

### **Purcell: *Chacony in G minor*, Z. 730 (arr. Benjamin Britten)**

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) was a precocious musician who composed his first full piece, an ode to King Charles II, at the tender age of eleven years. He went on to have one of history's most illustrious musical careers and came to be known as a cornerstone of the English Baroque tradition. Like Mozart a century after him, Purcell grew up in a deeply musical family; his uncle and younger brother both also pursued successful musical careers over the course of their lives. Despite only living to his mid-thirties, Purcell left an indelible mark on English music, and is considered alongside Byrd and Dunstaple as one of the Isle's most formative musicians of the seventeenth century. Purcell wrote for both the theater and the church, though his opera *Dido and Aeneas* continues to be a cornerstone of the operatic repertoire. His *Chacony in G minor* was not a standalone instrumental work, but rather served as incidental music for some theatrical piece – historians are not quite sure which one.

You might know the term *chacony* in its Italian (*ciaccona*) or French (*chaconne*) versions, and Bach's solo violin *Partita No. 2 (BWV 1004)* ends with the renowned *Chaconne in D minor*, a staple of the violin repertoire. Often used interchangeably with the term *passacaglia*, a *ciaccona* is built on a repeating bass line over which the musicians "walk through" different melodic variations, a slow movement forward through time and musical space enabled by the repetitive harmonic structure. The triple meter *passacaglia* dance was often performed in the streets of cities, and the term itself derives from the Spanish words: *pasar* (to pass) and *calle* (street). The *ciaccona* differs from the *passacaglia* in only two elements, its faster tempo and its metrical emphasis on the first beat of the bar. *Ciaccona's* etymology leads us back to the Basque word *chocuna* (pretty), and there can be no denying the beauty of Purcell's *Chacony*.

The *Chacony in g minor* was originally composed for a viol consort, and Benjamin Britten arranged it to its current form for string quartet. The *Chacony* proceeds over an eight-bar bass line built on a descending G minor tetrachord (four notes descending from the tonic to the dominant). This poignant descending bass line is reminiscent of the *lamento* bass line common in Renaissance *madrigals* and popularized by Monteverdi in his *Lamento della ninfa*. Purcell, though he did not exclusively associate this descending tetrachord with grief (and notably wrote love songs on the same bass line), famously used the figure in *Dido's Lament* from *Dido and Aeneas*, further cementing in our psyche the association between this four-note pattern and tragedy.

When listening to the *Chacony*, bear in mind the potential for both love and grief, for they are present in equal amounts. The work begins with an exposition of the descending tetrachord in the cello while the upper strings move in tandem through the opening chords, dotted rhythms defining their movement through time. Hearing the intricate counterpoint's continuous motion makes clear that Purcell composed this piece one line at a time, rather than building them in a vertical fashion from lowest to highest. Listen for the moments when different groups of instruments pair up in more or less rhythmic unison, while the third voice serves as a countermelody and the fourth lays out the unchanging harmonic progression. As these configurations change over the course of the piece, the musical tension rises and falls and despite the amount of repetition, the music continues to grow until the very final chord.

### **Grieg: *String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 27***

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), of *Peer Gynt* fame, composed works championing Norwegian national identity through the incorporation of folk melodies in his works. In the same way that Jean Sibelius composed works in praise of Finland and Bedřich Smetana uplifted his Czech homeland, Grieg tirelessly sought to bring elements of his Norwegian heritage into the art music sphere. Surprisingly, Grieg was also of Scottish descent; his great-grandfather Alexander of the Clann Ghrioghair moved to Norway after the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Grieg was raised in a home filled with music, as his mother was a music teacher and his first piano teacher. At the urging of the Norwegian virtuoso violinist, Ole Bull, Grieg attended the Leipzig Conservatory at age 15. Although Grieg was beset by illness throughout his adult life, he made the most of his trips to the spas and saunas and befriended several of his doctors. Queen Victoria of England was greatly pleased by Grieg's music, and he received honorary doctorates from both Cambridge (1894) and Oxford (1906).

