

Claude

Debussy

Maurice

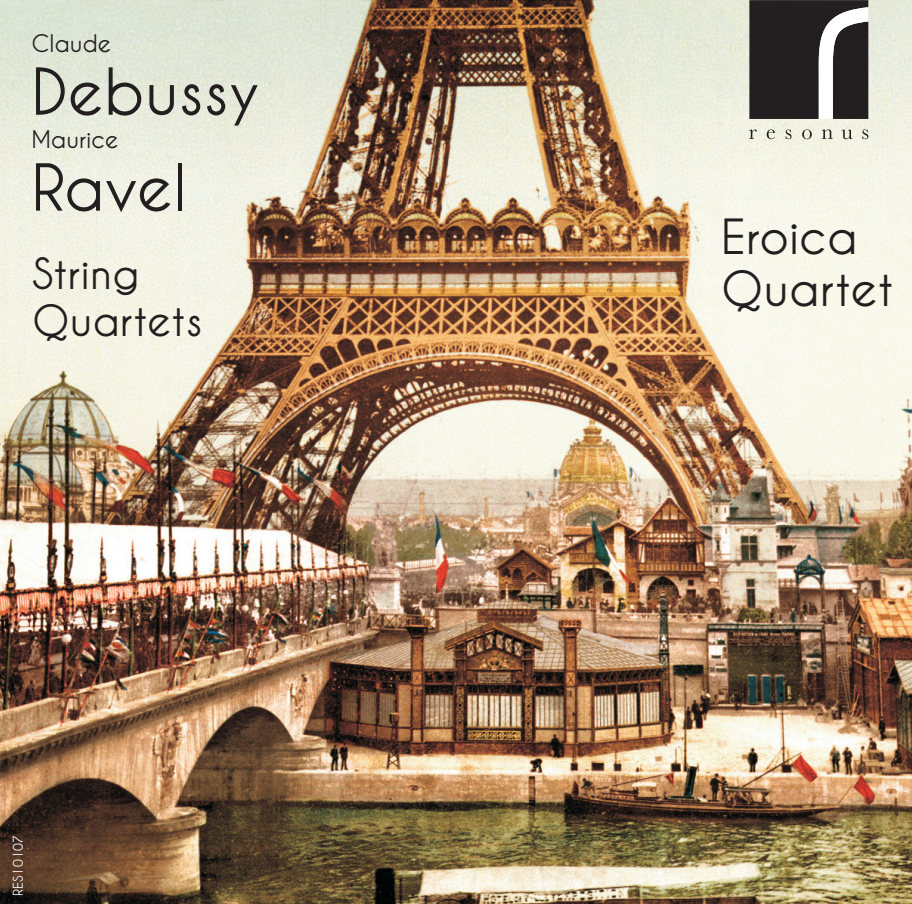
Ravel

String  
Quartets



resonus

Eroica  
Quartet



RES10107

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

## String Quartets

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### Eroica Quartet

Peter Hanson *violin 1*

Julia Hanson *violin 2*

Vicci Wardman *viola*

David Watkin *cello*

*'... refreshingly impetuous'*  
The New York Times

*'... heroic, questing, unsettling and magnificent performances'*  
BBC Music magazine, February 2001, Chamber disc of the month

### Maurice Ravel

#### String Quartet

- |                                |        |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| 1. Allegro moderato: très doux | [7:59] |
| 2. Assez vif: très rythmé      | [6:25] |
| 3. Très lent                   | [8:22] |
| 4. Vif et agité                | [5:36] |

### Claude Debussy

#### String Quartet, Op. 10

- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| 5. Animé et très décidé  | [6:41]  |
| 6. Assez vif et bien rythmé  | [3:57]  |
| 7. Andantino: doucement expressif  | [8:25]  |
| 8. Très modéré – en animant peu à peu<br>– Très mouvementé et avec passion | [7:28]  |
| Total playing time   | [54:57] |

*All tracks are performed on gut strings*



Debussy playing the piano at Ernest Chausson's house in Luzancy (Seine-et-Marne), August 1893

