Not a prolific composer, Ernest Chausson died in 1899, at the age of 44, from injuries sustained in a bicycle accident. His death silenced the most distinctive voice in French music in the generation that preceded the likes of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Indeed, Chausson’s music forms a bridge of sorts between Cesar Franck’s lush, Wagnerian Romanticism and the sensuous Impressionism of Debussy. Chausson came from a wealthy family. In fact, due to his comfortable circumstances, it was unnecessary for him to pursue a living as a musician. Although interested in music from a young age, Chausson pursued law studies at his father’s behest and, in 1877, he was sworn in as a lawyer in Paris. The impulse to devote himself to composition was sparked in 1879 when he attended a performance of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde. Chausson entered the Paris Conservatory the following year and began composition studies with Jules Massenet. He supplemented his formal musical education by studying privately with Cesar Franck. As secretary of the Société Nationale de Musique (an organization founded, in part, by Camille Saint-Saëns to promote the performance of French instrumental music) from 1886, Chausson became a full-fledged member of the Parisian musical community. His salon became a regular meeting place for literary and musical notables.

Composed between mid-April and mid-June 1896, the Poème was given its première at the Nancy Conservatoire on December 27 of that year by Eugène Ysaye, to whom it is dedicated. In a sublime gesture, Chausson’s friend, Isaac Albéniz, secretly arranged for Breitkopf to publish the score, paying for it from his own pocket, to buoy the composer through one of his periodic bouts of self-doubt. The seamless form and supple structure of the Poème is a mark of Chausson’s genius. The Poème originally bore the subtitle, “Le Chant de l’amour triomphant” which is the title of a short story by Ivan Turgenev, one of the composer’s favorite authors. Set in the sixteenth-century, the story tells the tale of two men of Ferrara, the closest of friends – one a painter and the other a musician – who are in love with the same woman and agree to abide by her decision in the matter. She makes the less complicated choice, and the rejected musician, Muzio, sets out to spend many years traveling in India and the Orient. He returns with new skills, some of them on the shady side, and among them his performance on an Indian stringed instrument of the strangely compelling “Song of Love Triumphant.” This piece of music then takes on a crucial role in the sinister unfolding of the tale.

NOTE: Ernest Chausson was gentle, cultured, and generous. Like his teacher, Cesar Franck, he was innocent of any skill at showmanship. His works were occasionally abused and, more often, simply ignored. When a storm of applause greeted Ysaye’s first performance of the Poème in April 1897, the bewildered composer could only keep repeating, “I can’t get over it.”