The *String Quartet in G minor* was Grieg's only completed string quartet that is widely performed today. The first one he composed as an academic exercise is now lost and the third one was never fully completed. Grieg finished this quartet in 1878 and it was premiered in Cologne that same year. Although Claude Debussy openly disparaged Grieg's music, the musicologist Gerald Abraham first suggested in 1948 that Debussy may have been highly influenced by Grieg when composing his own string quartet. The cyclic structure, the key, the prevalence of the primary theme across movements, and the explorations of tonal color are all elements which show up in Debussy's later work.

The first movement, *Un poco andante*, opens with an attention-grabbing G minor chord which quickly collapses into unison movement to a D minor chord. Alternating between these two textures of full chordal structure and unison across the voices, the introduction promises drama on an untold scale. Indeed, this first theme (which appears once more at the very end of the quartet) is a quotation from a Norwegian folksong: *Spillamæd*. The music picks up the pace at the *Allegro molto ed agitato*, underpinned by near constant hemiola between duple and triple meters and Grieg's characteristically quick eighth note rhythms are everywhere. The contrapuntal textures here draw on the compositional legacy of Haydn, whose string quartets set the precedent for simultaneous independence and interdependence of the four instruments and foreshadow the techniques that would come to be used by Debussy to write his own string quartet.

In the *Romanze*, marked at a stately *Andantino* pace, Grieg's *modus operandi* is an exploration of the string quartet's sonic color palette, seeking to tease out the ensemble's capabilities. The *Romanze* is characterized by its insistence on imitative counterpoint, slowly building up from an individual voice and each entrance mimicking the last. This technique has a long history and was a mainstay of Renaissance polyphony, yet in this nineteenth-century string quartet it is given a new life. The texture is not quite fugal, for after the imitative entries, each line branches off. No two individuals here play the same part, yet each fits together like the pieces of a puzzle. One might even find the melody to be repetitive, but still we cannot help but continue to listen intently, for the accompanimental figures are constantly changing and breathing new life into the various iterations of the melody.

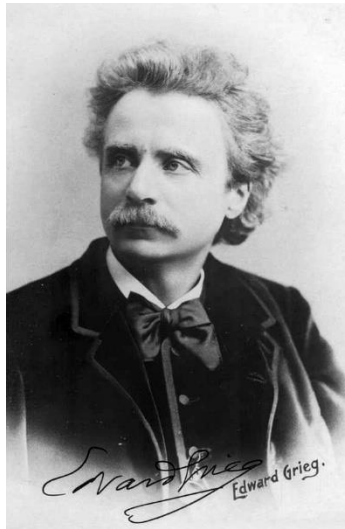
The third movement, an *Intermezzo*, proceeds at a faster tempo: *Allegro molto marcato*. Here, Grieg returns to the intense unison texture that opened the first movement. The double stops in the lower strings even caused Grieg's first publisher, C.F. Peters, to reject his manuscript, stating that it needed to incorporate a piano in order to be playable. It is precisely in these simpler parts where Grieg demands

the greatest virtuosity from his musicians; the melody sorts itself out without a hitch. The opening quickly melts into a lively dance in 3/4 time. In this movement the flow of time depends heavily on the meter, moving forward with energetic drive and dissipating into stillness just as quickly. The second section builds upon the other, beginning with a folk melody in the cello which is passed from the lowest to the highest voice. This forms the basis of a theme and variations which unfolds over the rest of the movement before returning to the movement's opening music.

