

## **Quartet No. 19 in C major, K. 465, "Dissonance"**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart had been profoundly impressed by Haydn's set of six quartets Opus 33 published in 1781. Inspired by these works, he returned to the writing of string quartets after a lapse of ten years. It was between 1782 and 1785 that the six "Haydn" quartets were composed. As musicologist Alfred Einstein says, "Mozart did not allow himself to be overcome. This time he learned as a master from a master; he did not imitate, he yielded nothing of his own personality." He followed Haydn's lead in conceiving the string quartet as a four-part discourse, shared by all the instruments. Their respect and admiration being mutual, Haydn was, in turn, to be influenced in his own subsequent quartets by these quartets that Mozart dedicated to him. The C major Quartet was the last of the series to be composed. It was completed on January 14th, 1785. Its appellation "Dissonance" refers to the introductory adagio's opening passage. As is usually the case, the composer had nothing to do with this nickname. And, if you're expecting, because of this name, to be treated to earcrushing dissonance, of the sort that would make Charlie Ives stand up and cheer; fugettaboutit. The "dissonance" occurs in the opening passage; a progression of chords over a pedal point by the cello. While it is a rather chromatic passage, it's quite within the rules of 18th century harmony. So while it may have reportedly caused a tantrum or two by a disgruntled aristocrat with "sissy ears", as Ives would say, causing him to tear up the parts, and caused scores to be returned to the publisher, by performers, with corrections indicated, none other than the dedicatee (and no mean musical experimenter himself) Haydn would remark; "Well, if Mozart wrote it, he must have meant it." What this opening passage achieves is a deliberate sense of ambiguity. Mozart is keeping us in the fog, rather than clearly establishing the key of C major. With the Allegro that follows this introduction, the fog has lifted and we are the sunny key of C major. The second movement andante cantabile is considered to be the heart of the work; a lovely, lush, lyrical (forgive the alliteration) work. The third movement menuetto is interesting in that central to it is a rather agitated section that places it way out of the realm of a courtly or even country dance. The finale is a good natured romp ala Haydn, using his type of clipped themes and a device that Haydn was an absolute master of...

...the pause.

--note by Joseph Way

## **String Quartet No. 1, Op. 7 (1909) Béla Bartók (1881-1945)**

The six string quartets of Béla Bartók are among the twentieth century's greatest achievements in the realm of chamber music. For depth, consummate artistry, and musical drama they are rivaled only by the Shostakovich quartets. Because Bartók's six essays in the genre span three decades, they constitute an overview of his artistic development.

The First Quartet has received somewhat less attention than the others, probably because it is more derivative. Although this piece followed Bartók's first ethnomusicological work in his native Hungary, his efforts to distill an authentic Hungarian style were still in the formative stage. Viennese taste reigned supreme when Bartók was learning music, thus it is no real surprise to hear echoes of Strauss, Brahms, Reger, and even Wagner, in his early works. Bartók was also becoming acquainted with the music of Claude Debussy. Occasional hints of whole-tone scales in the String Quartet Opus 7 may plausibly be traced to Debussy.

This quartet was one of the first important compositions that Bartók published, a sure mark of his own high regard for it. Partly because of its free approach to tonality (this music may sound conservative to us, but it was quite adventurous for its time), the First Quartet was not performed until two years after its composition. A newly-formed ensemble, the Waldbauer-

Kerpely Quartet, played the premiere. Bartók repaid their loyalty by dedicating his Second Quartet to them in 1920. But emotionally, his first published quartet is associated with the same woman for whom he composed the First Violin Concerto: violinist Stefi Geyer. His unrequited passion for her found expression in the mournful lamentation of the Quartet's opening movement. That personal stamp was eminently clear to his contemporaries, though they could not have known the circumstances. Reminiscing in 1955, French composer Darius Milhaud wrote:

As far back as 1909 I was going to the publishers Eschig, on Rue Lafitte in those days, to study their scores of Bartók, brought out in Hungary, and those of Schoenberg, published in Vienna, for which Eschig was the agent. It was there that I bought Bartók's First Quartet. My Conservatoire friends and I were regularly performing quartets at my place and we had become passionately fond of this work, so full of life and such personal lyricism.