## Debussy and Ravel: String Quartets

### Claude Debussy (1862-1918) String Quartet, Op. 10

Debussy's String Quartet was completed in February 1893 and first performed by the Ysaÿe Quartet on 29 December 1893, at Salle Pleyel – the 234th concert of the Société Nationale de Musique. This was almost exactly a year before Paris was shocked by the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, the most laconic manifestation of Debussy's revolutionary creative spirit. The Quartet, conceived at the same time as the *Prélude*, is one of his earliest mature works – a piece that still has some roots in the musical language of Franck – especially in its use of themes recurring throughout the work and in some of the harmonies – but in which a fresh and brilliant imagination can be heard, not least in the spectacularly inventive writing for string instruments – something that was thoroughly absorbed by Ravel in the Quartet he wrote a decade later.

For reasons that are unclear, Debussy's Quartet is the only work to which he gave an opus number: the score of the first edition, published by Durand in 1894, describes the work as '1er Quatuor ... par C.A. Debussy. Op. 10.' Edward Lockspeiser has speculated that 'this is possibly an ironic concession to the meticulous methods of classifying chamber music.' This could well

be the case, though the programme for the first performance describes the work simply as 'Quatuor'. The programme announced for the Salle Pleyel on 29 December 1893 provided a fascinating context for Debussy's Quartet:

Sonate pour piano et violon – C. Franck  
Quatuor pour deux violons, alto et violoncelle  
– C.A. Debussy (1re audition)  
Élégie pour violoncelle – G. Fauré  
Sarabande, Gigue, Chaconne – J.S. Bach  
Quatuor pour deux violons, alto et violoncelle  
– Vincent d'Indy

In the event, the Fauré and Bach items were dropped at the last minute, for fear of the concert lasting too long, and the Debussy Quartet was placed at the start of the programme. As a result, all three of the works actually performed at the Société Nationale were dedicated to the great violinist Eugène Ysaÿe (or to his quartet): the Franck Violin Sonata, the First String Quartet by D'Indy and Debussy's Quartet. The pairing of the Debussy with Franck's masterpiece (played on this occasion by Ysaÿe and Vincent d'Indy) must have been particularly thought-provoking to the audience at the première: Franck's most creative and poetic use of cyclic form coming immediately after Debussy's work that uses some of the same techniques, albeit in a highly individual accent. For instance, the second makes extensive use of *pizzicato*, with hints of the Javanese music that Debussy had

heard at the 1889 Exposition, and also of the *pizzicato ostinato* Scherzo from Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony – a work the young Debussy knew well, having played it as a piano duet with its dedicatee Nadezhda von Meck in 1880. The slow movement begins with little fragments of its theme split between the lower instruments before being introduced in full by the first violin, over rich chromatic harmonies that certainly have echoes of Franck, and with his pupil Ernest Chausson – a close friend of Debussy's at the time before the two of them fell out. The finale has clear thematic links with the first. It starts hesitantly, gradually building up both tension and speed, on a melodic idea presented in a brilliant array of different guises before reaching the dazzling conclusion in G major. But this apparently seamless musical flow came only after considerable trouble: the finale gave Debussy a lot of trouble, as he told Chausson: 'As for the last movement of the Quartet, I can't get it into the shape I want and that's the third time of trying. It's a hard slog!'

It's intriguing to speculate on the sound of the Ysaÿe Quartet. According to Elias Dann, Ysaÿe was 'the last world-famous violinist to play on gut E, A and D strings'. Though metal E strings were used occasionally in the late nineteenth century, they were not widely accepted until at least the 1920s, so it's safe to assume that the sound Debussy had in

mind for his Quartet was an ensemble playing on gut strings.

What does seem certain is that the Quartet was initially greeted with indifference. In his study of Ysaÿe and chamber music, Michel Stockhem writes that 'the première of Debussy's Quartet caused no scandal. The work was little understood except by the most progressive fringes of the musical public.' Newspaper coverage of the Société Nationale concerts was patchy, though there was an encouraging review by the composer Guy Ropartz published in the *Guide musical* on 7 January 1894. Although he was a Franck pupil, the influence that Ropartz noticed in the work was not that of his old teacher, but something from farther afield:

An unpublished quartet by Mr C. Debussy opened the programme. This is a very interesting work, dominated by the influence of the young Russians: the poetry of the themes, the unusual sonorities. The first two movements are particularly remarkable.

