Mozart: Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, K. 493 (1786)

Just as Haydn has come to be regarded as the father of the string quartet, with Beethoven playing an instrumental role in bringing chamber music to the public stage, Mozart is no less than history's first piano virtuoso who played a formative role in the development of the piano quartet genre. The piano quartet is an odd beast, removing the second violin – which has become an essential texture in the fabric of the symphony and the string quartet – and replacing it with a piano. Not only does this unsettle the balance between the different instruments (one piano can quite easily overpower a small orchestra, let alone three strings), but it forces the viola into a role it does not customarily occupy – the countermelody and supporting voice to the violin. The nasality of the viola's natural voice makes this a peculiar pairing, full of timbral potential, and gives the instrument a much more active role than is customary. In effect, the "inner voices" being reduced to a singular entity gives much more freedom to the viola to sing out from the dense texture of the piano quartet. Mozart, in this quartet, takes full advantage of the viola's melodic capabilities, hinting at the techniques he will later use in the *Sinfonia Concertante in E-Flat Major K. 364,* to render the viola a soloistic equal to the violin.

In fact, the viola is not the only instrument to receive preferential treatment in this work – the violin and piano each are entrusted with extremely virtuosic parts that perhaps only Mozart himself could have pulled off successfully. In fact, his publishers decided to cancel the contract for a set of three piano quartets upon seeing how difficult the piano part was, predicting slow sales and insufficient profits. Theirs was certainly not a very prescient publishing house. In any case, the bubbling joy emanating from every instrument in the mix is highly characteristic of Mozart's style, and we cannot help but imagine a scenario in which Mozart, with a twinkle in his eye, took turns playing the piano, the violin, and the viola parts alongside his musical colleagues. Chamber music in Mozart's time was a *divertissement*, a pleasurable activity undertaken in the company of friends, to pass the time. Certainly concerts took place, and Mozart was frequently called upon to perform for some prince or the other, however the effervescent playfulness of his E-flat Major piano quartet lends itself perfectly to the salon culture of eighteenth century Vienna.

In the first movement, *Allegro*, the strings and piano begin on a sort of crowd-silencing chord – a loud chord played in unison rhythm to grab the attention of the audience (however informal it may have been – we cannot forget that audiences of Mozart's time were hardly the demure statues that fill our modern recital halls). The violin and piano continue to play off each other, and the viola is given its first melodic moment to shine without the added support of a second violin. Throughout the movement, there is a certain economy of musical motifs, in which Mozart insists on the same melodic and rhythmic motifs to build up the foundations of the movement. In this case, the pattern of two slurred eighth notes followed by two staccato eighth notes is the central motif underpinning the quartet.

The second movement, *Larghetto*, is in the form of a *romance*, one of Mozart's preferred slow movement styles, with the lyrical melody passed between all four instruments. The final movement, *Allegretto*, is a romping rondo that features the pianist's brilliant virtuosity. At every moment, the pianist is chomping at the bit, rearing to be let loose in a show of dazzling pyrotechnics. The strings are tasked with keeping the piano in check, engaging in a series of

quirky call and response patterns among each other and with the piano. Mozart composed this ebullient quartet in stark contrast to his first venture in the genre, the moody G minor piano quartet, but in so doing, set the stage for nineteenth century romantic composers like Schumann and Fauré who would come to adopt the piano quartet as special medium for conveying their most intimate musical ideas.

Viennese salon and chamber music culture

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Turina: Piano Quartet in A Minor, Op. 67 (1931)

