

Quatuor Ysaÿe

Mozart: String Quartet in No. 14 in G Major K.387

In December of 1781, Mozart and Joseph Haydn met for the first time. Haydn was fifty and Mozart half that, but they immediately formed a fast friendship that lasted ten years, until Mozart's death. It was a friendship coupled with deep mutual respect: each knew the other to be a consummate musician, and they used each other's talents to advance their craft. Haydn gave Mozart the basic quartet form; Mozart gave it a breadth and spirit that Haydn immediately picked up for his later quartets. In 1791, Mozart began work on the first of six quartets - numbers fourteen through nineteen - that he would eventually dedicate to Haydn. Although he was usually a rapid composer, Mozart took his time with these, and he worked hard to polish them to brilliance. In this he succeeded outstandingly. The first of the six is so full of invention it's hard to know where to begin, but special note should be taken of the curious off-the-beat accents in the second movement, and the daring polyphony that darts in and out of the finale (Mozart had recently 'discovered' Bach while arranging fugues for his patron, Baron van Swieten). These 'modernisms' were not universally appreciated. One nobleman tore up the score to the '*Dissonant*' quartet (No. 19) in a rage; some purchasers returned the parts to the publisher as being too full of mistakes to play. Now we appreciate Mozart's innovative genius.

Fauré, String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 121

Gabriel Fauré's String Quartet in E minor, Op 121, is a swan song, an apotheosis for this old man of eighty years, born on May 12, 1845 at Pamiers in the Ariège. The son of a primary school inspector, Fauré was sent very early to Paris to study with Louis Niedermeyer, then Saint-Saëns. Organist at Rennes in 1866, he successively held five organ posts in Paris from 1870 to 1896 before becoming a teacher at the Conservatoire, then its director in 1905. Fauré was to train such famous artists as Enesco, Ducasse, Koechlin, Schmitt, Aubert and Nadia Boulanger, to name but a few. Losing his hearing, he had to resign as director in 1920, but continued to lead an active life as a writer of articles, but mainly as a composer. He was made a commander of the Légion d'honneur in 1910 and died on November 4, 1924.

'I've started a quartet for strings, without piano. This is a genre made particularly famous by Beethoven, so that anyone who is not Beethoven is scared stiff of it!' wrote Fauré to his wife on September 9, 1923. What better way to judge the modesty of an established composer faced with a noble genre? Already coming to the end of his life, Fauré assessed this unacknowledged musical testament: 'As I moved on towards the conclusion, I increased my hours of work and I'm paying for it with a little tiredness. I can scarcely manage to write a few lines'.

One would need many pages to give an account of the exciting genesis of this work, so much did Fauré put into it the best of himself. The *Allegro moderato* in 2/2 is in sonata form, a style dear to Fauré. The theme on the first violin is merged into a rending appeal from the viola in an atmosphere of melancholy, almost swaying. The first violin then sings its rising phrase of legato crochets, so naïve, yet so detached. A re-exposition is sketched with the lip of the brush adding a touch of color,

then serious counterpoint and brightness in the final development, all ending in a pianissimo. The Andante in 4/4 that follows is a very fine piece of string quartet writing. From start to finish it bathes the composition in light. Fauré uses the sonata form once more in his final 4/4 Allegro. The cello announces and develops the refrain over a pizzicato accompaniment; the whole thing being a cleverly disguised scherzo. Everything explodes in a sustained crescendo.

Brahms, String Quartet No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 51

The musical manner that Brahms adopted as a young man, and the skill that he showed when he was only twenty, led Schumann to proclaim him, in 1853, “a musician chosen to give ideal expression to his times, a young man over whose cradle Graces and Hero have stood watch.” From the very beginning he was the Brahms of noble melody, of rich texture, of rhythmic freedom, of large statements in big forms beautifully written for the instruments. This does not mean that there is little difference in the music he wrote at twenty and at forty. He matured and grew and said different things at different times, but even when young, he had found his own eloquent language, which he would use consistently and well until the end of his life.

Schumann’s pronouncement mentioned “string quartets,” and Brahms may have written twenty or more of them before he allowed the pair we now call his first two quartets to be published, twenty years later. The long delay had two causes. One was the burden of following Beethoven. Many composers of great talent, perhaps even true genius, have been struck dumb by the gravity of this historical weight. (How few Tenth Symphonies were written after Beethoven’s time!). Brahms also needed a way to deal with the complex polyphony that was an inherent part of his musical thought, so that it could make the impression he wanted with only four stringed instruments. The Sextets of the 1860’s had given him a satisfactory medium, fifty per cent larger, but a Quintet had failed. In the 1870’s he felt, at last, that he knew what to do with four players, and the Op. 51 Quartets are great works in which fullness of expression is unhindered by economy of means. They were completed in 1873, after perhaps as much as eight years of thought, during his summer vacation in the countryside not far from Munich. Musician-friends came out from the city, pretty young women among them. There was much jollity, much music. Brahms enjoyed the rustic surroundings and the beauties of nature. In simplest terms, he had a good time - and while having it, he finished and tried out the two Quartets, the popular Haydn Variations, and several songs. The first public performance was given by the Hellmesberger Quartet in Vienna on December 11, 1873.

The first Quartet of the pair is a somber but passionate piece. Its *Allegro* first movement may be derived from one of the early, discarded works, but it is in his familiar expressive language, complex and involuted, speaking here of tense drama. The opening theme will be referred to in all the later movements except the Scherzo. In the second movement it is transformed into the principal subject of a calm Romance, *Poco adagio*, a simple three part song of great beauty in the distant key of A-flat.

Third, the place for the Scherzo, is taken by a movement in the traditional form, *Allegretto molto moderato e comodo*, but with none of the original Italian meaning of the name which is “joke.” It is music that may be interpreted as a gracious dance or as an uneasy, sinister, shadowy one. The contrasting central trio section, *Un poco più animato*, is a folklike tune colorfully accompanied by unusual sounds from the open strings of the second violin and viola. In the *Allegro* finale, Brahms

refers again to the scherzo, but the musical materials are most closely related to those that open the Quartet, and the whole is presented with a concentrated force that recalls and balances the entire opening movement.