Alexander Borodin: String Quartet No 2 in D Minor

> *Against skies tinged purple with the setting of the sun, we first locked eyes in our little boat on the River Neckar. The water undulating around us, our boat following its smooth movements, our gazes never once faltered. Words failed me multiple times, in that moment, as I tried again and again to profess my feelings for you. Decades later, I am finally able to express that undying love through the medium I know best*—my *song. Dearest, I cannot help but feel that our love was destined to be.*

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887) composed his **String Quartet No. 2 in D Minor** as an ode of love to his wife, the acclaimed pianist Ekaterina Protopopova, in 1881. Listening to the music, it is not difficult to imagine the love story that Borodin himself envisioned through the music—each movement of the quartet relishes in its unbridled emotional outpourings. The above epigraph is in fact my own imagined program to the opening movement, a heartfelt love letter to Ekaterina. Many of its major themes were rehashed in the 1953 Broadway musical *Kismet*, a story of trickery, love, and destiny set in medieval Baghdad.

Despite the romanticism of the quartet's dedication, we must not let ourselves get too carried away by its heart wrenching melodies. Borodin was a chemist first and foremost, and he applied the same meticulous attention to detail to his music that he afforded his *aldol reactions* (a synthetic process which he is credited with discovering). In order to appreciate the quartet, we must begin by recognizing the musical building blocks with which Borodin synthesized this masterpiece.

Borodin's second string quartet is characterized by its extreme economy of musical ideas. Borodin minces no unnecessary notes and finds no joy in jumping from one melody to another. Instead, he begins with a musical seed, a motif which then grows into a primary theme for one movement, a countermelody in another, and the rhythmic base for the next. This minimalistic attitude towards musical ideas creates extreme cohesion between movements; the melodies of the first are not forgotten but rather reinforced by the finale. One might choose to read into his musical style the hand of a chemist, who not only makes efficient use of all his raw materials but finds novel ways in which to combine the same materials into completely new end products.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, begins with the inner strings syncopating the harmonic progression, creating the watery undulations that characterize the entire movement. The first violin and cello take turns singing out above these waves, two lovers wrapped around each others' arms. A plucked interlude in the inner strings leads to an intense cello and violin dialogue, perhaps a lovers' quarrel, broken only by the viola

introducing the third theme with a chromatic descent. The stark and moody development brings back the romantic first theme, which grapples with the jubilant second theme until the movement's end. Borodin curiously opts for a *Scherzo* for the second movement, inspired as he was by the chamber works of Felix Mendelssohn. This *Scherzo* alternates between a *moto perpetuo* motif outlined by a scalar falling third and a lush motif characterized by chordal rising thirds.

Who among us has not already fallen captive to the heartfelt outpouring of love that is Borodin's *Notturno*? In this third movement, the cello takes center stage to sing out one of classical music's most beloved melodies, which is then passed on to the first violin. The viola holds its ground with a continuous countermelody of flowing eighth notes underneath it all. The violins then break into an impassioned duet, a lovers' tryst set to chordal accompaniment in the viola and cello. Then we are brought back to earth by the cello reiterating the opening theme, interrupted by the viola's sly reintroduction of the virtuosic scale that is the second theme. These two themes are passed around the quartet, from violin to cello to viola back to the violins, until the cello and first violin unite and engage in direct conversation. The entirety of this movement relies on these same melodies, broken up, reused, and re-configured again and again to push forward the musical momentum. Borodin's absolute control over his melodic material is here showcased through his strict economy of motivic reuse.

The *Finale* of the quartet is the bow that ties this work together. Picking up on the ethereal ending of the *Notturno*, Borodin begins by dividing the quartet into two halves, the violins on one side and the viola and cello on the other. The violins open with a ghostly call that is then answered by the lower strings with an equally mournful aspect. A second back-and-forth then melts into a stark march outlined by the cello's staccato quarter notes. The viola picks up the pace with the first iteration of an eighth note melody that is then repeated at the second and first violin entrances. Once the full texture has finally been introduced, Borodin expresses his effusive joy at having found his true love with a virtuosic showpiece for all four instruments.