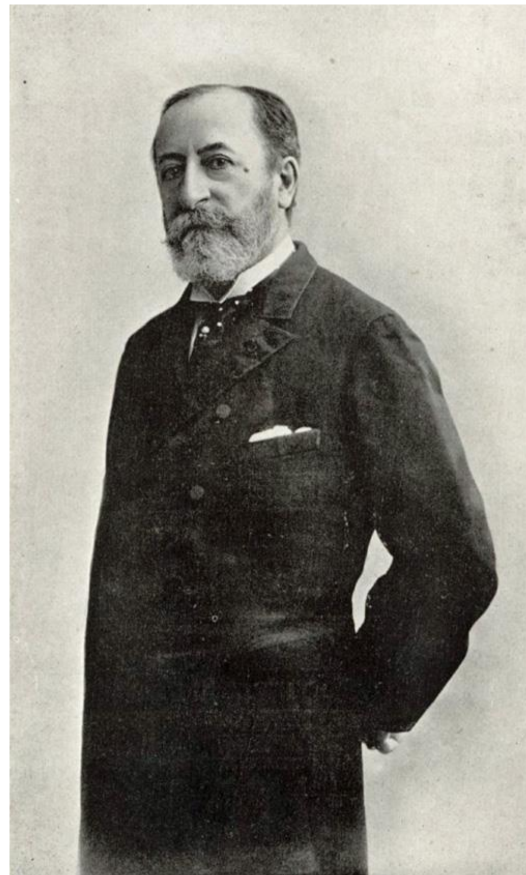
Like his illustrious predecessors, Isaac Albéniz and Enrique Granados, and classmate, Manuel de Falla, Joaquin Turina (1882-1949) was a member of the school of Spanish (specifically Andalusian) composers who received formal composition training in Paris. Turina, born in Sevilla in 1882, moved to Paris in 1905 to study with Vincent d'Indy at the *Schola Cantorum*. While there, Turina gained an immense appreciation for French impressionists, like Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy, and incorporated a number of their techniques into his own compositional style. However, Turina (alongside Albéniz and Falla) was also deeply invested in promoting Spanish (especially Andalusian) cultural heritage as a way of asserting his nationalist pride in a historical moment when European nationhood and cultural heritage was undergoing a trial by fire.

In the same vein of nationalist pride that characterized his *Oración del Torero* (1925), Turina sought to use the piano quartet as a medium for promoting the music of his native Spain, using the compositional techniques and musical language of Paris to enrobe the folk modes and harmonies of Andalusia in an art music veneer. In a fairly Debussyian approach to instrumentation, each of the four instruments of the quartet are used sometimes as bearers of thematic material and more often than not they are creating a specific timbral effect or musical color in order to deepen the musical texture beyond the purely contrapuntal style that permeates so many other compositions of chamber music. The symphony has tended to be the locus for such timbral experimentation; however Turina brings these techniques to bear even in the intimacy of the chamber ensemble, delighting our ears and senses with a wide range of exceptional musical textures.

Turina's piano quartet is divided into three movements, but he chooses an idiosyncratic pattern in which to present them, starting with a rhapsodic *Lento* movement. The movement gains pace after the grave introduction, speeding up to an *Andante mosso*, where the viola and cello engage in a repeated back-and-forth, passing the melody from one to the other and back again. The movement ends on an unanswered question, the final note lingering in the air without resolution until the broken *pizzicato* chords of the *Scherzo: Vivo* break the silence. Turina here uses the ensemble's instrumentation to mimic a guitarist's arpeggiations, offsetting the *pizzicati* across the upper and lower strings to achieve the effect. In true French Impressionist style, Turina plays with different colors and timbres, putting a long note here in the viola, followed by a floated response in the violin, and initiating a series of call and response motifs that add up to a magnificent whole. A second guitaristic interlude leads to a bombastic coda to cap off the *scherzo*. Quick on the heels of the second movement is the dramatic finale, *Andante-Allegro*, which contains a number of references to Spanish folk dances, evoking the musical language used by Georges Bizet in his opera, *Carmen*. The movement opens with a solo violin rhapsody, in a mode hearkening to the violin showpieces of nineteenth century Spanish composer Pablo de Sarasate and Édouard Lalo, another French composer with a vested interest in Spanish melody. After the violin waxes poetic on an Iberian theme, the viola and cello join in parallel motion to the violin, providing a distinct harmonic setting to the violin's melody. The pianist does not get to flex their virtuosity as they did in Mozart's quartet, however Turina uses this movement to set

the score of his beloved homeland and entices us to imagine the wonders of Spain in this operatic work of chamber music.

Joaquin Turina



Camille Saint-Saëns

Saint-Saëns: Piano Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 41 (1875)

Camille Saint-Saëns was born in Paris on October 9, 1835, living to the ripe age of eighty-six. From a very early age, he was recognized as a musical prodigy, gaining renown as a concert pianist from his debut at ten years old, and going on to be a virtuoso organist and acclaimed composer. Some of the most recognizable melodies in the symphonic repertoire were written by Saint-Saëns, including the *Carnaval des Animaux* (which contains *Le Cygne – The Swan*), *Danse Macabre*, *Samson et Delilah*, and his *Organ Symphony*. His chamber works do not quite enjoy the same limelight afforded to his symphonic and operatic compositions, but they nonetheless exhibit the same qualities of contrapuntal precision, carefully crafted melodies, and motivic tightness that ties the whole work together. Though Saint-Saëns did not pursue a long career as a teacher, he spent five years at the *École de Musique Classique et Religieuse,* where he mentored and befriended a young Gabriel Fauré, who then went on to teach Maurice Ravel. Thus, by extension, the composition language of Saint-Saëns finds a home not only in the French composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also in the work of Turina who himself learned from the techniques of the Parisian music schools.