The First Quartet consists of three large movements played without pause. Bartók opens with a slow movement in imitative counterpoint that is melodically related to the Violin Concerto written for Geyer. The movement reaches its most feverish intensity on clear triads, oddly exacerbating the subdued anxiety of the otherwise expressionist language. The second and third movements are progressively faster and often more folk-like in character, hinting at his mature style. Bartók's lifelong predilection for contrapuntal techniques manifests itself here in the finale's scherzo-like fugue.

Other than the absence of unusual string techniques, the principal difference between this early quartet and Bartók's later ones is the comparative lack of compression. A sense of spaciousness bordering on romantic abandon characterizes this music. The composer takes exactly as much time as he needs -- a solid half-hour, in this case -- to state and develop his ideas. Further, the musical ideas are less explicitly governed by the folk tunes that constitute such an integral part of Bartók's musical vocabulary in later works. What this quartet shares unmistakably with its five siblings is a powerful sense of rhythmic drive, particularly in the last movement, and a steady increase of energy that assists in driving the narrative to its dramatic conclusion.

– Laurie Shulman ©2022

## **Quartet in F major** Maurice Ravel

Even though Ravel worked on his sole string quartet from late 1902 to April 1903, while still a student at the Paris Conservatoire, it is far from a student work. The piece integrates the several styles that he had incorporated into his own musical vocabulary. A major influence was Debussy- particularly Debussy's Quartet in g minor, with its Impressionist quality and fascinating tone colors. At the same time, the clear and transparent textures, the impelling logic, and tight control of the basic organization bear testimony to Ravel's strong Neoclassical proclivity and admiration for Mozart. Finally, some of the strange and unfamiliar tonal effects reflect an interest in the exotic music of the Far East.

The generally favorable initial reactions to the quartet did include some sharp criticism, with a few commentators even suggesting that Ravel make extensive revisions. Debussy, a good if not intimate friend of Ravel, advised the

young composer, "In the name of the gods of music, and in mine, do not touch a single note of what you have written in your quartet." Despite this evidence of Debussy's support and approval, a comparison of the Debussy and Ravel quartets became a prime subject of newspaper and café debate in Paris, resulting finally in a breach between the two composers. Eventually Ravel was moved to comment sadly, "It's probably better for us, after all, to be on frigid terms for illogical reasons."

The quartet opens with a thematic group that contains two distinctive ideas: a rich, warmly scored melody involving the entire quartet and a first violin melody of a similar character over rapid figures in the second violin and viola. After speeding up to a climax, the music quiets, and the soaring second theme is stated by the first violin and viola playing two octaves apart, producing a most striking tone color. Although the rest of the movement follows the regular sonata form, the precise writing, the exciting tonal effects, and the powerful climaxes make this a most impressive movement.

Ravel conjures up the sound of a Javanese *gamelan* orchestra in the swift-moving pizzicato opening of the second movement by having the outer instruments playing in 3/4 meter (three groups of two eighth notes to a measure), while the inner parts play in 6/8 meter (two groups of three eighth notes per measure). Trills and tremolos create a lustrous sheen as the movement continues. The cello alone plays a transition to the slow, moody middle section. Although they are not exactly parallel, the extremely lyrical themes here seem to grow from the second subject of the first movement. A shortened reprise of the opening section concludes the movement.

Ravel achieves an improvisatory rhapsodic feeling in the slow third movement, with its continually shifting tempi and episodic construction. He is also able, with consummate skill, to weave the opening melody of the quartet in with the new melodic content. As in the previous movements, there is an ever-changing progression of new and imaginative tone colors, a remarkable achievement, considering that Ravel had only four instruments at his disposal, rather than the strings, winds, and percussion of a symphony orchestra.

The vigorous finale opens with an angry snarl followed by a long, held note, repeated twice before the movement starts moving forward. Its awkward five-beat meter, possibly Russian in inspiration, lends it an unsettling character. The rest of the movement alternated the contrasting expressive and lyrical melodies (including returns of the first movement theme) with repeats of the opening outburst.

The quartet, which was dedicated to Fauré, was introduced to Paris by the Heymann Quartet on March 5, 1904

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