Borodin's second string quartet is a case study in how just a few words can go a very long way to expressing one's love.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Alexander Borodin (left) and his wife, Ekaterina Protopopova (right)

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Sir William Walton

Source: The Violin Channel

William Walton: String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor

In 1939, the BBC commissioned the established English composer, William Walton (1902-1983) to compose a chamber work, a task which he (somewhat) happily accepted. Walton had escaped the ravages of the frontlines in the Second World War by being exempted from military service as an ambulance driver in order to write music for propaganda films (he later said that he had crashed a few too many ambulances to be of any use). It took Walton a full eight years to finish this string quartet, which he considered too abstract a genre as compared to the film music that was his bread and butter. To deal with his anxieties about the genre, Walton turned to some of the most established norms of the classical sonata-allegro form to build this unique piece. One might find this astonishing given that Walton was a contemporary of Béla Bartók and Dmitri Shostakovich, whose contributions to the string quartet genre instead imploded classical forms and structures. William Walton's **String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor** was thus premiered in 1947 by the Blech Quartet.

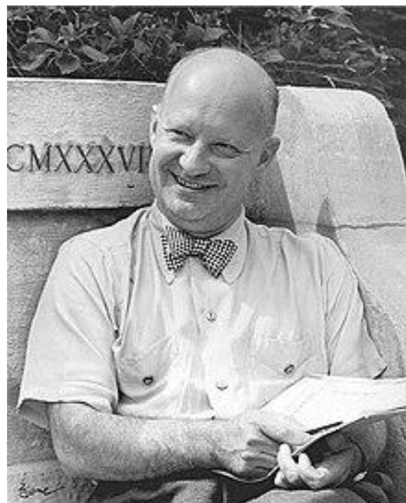
In the first movement, *Allegro*, the viola gets a moment in the spotlight as it states the opening theme in its sultry tenor register. Then imperceptibly, each of the other strings enters the fray one at a time, building up to the texture of the full string quartet. The four voices meld into one meandering creature, roaming over grassy knolls and hills with nary a care in the world. Suddenly, the cello stutters, its breath taken away by a fearsome sight. The violins join in on this anxious second theme, which is passed across all four voices as our gentle beast runs away from danger, skittering over stones and twigs to reach safety. The interplay between this serene first and frightening second theme allow Walton to tell us a story alternating between calm tranquility and unsettling terror. He breaks up these themes into a nearly fugal texture in the development section, starting once more with the viola. Despite his interest in antiquated musical forms, Walton never sustains a full fugue and the development is best characterized by its imitative counterpoint than by the full maintenance of a fugal theme across all four voices.

The second movement, *Presto*, is in fact a musical joke or *scherzo* movement. It begins with one melodic line broken up and passed back and forth across all four instruments. Walton maintains this fragmented voice leading throughout the movement, such that we are constantly pivoting our attention from one instrument to another to make sense of the melody (or lack thereof). There is in this movement a Bartokian insistence on a continuous rhythmic motor over which the other instruments build their almost robotic counterpoint. Like clockwork, the rhythmic motor never stops, and we cannot take a breath until the final note. The ending is yet another contrapuntal implosion in which the theme is fragmented and passed seamlessly across all four voices.

Walton is widely known for his viola concerto, composed in 1929 and one of the most recognizable staples of the instrument's limited solo repertoire. In his concerto, Walton took some pains to thin out the orchestra's texture so that the viola can always be heard above it, even in its most breathless registers. He seems to have taken cues from this concerto's textural voicing to compose the *Lento* movement of his quartet, in which the viola once again takes center stage. The viola sings out a mournful opening melody to very sparse chordal accompaniment. Then the viola is joined by the first violin in a haunting duet, and eventually the second violin enters the conversation. As the first violin finally claims its traditional role as the bearer of melody, the viola returns with a melancholic solo accompanied by *pizzicati* in the cello. Not only in the instrumentation, but also in his careful treatment of simple melodies, we can see a clear nod to his viola concerto, premiered by the acclaimed German-American violist, Paul Hindemith. In keeping with its role as the soloist of the movement, the viola leads us into the coda with its halcyon timbres.

