aside his violin to enroll as a pre-med student in Vienna, and then to fulfill military service. When he decided to return to music, he regained his technique quickly, only to fail an 1896 audition for an opening in the violin section of the Vienna Court Opera (which was actually the Vienna Philharmonic, moved from the stage into the pit). Within two years, however, he appeared with that orchestra — as a soloist — to great acclaim, and his career was off and running. Sir Edward Elgar wrote his

Violin Concerto for Kreisler, who premiered it in 1910 with the composer conducting.

However, he did encounter certain impediments. He was wounded in World War I while serving in the Austrian Army. Then, when he and his American wife came to the United States, he was somewhat thwarted by anti-Germanic sentiment. (The Kreislers returned to America permanently in 1939, and he was granted American citizenship in 1943.) An accident in April 1941 — he was struck by an egg-delivery truck when he stepped off the curb at 57th Street and Madison Avenue — robbed him of some of his sight and hearing, and by 1950 his career had ended. Yet, through all of this, he performed with a unique combination of ease, grace, charm, technical perfection, tonal luster, and idiosyncratic personality.

What's more, Kreisler composed quite a few works, including a string quartet, cadenzas for the Beethoven and Brahms Violin Concertos, and numerous light pieces for the violin. *Tambourin chinois*, *Schön Rosmarin*, *Liebesleid*, *Liebesfreud*, and *Caprice viennois* are among his compositions that remain in the working repertoire of violinists, who often present them as encores.

In Short

Born: February 2, 1875, in Vienna, Austria

Died: January 29, 1962, in New York City

Work composed: probably 1910, certainly not later

World premiere: unknown

New York Philharmonic premiere: an unspecified arrangement was performed on January 7, 1916, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928 to form today's New York Philharmonic), the composer as soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 31, 1996, Zubin Mehta, conductor, Midori, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 4 minutes

Kreisler gained a certain notoriety for attributing some of his pieces, written “in the antique style,” to long-departed composers whose names were vaguely familiar to music lovers but whose music was utterly forgotten, claiming he had the original manuscripts in his possession. So it is that a number of pieces ostensibly by Pugnani, Tartini, Dittersdorf, Francoeur, and the like turned out to have actually have been practical jokes by Kreisler, as he revealed in 1935 to the chagrin of more than a few musicologists and critics who had applauded his antiquarian interests. He also co-composed, with Victor Jacobi (1883–1921), the three-act operetta *Apple Blossoms*, and in 1933 he followed that up with a second operetta, *Sissy*, which was used in the motion picture *The King Steps Out* (1936) and includes the once-popular song “Stars in My Eyes.” The music of both is steeped in nostalgia for a Viennese charm that was by that time becoming more and more just a memory.

The compositional history of many of Kreisler’s works is obscure, and *Tambourin chinois* is no exception. It certainly dates from no later than 1910, since he first recorded it on May 13 of that year for the Victor label, with pianist George Falkenstein. (Kreisler submitted the composition for copyright that September.) The piece would remain a favorite among record collectors, so much so that Kreisler re-recorded it in 1911 for release on the HMV label, with pianist Haddon Squire; in 1915 and 1928 for Victor, with Carl Lamson; in 1936 for Electrola, with Franz Rupp; and in 1942 for RCA Victor, with Charles O’Connell conducting the Victor Symphony Orchestra.



Sources and Inspirations

Frederick Herman Martens, in his book *Violin Mastery: Talks with Master Violinists and Teachers* (1919), reported this comment from Kreisler on the inspiration for *Tambourin chinois*:

I don’t mind telling you that I enjoyed very much writing my *Tambourin chinois*. The idea for it came to me after a visit to the Chinese theatre in San Francisco — not that the music there suggested any theme, but it gave me the impulse to write a free fantasy in the Chinese manner.

To which Mr. Martens adds this footnote:

It is interesting to note that Nikolai Sokoloff, conductor of the San Francisco Philharmonic, returning home from a tour of American and French army camps in France, some time ago, said: “My most popular number was Kreisler’s *Tambourin chinois*. Invariably I had to repeat that.” A strong indorsement [*sic*] of the internationalism of Art by the actual fighter in the trenches.

Instrumentation: two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, timpani, tambourine, triangle, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.