

never accuse them of having a language barrier. But, whereas Debussy's quartet is the work of a headstrong progressive still on his way to developing a mature, personal style, Ravel's is the work of an already mature artist more concerned with craftsmanship and traditional structure than with innovation. Not surprisingly, given their relative places in their careers when the two composers wrote their string quartets, Ravel's is the more sound piece of music and Debussy's is the more groundbreaking. Incidentally, Debussy, by all accounts, adored Ravel's piece, and though it makes the cut by just a couple of years, it is probably the most oft-played string quartet of the twentieth century. Ravel dedicated it to his teacher, Gabriel Fauré.

Ravel's String Quartet is in four movements: Moderato très doux, Assez vif-Très rythmé, Très lent, and Vif et agité. The opening movement's pianissimo second theme is as hollow and melancholy as the first theme is warm and inviting. In the second movement, which serves as the Quartet's scherzo, Ravel moves into the pizzicato world already explored by Debussy in the scherzo movement of his String Quartet; the central portion (one hesitates to call it a "trio section") calls for the players to put mutes on their instruments. Bits of music from earlier in the Quartet can be heard, wearing new clothes, in the slow movement; likewise in the finale, which plunges straight into a frantic 5/4 meter bombast at its start, lightens up in the middle, and then ends in a blaze of zeal.

The Quartetto Italiano is regarded as one of the finest string quartets of the twentieth century. The group generally focused on quartet-only repertory, avoiding performance with guest artists of quintets and other larger compositions. The ensemble's repertory was broad and included the entire quartet outputs of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, and Webern, and selected works of Galuppi, Vivaldi, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Bartók, Shostakovich, Villa-Lobos, Schoenberg, and many others.

DEBUSSY STRING QUARTET IN G MINOR

RAVEL STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR

QUARTETTO ITALIANO



Debussy began work on the composition of his only string quartet in 1892. Little documentary evidence, save for one or two passing oblique references in letters to friends remains to indicate his rate of progress. The final movement, however, caused him no little trouble, and only in August 1893 did Debussy feel able to write to his colleague André Poniatowski that "I think I can finally show you the last movement of the quartet, which has made me really miserable!"

Cast in the traditional four movements, Debussy's Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 has as its most distinctive feature its overarching preoccupation with timbre and sonority. The work as a whole offers a compendium of string-playing techniques, yet it also displays a concision of thought rare, perhaps, in a composition often regarded (along with the quartet by Ravel) as one of the seminal impressionist works in the string quartet genre.

Its fascinating and readily palpable thematic concentration seems all the more remarkable when one realizes that the very first theme of the opening movement (*Animé et très décidé*) comes to furnish almost all of the diverse thematic components for the entire work. Another ingenious feature (possibly less immediately apparent to the listener at first hearing) is that the quartet is less dominated by melodic or harmonic considerations than by a rhythmic flexibility which carries the potential for seemingly endless variety. In this respect, Debussy's string quartet seems to strongly prefigure those by Bartók. Yet it remains unmistakably a work dominated by the sensuality and longueurs of French late nineteenth century Romanticism, a strong feature of the slow third movement (*Andantino doucement expressif*).

The work is also strongly predictive of the disjunctive and highly polarized new musical language that would assert itself in the two decades following its completion. The Scherzo (*Assez vif et bien rythmé*), for example, makes use of the disruptive sonic confrontations that can occur when rapidly alternating pizzicato and bowed passages produce what one commentator has described as "a confusion that forces the listener to concentrate on the textures, rather than the

linear form of the music." These apparently disparate elements are then welded together in a finale of striking economy of means, and only at the close does it become really clear that the opening gestures of the work have actually altered themselves and coalesced to produce an organic unity of some 25 minutes' duration.

The work was to be dedicated to Ernest Chausson, whose personal reservations eventually diverted the composer's original intentions. Debussy sold his score for a mere 250 francs to the publishers Durand & Cie, who, as he later recalled, "were cynical enough about it to freely admit that what they were paying me didn't cover all the labor this 'work' has entailed." Not surprisingly, the quartet was widely misunderstood at its premiere, given by the Ysayé Quartet on December 29, 1893. At the time, the composer Guy Ropartz was the lone voice in a wilderness of critical lack of interest; he described the quartet as a work "dominated by the influence of young Russia (interestingly, Debussy's patroness in the early 1880s had been Nadezhda von Meck, better known for her support of Tchaikovsky); there are poetic themes, rare sonorities, the first two movements being particularly remarkable."

The similarities between Maurice Ravel's only work for string quartet, the String Quartet in F major, and Claude Debussy's only work for string quartet, the String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10, can hardly be avoided or ignored. During the early years of his career, Ravel was frequently and sometimes vehemently criticized for having copied Debussy, and it was only later that musical society began to realize that, in the realm of piano music at least, it was equally possible that Debussy had imitated his younger colleague. With the String Quartet in F, composed in 1902 and 1903 and then revised up to 1910, however, Ravel seems more certain to have relied on Debussy's 1893 Op. 10; as emotionally, psychologically, and even structurally different as the two works are, one could

DEBUSSY STRING QUARTET IN G MINOR

RAVEL STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR QUARTETTO ITALIANO

Claude Debussy String Quartet In G Minor

1 nimé Et Très Décidé 6:31

2 Assez Vif Et Bien Rhythmé) 3:57

3 Andantino Doucement Expressif 8:40

4 Très Modéré - Très Mouvementé Et Avec Passion 7:38

Maurice Ravel String Quartet In F Major

5 Allegro Moderato. Très Doux 8:43

6 Assez Vif. Très Rhythmé 6:35

7 Très Lent 9:05

8 Vif Et Agité 5:30

Recorded by Philips at the Théâtre Vevey, Vevey, Switzerland, 11-14 August 1965

Engineer - Tony Buczynski

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