Although Saint-Saëns was an avid admirer of Wagnerian aesthetics and the expansive musical techniques that came be popular in *fin de siècle* Vienna, in the works of Bruckner and Mahler. Nonetheless, Saint-Saëns musical style was distinct from the Wagnerian ideal and he developed his own compositional language that relied heavily on a mastery of counterpoint and demanded exact precision on the part of the performers. Despite being acknowledged as a musical genius and having already made a name for himself as a composer of repute, Saint-Saëns was twice denied the first prize at the *Prix de Rome*, first in 1852 and then in 1864, losing to younger contestants who were deemed to have a greater passion and inner fire for composition than himself. Berlioz, a judge in the 1864 competition, voted against Saint-Saëns, explaining that though he had achieved technical mastery, his pieces left something to be desired, lacking a certain soul that was clearly present in the victor's work. Saint-Saëns, though he felt slighted, was unfazed by the critique and felt that mastery of the technical art of composition need not involve the input of the emotions and that music, like art, could stand by virtue of its composition and form. His approach to composition quickly becomes apparent in the second movement of the piano quartet, when crisp and matter-of-fact precision is not only essential to its performance, but the extended fugue that Saint-Saëns writes into the movement required the same eye for detail and precision.

The Piano Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 41 was one of Saint-Saëns earlier compositions, and it was premièred in 1875, a significant year for the composer. Not only was he married to Marie-Laure Truffot, but his son was also born the same year. One of his most enduring works, *Danse Macabre*, was also premièred in 1875. For the première of the piano quartet, Saint-Saëns on piano was joined by Pablo de Sarasate, the Spanish violin virtuoso, Alfred Turban on viola, and Léon Jacquard on cello. The star-studded ensemble likely gave a performance which would have remained in the audience's mind for some time to come.

The piano quartet is broken up into four movements, beginning with a bombastic *Allegretto* of symphonic proportions. While snippets of melodies are exchanged between the three strings as if

in a back-and-forth conversation, the moments where all four instruments join together simultaneously create an impressive thick texture, reminiscent of Saint-Saëns' symphonic writing. Like Brahms, Saint-Saëns' compositions are contrapuntally elegant and complicated, yet maintain a lush density of sound that was characteristically his. In order to successfully execute a performance of Saint-Saëns works, the musicians must embrace precision in their interpretation, not letting their passions take over in the moment of performance, or the whole house of cards comes crashing down. The second movement, *Andante maestoso, ma con moto*, is essentially a fugue, expanding upon the harmonic techniques of the Baroque masters in order to showcase Saint-Saëns own compositional prowess. An extended fugue of these proportions is a demanding exercise for both composer and performers and the stiff musical genius of Saint-Saëns shows through in the almost robotic technical precision and cleanliness demanded of the ensemble.

From there, Saint-Saëns moves on to a *scherzo* movement in which he introduces a syncopated main theme, throwing the entire rhythmic impetus off-kilter. A simple scale becomes an exercise in group concentration, which each note of the scale divided among the different instruments, and the musicians must stack onto each other with absolute precision in order to execute the large-scale melodic movement upwards. This technique in particular foreshadows the textural techniques used by Béla Bartók in his six notoriously difficult string quartets. The final movement, *Allegro*, is rambunctious finale in which all the themes of the earlier movements make a reappearance, not only restated but put into conversation with one another in a somewhat fugal setting. It is in this finale that Saint-Saëns shows forth his musical acumen as an organist, as the slow stacking and buildup of chords from one note is highly reminiscent of the organ's timbre and sounding technique. Throughout the entire work, Saint-Saëns brings to the fore his own taste for counterpoint while still maintaining a lushness of sound that finds a home in the works of so many French composers after Berlioz. From Mozart to Saint-Saëns to Turina, the piano quartet drastically changed from one generation to the next, from one composer to the next; through it all, the singular constant was the ensemble and the performers, who must a way to express their voices through the veils of each composer.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley