

Great Performances from the Library of Congress

Volume 23

Quintet for Piano and Strings in A Major, D. 667 (Op. posth. 114) (37:40)

1 *Allegro vivace* (9:40)

2 *Andante* (8:05)

3 *Scherzo (Presto)* (4:24)

4 *Theme with variations* (8:38)

5 *Allegro* (6:52)

Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

Joseph Roisman, violin · Boris Kroyt, viola
Mischa Schneider, violoncello · Julius Levine, contrabass
Artur Balsam, piano

Recorded in concert at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress April 26, 1956

Quintet for Piano and Strings in F Minor (36:11)

6 *Molto moderato quasi lento. Allegro* (16:32)

7 *Lento con molto sentimento* (10:29)

8 *Allegro non troppo ma con fuoco* (9:10)

César Franck
(1822-1890)

Joseph Roisman, violin · Jac Gorodetzky, violin
Boris Kroyt, viola · Mischa Schneider, violoncello
Artur Balsam, piano

Recorded in concert at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress December 18, 1953

Schubert's D. 667 has been nicknamed the *Forellen* or *Trout* due to the composer's fourth movement variation treatment of a portion of his *lied* by the same name (*Die Forelle*, D. 550). Pundsters with a taste for fish, though, have equal justification for alluding to the work as *The Bass Quintet*, as the use of the double bass, the lowest stringed instrument, inevitably adds an orchestral dimension to the sound. The rather archaic two-part structure of the *Trout's* first, second and fifth movements, and the five-movement format give further evidence to the supposition that Schubert was harking back to the jolly divertimento so popular in Mozart's day.

Schubert wrote the *Quintet* in the summer of 1819 while vacationing with his friend Johann Michael Vogl in upper Austria. The first stop on their itinerary was Vogl's birthplace, Steyr, a small town not far from Linz. "At the house where I lodge," wrote the 22-year-old Schubert, "there are eight girls, nearly all pretty."

Residing in Steyr was one Silvester Paumgartner, a mining director and competent amateur cellist, who asked the visiting Schubert to compose a quintet for the same instrumental combination as Hummel's then popular one, which had just recently been published. Another explanation for the unusual piano-violin-violoncello-bass arrangement is that this aggregation just happened to be available for the Paumgartner *soirée* at which it was premiered. It has also been said that Paumgartner, fond of Schubert's song *Die Forelle*, had requested the variation treatment of the same. Perhaps so, but when we examine Schubert's *D minor String Quartet*, the *Variations* for flute and piano, and the *C major Phantasie* for violin and piano – all of which give instrumental elaboration to already existing songs – it becomes clear that Schubert was quite willing to oblige.

The parallel two-part structure of the first, second and fifth movements has already been noted. It remains to be pointed out that because of this, audiences have the chronic habit of applauding prematurely at mid-point in the finale. And so it is with this 1956 concert performance — although the intrusion is happily of short duration and may be taken as a memento of the day.

César (August-Jean-Guillaume-Hubert) Franck was born in Liège, on December 12, 1822. Liège was part of France's Walloon district, which in 1830, officially became Belgium. Tradition has made Franck a French composer. Considering, however, the profoundly Germanic character of the region in which both his father and grandfather lived, and the fact that his mother (née Marie-Catherine-Barbe) was a German, French national pride seems to have made Franck's identity a subject of wishful thinking.

Franck's Quintet is a large, supercharged, product of Late Romanticism, whose idiom owes much to Wagner. The Quintet's appearance in 1879 came as a shock to the composer's followers: in the preceding years (1858-1890), Franck had been quietly ensconced as the organist and composer at Sainte-Clotilde, as Professor of Organ at the Paris Conservatory (1872-1890), the latter position firmly establishing his reputation in the world of music. Most of his compositions reflected the quiet, religious side of his persona. But the drama and molten emotionalism of this quintet evidently rankled some musicians, striking them as completely out-of-character. Camille Saint-Saëns, who was playing the piano at the very first performance, walked off the platform disdainfully, leaving the manuscript dedicated to him on the instrument. In time, Franck's formal innovations became understood, and accepted more readily. However, the composer's wife vehemently disliked, nay hated, the piece. It was rumored that her husband was having a fling with a Miss Augusta Holmes

during the work's gestation and that Mme. Franck's antipathy was due to that association.

Both quintets, the Schubert especially, were often played at Budapest Quartet concerts. Bridge Records has already released a 1946 Trout (BRIDGE 9062) in which the conductor George Szell played the piano part with bassist George E. Moleux.

Regarding Balsam's Franck, I much prefer his ardent account to that of Clifford Curzon, who participated in a rather reserved performance with the Budapest at the L.O.C. on October 3, 1956.

What I like most about the middleground view of Balsam and the Budapesters is that they preserve drama and lyricism but eschew the almost obsessive tautness and compression that Jascha Heifetz and associates deemed *de rigueur* for this music. The Franck *Piano Quintet*, like the *Concerto for Piano and String Quartet* by Franck's pupil Chausson, can be scorched by excessive objectivity on the one hand, and drowned in bathos on the other. This cherishable interpretation gets it just right.

