

Mozart: *Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, K. 493*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) composed two seminal works for a then-obscure combination of instruments: violin, viola, cello, and the burgeoning *pianoforte*. Though he was himself an acclaimed virtuoso of the piano—having composed and performed over twenty concerti for the instrument alongside a full orchestra—Mozart had only begun to delve into the possibilities of the instrument alongside a chamber ensemble in the mid-1780s. His publisher, Hoffmeister, had in fact commissioned a set of three so-called “piano quartets” from Mozart, the first of which he delivered in 1785 (his *G Minor Quartet, K. 478*). However, Hoffmeister saw fairly meager sales for this piece, seemingly because of the novelty of the genre and the technically demanding piano part. Hoffmeister then cancelled the rest of the contract, allowing Mozart to keep his retaining fee. A shortsighted decision it turned out to be!

The next year, mere weeks after the première of his acclaimed opera, *Le nozze di Figaro*, Mozart went on to compose a second piano quartet, this time in E-flat major. The cancellation of his commission could not prevent Mozart from further exploring this novel combination of instruments nor would it hold him back from writing an equally (if not more) virtuosic piano part. The result was a masterpiece in musical dialogue, a work situated in between the intimacy of a string quartet and the grandeur of a piano concerto. Moreover, the strings and piano walk a tightly balanced rope, neither overpowering the other despite the huge differences in timbre afforded by the instruments. Mozart takes advantage of concerto-style writing in which the piano and strings alternate, almost as if they were *solo* and *tutti* passages, even interspersing *solo* and *duo* strings with the piano at moments. Full *tutti* across all four instruments are rare events, marking climactic moments in the music as well as bombastic introductions and finales. Through it all, the piano retains an intensely improvisatory nature as compared to the writing for the strings. You might imagine Mozart himself at the keys, adding embellishments, revoicing the melody, or taking the liberty of a short cadenza here and there, as the strings sensitively follow along with their ensemble. The result is neither fully a chamber work nor an orchestral concerto, but somewhere in between.

I – Allegro

*A tenor strides onstage, singing his opening aria with a full-bodied voice.
Chorus members scurry around him, placing a vase of flowers here, shooing
away an overeager dog there, bringing out a lavish meal from the kitchen in
the corner...*

A truly operatic introduction begins this piano quartet, with the violin portraying the aforementioned male lead. The piano's left hand lends the otherwise calm texture its frenetic energy, while the lower strings fill out the stage with their resonant chords. After the strings shift into the statement of the primary theme, the piano immediately responds to their syncopated call in its brilliant upper register, signaling the beginning of a conversation between our tenor and the heroine of the show. This delicate call and response texture is found throughout the piano quartet—almost always between the strings and the piano—creating a fluid sense of a continuing dialogue between our two protagonists. This movement can roughly be broken up by the series of string passages (more or less the “*tutti*”) around which the piano constantly dances and adds its almost improvised character. In the development, the piano takes us on a harmonic detour through a series of minor keys via a motif of the primary theme, transposed again and again. In true sonata form, the recapitulation leads us right back to E-flat major to close off this delightful musical conversation.

II – Larghetto

In the second movement, the piano opens with a musing statement of a primary theme, commented on by the strings. Here, the balance shifts, with the piano introducing thematic material while the strings take on the role of respondents. Mozart takes full advantage of the piano's versatility in voicing, mimicking the three-voice texture of the strings across both hands to truly create a conversation among equals such that the seams between piano and strings slowly melt away. In this movement, Mozart explores the full possibilities of what the piano could accomplish alongside a small ensemble, both texturally and timbrally, setting the stage for a long line of piano quartets written in the decades after.