Suddenly, we are launched into the *Allegro molto* finale, a spunky rondo to an otherwise calm and collected string quartet. Keeping with the classical ideals upon which his 19th century predecessors matured the string quartet genre, Walton follows a fairly strict rondo form, constantly returning to the opening theme in between increasingly virtuosic variations. We can see here influences such as the independence of voices in Beethoven's late quartets, Mendelssohn's love for a good *moto perpetuo,* and Bartók's fierce energy and tendency for folk tune harmonies, which shows itself most clearly in the coda. In this movement, Walton plays between homophony and increasingly complex counterpoint that finally culminates in an almost orchestral sound. Building up to a frenetic coda, the finale ends with a proverbial bang!

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Violist Paul Hindemith

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Hugo Wolf: Italian Serenade

What better way to cap off the summer and return to our daily lives than to take a stroll through the streets of Italy? Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) was an Austrian composer, most well-known for his *lieder*, who was also related to the celebrated conductor Herbert von Karajan. His life tragically cut short by syphilis, he nonetheless managed to compose a fair bit of music, among which we can count this delightful promenade through Italy which he wrote in 1887. The **Italian Serenade** was inspired by a poem composed by Joseph Eichendorff, *The Soldier I,* and a novella he wrote entitled, *From the Life of a Ne'er-Do-Well*. The novella tells the story of a young violinist who travels the world to find fame, while the poem speaks of a soldier who finds a young maiden in a castle, but instead of desiring her hand in marriage, runs away from the thought of being so shackled. For Wolf's *Serenade*, I like to imagine a philandering Italian *ragazzo* and his amorous (mis)adventures. The *Italian Serenade* is a short piece, written as a continuous whole, but it nonetheless lends itself to an episodic breakdown.

Ist auch schmuck nicht mein Rösslein, *So ist's doch recht klug,* *Trägt im Finstern zu 'nem Schlösslein* *Mich rasch noch genug.*	Though my little horse isn't handsome, He's really rather clever, He carries me to a little castle Quickly enough in the dark.

The piece begins with a light *spiccato* opening, not unlike the pitter-patter of a horse sauntering up to a castle, just like Eichendorff's poem outlines (translation for all parts of the poem are by Richard Stokes). The first violin adds in a frolicking melody that mirror's the soldier's excitement at meeting his beloved.

Ist das Schloss auch nicht prächtig: *Zum Garten aus der Tür* *Tritt ein Mädchen doch allnächtig* *Dort freundlich herfür.*	Though the castle's not palatial From the gate into the garden A girl steps every night In friendly fashion.

The next episode is more curious, almost searching, as the young man gazes upon the fair maiden. He is intrigued by her, and as the quartet builds up to a fortissimo resolution, he too decides to approach her and profess his love.

Und ist auch die Kleine *Nicht die Schönst' auf der Welt,* *So giebt's doch just Keine,* *Die mir besser gefällt.*	And though the little creature Isn't the prettiest in the world, There's simply no one else I like better.

The next day, he takes a casual stroll through town, his whistling tune picked up by the lilting turns in the first and second violins. He reaches the edge of her chateau, and the solo cello portrays him calling out to her standing in the balcony, just as Romeo answered Juliet's musings that fateful day in fair Verona.

Then walking in from the window, he tiptoes through the halls of his lover's *palazzo*, trying his darnedest not to be heard. The viola calls out in a booming voice, "Who goes there?" and he freezes, fearing that he has been found out. Then, picking up the pace, he scurries away into the safety of his love's bedchamber. She throws open the doors and he falls into her arms, enraptured.

The two spend a long night together, dreaming of the future they might have, with him tiptoeing every night through the castle and evading her father's gaze. They chuckle and she brings up marriage... As quickly as he came, he opens the window and jumps into the night, fearing that he might lose the one thing he holds dearest... his freedom.

Und spricht sie vom Freien, *So schwing' ich mich auf mein Ross –* *Ich bleibe im Freien,* *Und sie auf dem Schloss.*	But if she speaks of marriage, I leap onto my horse – I'll stay outside and be free, And she can stay in the castle.

Hugo Wolf

Source: Britannica