The work attracted more attention when it was played in Brussels on 1 March as part of an all-Debussy concert arranged by Ysaÿe. The critic Octave Maus wrote about the event in *Art moderne*, providing a perceptive account of the Quartet:

Very classically constructed in four movements that could, without difficulty, be titled like those of the old masters as *Allegro*, *Scherzo*, *Andante*, *Finale*, the quartet follows a logical path, clearly set out,

despite the capricious imagination of the modulations that seem to draw us into an adventure. It is this quality, in a torrent of youthfulness, harmonic daring and unexpected resolutions that particularly struck the musicians.

The first movement, notably – the most remarkable of this striking work – unfolds with a weighty, sober and very stylish artistry. Its complication is only apparent. Under the tracery and arabesques, a close study of the work reveals the structure: the architecture of a master sure of his craft. The movement marked *Assez vif et bien rythmé*, all in pizzicato, has a dapper gracefulness and a marvellous spirit. The *Andantino*, 'sweetly expressive', develops through dreamy melodies and an adorable seductiveness. And the finale brings an eloquent peroration to this composition that is so full of happy discoveries, youthful inspiration and exquisite details.

Ernest Chausson – to whom Debussy had confided much about his work in progress and who was originally intended to be its dedicatee – expressed his doubts about the Quartet. Debussy was hurt, but promised that he'd write another one that would be more to Chausson's liking ('in a more dignified form'). Debussy even sketched part of a second quartet early in 1894, but nothing ever came of his plans. Within a few months, his friendship with Chausson was broken off – not as a result of disagreements over the Quartet, but because Chausson has concerns about some of Debussy's financial dealings, and he disapproved of what he thought a misguided engagement to Thérèse Roger. But despite this

estrangement, Edward Lockspeiser tells us that Debussy attended Chausson's funeral in 1899, along with the likes of Fauré, Degas and Rodin.

### Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) String Quartet

Dedicated 'à mon cher maître Gabriel Fauré', Ravel's only string quartet was started in 1902. On 30 April that year he had attended the first performance of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and immediately afterwards set about his candidature for the Prix de Rome – a prize he was fated never to win despite repeated attempts between 1900 and 1905. In the autumn he undertook a project for a fellow-composer, Frederick Delius, who asked him to make a piano-vocal score of the opera *Margot la Rouge*. Ravel took this time-consuming task seriously, telling Delius in early October that he had corrected 'obvious errors' and leaving some 'doubtful passages' until the two had a chance to discuss them.

He then set to work on the String Quartet, and the first two movements were finished in December 1902, according to Ravel's note on the last page of the second movement in the autograph score. The next month, he submitted the first movement for a composition prize at the Paris Conservatoire, where he was still studying with Fauré. The jury was not particularly impressed by what they saw, and

the music drew a typically acidic reaction from the Conservatoire's director, Théodore Dubois, who proclaimed that it 'lacked simplicity'. But even Ravel's teacher had his doubts about the work, as Hélène Jourdan-Morhange recalled:

All through his life Ravel used to tell a story about how he took his String Quartet into Fauré's class and how Fauré received it with less than his usual enthusiasm; indeed he pulled a face and thought it was no good. Some days later he asked Ravel to bring the manuscript back again:

'Why do you want to see it, cher maître,' said Ravel, 'since it's rubbish?'

'I could have been wrong,' Fauré replied.

Fauré's willingness to give the work another chance was a gesture that greatly touched the young Ravel. But the failure of the first movement to win a prize meant that his studies at the Conservatoire were over. He was expelled from the venerable institution, and didn't return there until several years later – as an examiner.