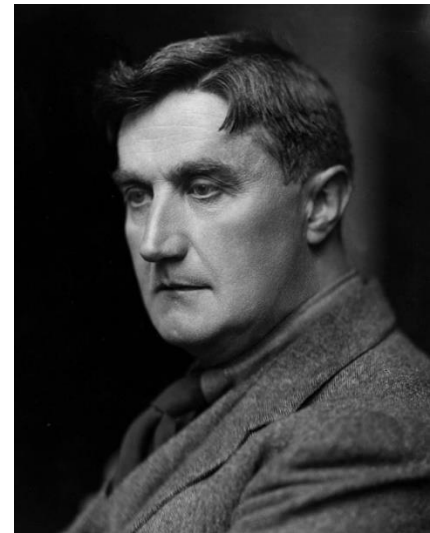
The *Finale* begins with a *Lento* introduction complete with imitative entrances, but then Grieg pivots to a surprising key of D major before jumping into a *Presto al saltarello*. This movement takes *saltare* (to jump) at its word; everything from the melodic leaps to the rhythms to the bow strokes embodies the idea of jumping. The viola sets the stage with an ostinato *saltato* figure, while the first violin takes up a *sautillé* melody, hopping from one note to the next in very quick succession. Even the *pizzicato* in the cello jumps from one string to the next. At the heart of it all is the evocation of the medieval *saltarello* dance, and as such this movement demands the utmost virtuosity from each player. Making things sound simple is never as easy as it may seem. Finally, the *Spillamæd* theme from the first movement makes another appearance, Grieg's thrilling string quartet finally coming full circle.



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Edvard Grieg: Wikimedia Commons



Ralph Vaughan Williams:  
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### **Vaughan Williams: *String Quartet No. 1 in G minor***

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was an English composer who revitalized English folk song and early music by incorporating them into his works. He studied with some of the leading names in music of the early twentieth century, Sir Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music in the late 1890s and Maurice Ravel informally between 1907-1908. While a composition student, Vaughan Williams befriended Gustav Holst and the two remained lifelong friends as well as honest critics of each other's works. Given world events of the early twentieth century, Vaughan Williams often sought to consciously break free from the influence of the Germanic contrapuntal techniques championed by Wagner and Brahms, instead seeking to cultivate a distinctly English sound for which he turned to folksong as a font of inspiration. The time he spent working with Ravel had a marked impact on his use of texture and rhythms, and he wrote of the experience as helping him break free from "the heavy contrapuntal Teutonic manner." Ironically it is by studying with a French composer that Vaughan Williams finally came into his own with a distinctly English style.

Shortly after returning from his stint in Paris, Vaughan Williams composed his *String Quartet in G minor*. Many critics have pointed out its structural and textural similarities to Ravel's own string quartet. The comparisons between the two works are rarely favorable towards Vaughan Williams, but none can say that his work lacks originality or dramatic intent. Indeed, Vaughan Williams explores in his quartet a variety of sonic colors unique to his palette.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, given Vaughan Williams penchant for the viola's nasal and lyrical qualities, opens with the viola stating the primary theme. Throughout the quartet, there are countless moments where *solo* is marked into the score, making it absolutely clear to the players who has the primary melodic material at each point. Although folk melodies underpin the opening movement of this quartet, the clarity of rhythmic interplay throughout is doubtless a relic of his tutelage with Ravel.

The second movement is a *minuet and trio*, beginning with a unison passage that quickly breaks off into a sparse minuet. The minuet begins with the first violin leading the way by taking the primary theme up into its highest register. The remaining voices fill in the accompanimental roles, but despite the movement's modernity, not once does Vaughan Williams lose sight of the traditional *minuet* dance, breaking up the melody into two bar segments underpinned by a stately triple meter. In the trio, the viola begins the party, followed by the cello, the second violin, and finally the first violin.

Yet another *Romanze*, the third movement of this quartet builds on a first violin statement of the primary theme. At a stately walking pace, the theme then gets passed from the viola, back to the first violin, to the cello, and finally ends with the second violin. As the melody gets repeated again and again, Vaughan Williams explores a number of musical colors and textures, constantly reworking the melody over different musical beds. Although the melody repeats, it always sounds different than its prior iterations because of the varying backdrops over which it is presented.

The finale is where Vaughan Williams most closely resembles Ravel in the variety of textures presented across all four instruments and in his fleetness of rhythm. This *Rondo capriccioso* is a *moto perpetuo* in which the action never pauses until a short *tranquillo* interlude when time stops momentarily still. Vaughan Williams then builds back up to the full texture little by little, leading back to the chaos of the

beginning. The piece's coda walks us through every rhythm presented throughout the quartet, increasingly quickening from one moment to the next, finally culminating in a unison G.