Although the Budapest Quartet was best known for its matchless readings of the standard Viennese masterpieces: the ten mature Mozart string quartets and the same composer's quintets for two violas; the last three Schubert quartets, a judicious handful of Haydn's quartets. These works and almost yearly cycles of the Beethoven quartets predominate in their concerts. But a look at their actual programs reveals a diversity and an adventurousness which might well surprise you. Venturing as far afield as Bartók, Stravinsky, Martínú, Milhaud, Krenek and Piston, the Budapest gave ample play to the Russian masters: they played Borodin's *Quartet No. 2* in D major, with its ever-popular *Nocturne*, both Prokofiev quartets, and the Op. 11 and 22 quartets of Tchaikovsky, along with his *Sextet*, Op. 70,

“Souvenir de Florence.”

In 1953, the foursome was comprised of Joseph Roisman, Jac Gorodetzky, Boris Kroyt, and Mischa Schneider. Gorodetzky, although sharing his colleagues' Russian-Jewish ancestry, was a violinist largely schooled in the Franco-Belgian tradition (he had earlier done a stint as second violinist of the Guilet Quartet). The pianist, Artur Balsam (1906-1994), was one of the Budapest Quartet's frequent and favorite assisting artists, and is probably best remembered as one of the twentieth century's most admired collaborative pianists. Born in Warsaw, Poland, he studied in Lodz, making his debut there at age 12, and then went to Berlin, enrolling at the Hochschule für Musik and winning its Mendelssohn prize in 1930. Touring America for the first time with the youthful Yehudi Menuhin in 1932, Balsam took up permanent residency in the United States a year later. Over the years he taught at the Eastman School, Boston University and the Manhattan School of Music. An occasional soloist and an insatiable chamber musician, Balsam once quipped that, “I played with everybody you can think of, with the exception of Heifetz – but that's a great exception!”

Balsam was a paragon – a marvel of relaxed professionalism; he was, as many of his colleagues and disciples attest, an instrumentalist of awesome facility and accomplishment and a sight-reader of almost unparalleled quickness. Hearing his masterly phrasing and luminous singing tone is sufficient aural testimony to place Balsam in the highest artistic echelon.

—Harris Goldsmith

Harris Goldsmith is a pianist, author, critic and musicologist.





'Trout' Quintet rehearsal at the Coolidge Auditorium, 1956

l. to r. Misha Schneider, Artur Balsam, Joseph Roisman, Julius Levine, Boris Kroyt

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Photograph: 'Trout' Quintet rehearsal at the Coolidge Auditorium courtesy of June Schneider

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With thanks to Donald Manildi, Maxwell Brown, of the International Piano Archives,
the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Artur Balsam Foundation.

For Bridge Records: Ashley Arrington, Alexis Napoliello, Brad Napoliello,
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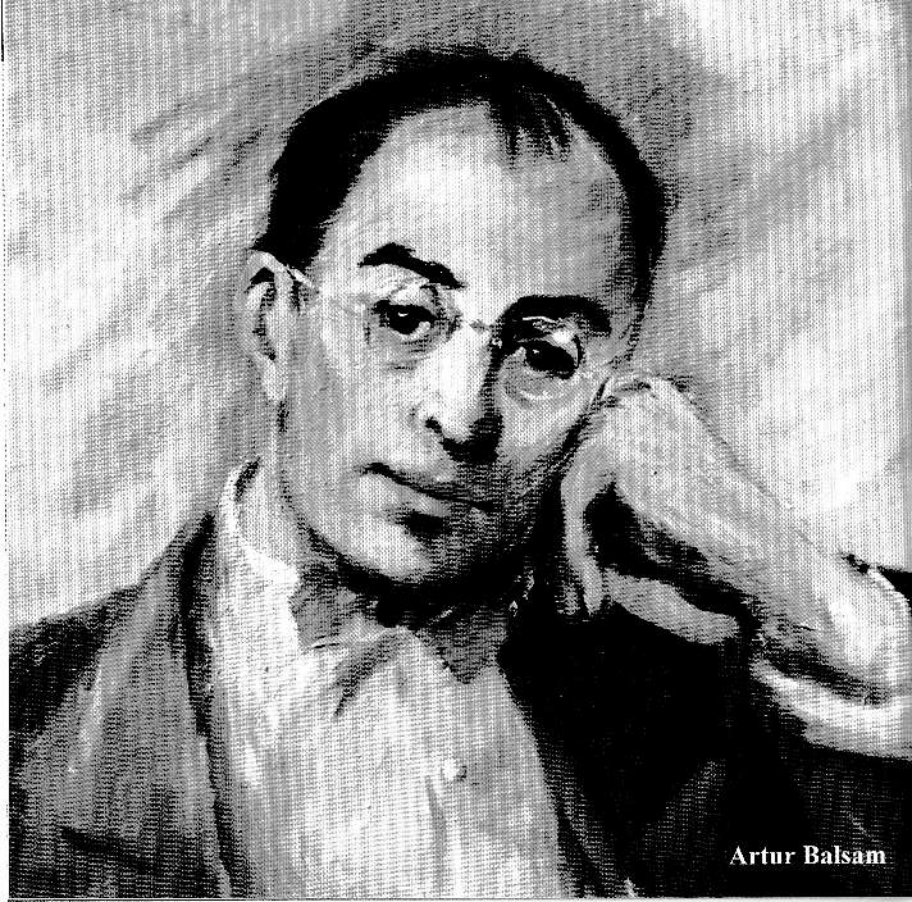
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Artur Balsam