But he persisted with the String Quartet, and, as the poet Léon-Paul Fargue recalled, Ravel played parts of it on the piano to friends while it was a work-in-progress. Fargue and Ravel were both members of Les Apaches, a group of friends – writers, artists and musicians – who provided Ravel's closest artistic circle at the time. By April 1903 he had finished all four movements, then put it aside for a

few months for yet another doomed attempt at the Prix de Rome. During the rest of 1903 it's likely that he made some further revisions to the score. At the time he wrote the Quartet, Ravel was living with his family at 19 boulevard Pereire, in north-west Paris. The pianist and composer Alfredo Casella was living a couple of doors away (at 15 boulevard Pereire), and the two became friends. In his memoirs, Casella recalled running into Ravel in the street: 'On my way home in January 1904, I found [Ravel] seated on a bench, attentively reading a manuscript. I came up to him and asked what it was. He said: "It is a quartet I have just finished. I am rather satisfied with it." It was the String Quartet in F which has become universally famous.'

The first performance was given on 5 March 1904, but one of those present at the final rehearsal was Claude Debussy, who wrote to Ravel on 4 March:

Cher ami,  
[Raoul] Bardac has just told me of your intention to have your Quartet – and especially the Andante – played less loudly. In the name of all the Gods, and mine, please, don't do that. Think of the difference in sonority between a hall that's full and one that's empty. It's only the Viola that slightly obscures the others and could perhaps be toned down? Otherwise, don't touch anything and all will be well.

My cordial affection.

Claude Debussy

This letter – which was only rediscovered quite recently – gave rise to the story that Debussy had told Ravel not to change a thing. In his biography of Ravel (2011), Roger Nichols prints the whole of this letter, and points out that Debussy's reply is more interesting than a blanket endorsement of the work. Firstly, the mere fact of Debussy's presence at a rehearsal suggests that the two composers – who always had a rather uneasy friendship – were close at this time, and secondly Debussy understood that Ravel had concerns about the Quartet's textures sounding too orchestral. Nichols elegantly summarizes the impact that Debussy had on the work: 'being at once homage to and exorcism of Debussy's influence. ... the Quartet [is] the work of a newly-matured composer, intent on pursuing his individual concerns.'

The première was given by the Heymann Quartet on 5 March 1904 at the Schola Cantorum, in one of the concerts of the Société Nationale de Musique. The press reaction was mixed. Pierre Lalo, Ravel's nemesis among Parisian critics, considered it to be essentially derivative: 'In all the elements which it contains and in all the sensations which it evokes, it offers an incredible resemblance to the music of M. Debussy.' But others were much more positive, especially Jean Marnold who declared that 'one should remember the name of Maurice Ravel. He is one of the

masters of tomorrow.' In her fascinating introduction to the recent Bärenreiter edition of the String Quartet, Juliette Appold quotes several other early reviews. Louis Laloy in *Revue musicale* wrote that it 'was received with much applause; it is the work of a sensitive and gifted musician, full of emotion, clarity and harmony.' Ravel's friend Michel Calvocoressi praised it in the same journal a month later, admiring its 'clarity of line' and its 'balanced architecture,' describing the overall impression of the work as 'at once suave and expressive.'

Years later, Ravel himself spoke about how he saw the importance of the Quartet quoted by his friend and pupil Roland-Manuel: 'My String Quartet represents a conception of musical construction, imperfectly realized no doubt, but set out much more precisely than in my earlier compositions.' In a clear parallel with Debussy's String Quartet, Ravel makes use of cyclic themes – material heard in the first movement returns in various guises throughout the rest of the work. The second movement is notable for Ravel's brilliant use of cross-rhythms and one of the less explicit instances of the Spanish influence in his music: though there's nothing in the thematic material to suggest Spain (and some have heard hints here of the Javanese gamelan that enchanted both Debussy and Ravel at the 1889 Exposition Universelle), the four

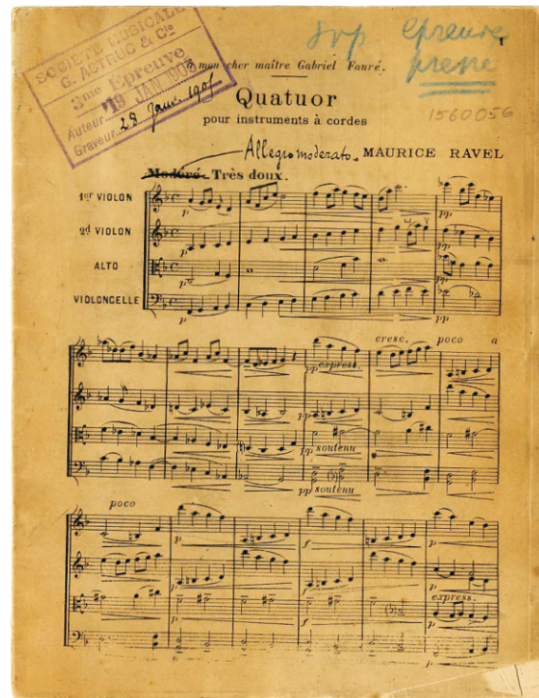
string players become a kind of gigantic guitar – using the same technique but producing a very different outcome from Debussy’s plucked strings in his Scherzo. The glorious slow movement is very rhapsodic in feel, and includes a dream-like recollection of the main theme from the first movement. In the finale, the rhythmic drive is made all the more individual through Ravel’s use of irregular time-signatures, moving freely from 5/8 to 5/4 and 3/4. This metrical mobility gives the movement a sense of momentum that not only impossible to predict but also impossible to resist. As with Debussy’s Quartet, the use of cyclic form seems entirely effortless, and in the finale Ravel’s recollections of the main theme from the first movement are woven into the texture with the greatest subtlety. The apparent ease with which Ravel handles musical forms, coupled with the kaleidoscopic imaginativeness of his string writing, produces a conclusion that appears to glitter and surge.

#### Historically-informed Debussy and Ravel

‘I have just heard the discs of my quartet recorded by the International String Quartet. I am completely satisfied with it regarding both its sonority and its motions and nuances.’ This was the endorsement Ravel wrote on 18 July 1927 for the first recording of the String Quartet, made a few weeks earlier by

the International String Quartet led by André Mangeot. The records were made in London by the National Gramophonic Society, a small company founded by Compton Mackenzie to record music that was overlooked by larger labels. This was particularly true of modern chamber music, and the première recording of the Ravel is just one of an astonishingly enterprising catalogue that included the sextet version of Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*, Elgar’s Piano Quintet, Warlock’s *The Curlew*, Bax’s Oboe Quintet and Phantasy Sonata, Malipiero’s String Quartet No. 2 and a 1924 recording of the Debussy String Quartet by the Spencer Dyke Quartet and Violin Sonata played by Mangeot with Lyell Barbour.

Ravel’s statement, written on his headed writing paper at Le Belvédère, Montfort-L’Amaury, was reproduced in a large facsimile as part of the article by André Mangeot on ‘The Ravel String Quartet’ published in the September 1927 edition of *The Gramophone*. This article contains all sorts of intriguing evidence for how the composer wanted the piece to be performed. After making a recording with which Mangeot was dissatisfied, he wrote that ‘Luckily for me [Ravel] came to London just then to play his new Violin Sonata with Jelly d’Aranyi’ and he was able to listen to the records: ‘in a little cubicle ... which was soon thick with cigarette smoke. I had the score with me, and as the records



The opening page of the third proofs (January 1905) of Ravel’s Quartet, showing the change of tempo in the composer’s hand (Sibley Music Library, Rochester NY)

were played he marked it wherever there was an effect or a tempo that he wanted altered. It was very interesting. He is most precise – he knows exactly what he wants – how, in his mind, that quartet, every bar of it, ought to sound.’ The players then recorded the work again, incorporating Ravel’s comments and suggestions, and Mangeot took the test records to Ravel in France.

One of the most interesting aspects of this recording is that the speeds chosen by the International Quartet are often slower than those marked in the printed score. The first movement is ‘Allegro moderato’ with a metronome mark of crotchet = 120. In fact Ravel dithered for a while over this tempo marking. Even on the third set of proofs (dated 28 January 1905), the tempo for the first movement is given as ‘Moderato’, as it appears on the autograph manuscript. It was at this moment that Ravel changed his mind – on these proofs he crossed out ‘Modéré’ and replaced it with ‘Allegro moderato.’ The metronome indication was added five years later, in 1910, when the score was corrected and the publication was transferred from Gabriel Astruc to Durand. Writing in Cobbett’s *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* (1930), Mangeot commented on the matter of speeds in the Ravel Quartet, suggesting that Ravel’s precisely calculated notations were best ignored: ‘in regard to

the question of discovering the real tempo of the work, it would be wise, in order to arrive at the truth, to try to forget the print entirely, and simply repeat the main subject mentally in any tempo, until the brain is saturated with it. After repeating the process for two or three days, the real tempo should suddenly appear of itself.’ This may sound like a cavalier approach, but it’s one that certainly satisfied Ravel. In her preface to the Bärenreiter edition, Juliette Appold makes a telling point about the flexibility of tempo in the International Quartet recording: as well as noting that speeds being generally slower than those marked in the score, she also draws attention to ‘its many rubati, which reveal that Ravel’s tempo indications are only momentary, and thus changeable.’

Compton Mackenzie noted in the 1930s that performances of the Ravel Quartet seemed to be getting faster, though this is a trend that has been reversed in most recent recordings – whether consciously or not, modern quartets seem to have reverted to speeds more like those Ravel was used to hearing, certainly in the work’s first recording, a subsequent version by the Galimir Quartet made in 1934 for which the ailing Ravel was present at the sessions.

Some of the same qualities can be heard in the Capet Quartet recordings of both the

Debussy and Ravel recorded in 1928. The Capet Quartet used a light vibrato – so much so that Yehudi Menuhin recalled hearing them as a 10-year-old prodigy, and leaving the hall because he was so disturbed by the lack of vibrato in the sound. Listening to the 1928 records, there is vibrato, but it is often sparingly applied, and it is varied to suit the expressive requirements of the music. In other words, the Capet considered the use of different kinds of vibrato as a way of enhancing the range of tonal colour and nuance in their performances. These records are also notable for the Capet’s free use of *portamento* and the quartet’s characteristic sonority that seems to evoke another age. Tully Potter has praised the Capet Quartet’s recordings ‘for their courtly musicality and the window they provide into late nineteenth-century performance practice. The sound made on the gut strings is very pure, almost chaste, and yet the interpretation is both probing and powerful.’

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*Nigel Simeone is a musicologist and writer. His books include Paris: A Musical Gazetteer (Yale University Press), Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story (Ashgate); he co-authored Messiaen (Yale University Press), and Janáček’s Works (Oxford University Press). He is a frequent contributor to International Record Review and is currently editing Bernstein’s letters for Yale University Press, due to be published in Autumn 2012.*

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## Eroica Quartet



Peter Hanson *violin 1*  
Julia Hanson *violin 2*  
Vikki Wardman *viola*  
David Watkin *cello*

Over many years the Eroica quartet has successfully established itself as a pioneering group in the rediscovery of nineteenth-century performing techniques and styles. They have performed widely, both at home and abroad, with concerts across Europe and the USA, including the Frick Collection, New York and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Also renowned for their historically informed recordings, they

have recorded all of Mendelssohn's quartets, the final release of which was released in May 2005 and a disc containing three quartets by Beethoven, all for the Harmonia Mundi USA label.

Their European concerts have included Holland, Denmark, Germany, France and Spain. After a successful Barcelona debut, the quartet gave a Mendelssohn cycle in November 2003. In 2010 they gave a performance of the original 1825 version of Mendelssohn's Octet, Op.20 in the Library of Congress, Washington, recording it the following May. Further engagements in 2010 included performing Ravel and Debussy quartets in Paris.

In 2011 their first release on the Resonus Classics label, the first recording of the original 1825 version of Mendelssohn's Octet, was met with resounding critical acclaim, including a 'Chamber Choice of the Month' accolade from *BBC Music Magazine*.

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and St John's Church, Loughton on 15-16 February 2011 (Debussy)  
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Executive Producer: Adam Binks  
Recorded at 24-bit / 96kHz resolution  
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