III – Allegretto

Mozart closes the quartet with a joyful *rondo*, a musical form in which a main theme is presented again and again in between variations on it. The result is that we can never truly get the primary theme (itself tightly related to the syncopated theme of the first movement) out of our head, a true ear worm! The piano once again begins the party, with increasingly blurry distinctions between it and the strings. While the first movement clearly established the piano in contrast to the strings, these final two movements do their best to bring the four instruments together such that we can almost lose track of who is playing at any given moment. The effervescent joy of the movement will have you dancing along, especially during the musical joke between the violin and piano. Hint, chickens may be involved.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Schubert: *Fantasy in C Major, D. 934*

Sei mir gegrüsst – ‘Accept my greeting’

The concert continues with a showpiece for the piano and viola (originally scored for piano and violin) by Franz Schubert (1797-1828), another Austrian composer who lived a musically prolific, but short, life. Inspired by two virtuosi present in Vienna in late 1827, Josef Slavik (violin) and Carl Maria von Bocklet (piano), Schubert decided to compose a Paganini-esque work to show off the technical mastery of both of these great musicians. Thus, was born Schubert’s final work prominently featuring the violin: the *Fantasy in C Major*, concluded in December of 1827 and premiered in January of 1828. A few short months later, Schubert would compose another *Fantasy* (this time in F minor) for piano four hands which would only see publication after his untimely passing in May of 1828. Both *Fantasies* share common elements: an uninterrupted formal structure with *tempo* changes marking “movements,” an uncharacteristically long score, moments of extreme virtuosity riddled in between moments of lyrical tranquility, and a decided insistence on equality between both players.

The *Fantasy in C Major* unfolds across four sections, of which the introduction is marked *Andante molto*. Rumbling trills from the piano set the stage for the viola to begin with a climbing melodic line that loosely follows the tune of one of Schubert’s lieder (*Sei mir gegrüsst*), which only fully materializes in the third section, *Andantino*. In these opening moments, though we are tonally centered around “C,” it remains unclear if we are in minor or major mode. The following section, *Allegretto*, is perhaps the most recognizable moment of Schubert’s *Fantasy*. Now firmly established in C Major, the viola and piano take turns skipping about in a Hungarian-style dance, with imitative counterpoint giving the whole section the feeling of a competition. The violist shows off his fast fingers in lighthearted frivolity while the pianist swears that he can play even faster! Impassioned octave double stops in the viola interspersed with arpeggiated sixteenth notes in the piano make this *moto perpetuo* section an absolute showstopper.

The following section, *Andantino*, is where Schubert displays his propensity for songwriting by creating a theme and variations around the melody of one of his earlier lieder: *Sei mir gegrüsst* (‘Accept my greetings’), just as he did nine years prior in his *Trout Quintet*. The first three variations are increasingly virtuosic showpieces for both viola and piano, showing off the full extent of both musician’s technical mastery. The fourth and final variation goes back to the basics, presenting the song in an interpretation which foregrounds its tragic lyricism. The song itself is about a greeting that cannot ever be achieved, for distance, time, and worlds themselves separate the singer from his beloved. The finale, *Allegro vivace*, is a bombastic exchange of dazzling bravura for both viola and piano. The coda forces both

instruments to switch their traditional contrapuntal roles, with octave scales in the piano underpinning triple-stop chords in the viola. The *Fantasy in C Major* reminds us that, though we often associate Schubert with lyrical melodies tinged with melancholy, he also wrote works full of the joy and vivacity of life.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



A young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (center, piano) with his father, Leopold (left, violin) and his sister Nannerl (right)

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Franz Schubert

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Fauré: *Piano Quartet in C Minor, Op. 15*

While the first two works on this program were joyful celebrations of Germanic culture, this final work is a thinly veiled protest against German Romanticism. Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), was the secretary of the *Société Nationale de Musique Française*, an institution founded by Camille Saint-Saëns for the cultivation and proliferation of *Ars gallica* (what we might call, “French music”). Created on the eve of the 1871 Prussian occupation of Paris, the *Société* was shaped for decades by its strong ideological opposition to the so-called German and Viennese “masters.” Instead of favoring clear and singable melodies, the composers in the *Société* sought to nurture the idea of a “French sound,” a concept that was fully forged in the music of Gabriel Fauré and deeply embraced by subsequent generations of composers (including Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel). Thus was born Fauré’s *Piano Quartet in C Minor, Op. 15*, composed in 1879, just eight years after Paris was lifted from the horrors of the Prussian siege and occupation in May of 1871. The humiliation France suffered in the capture of its capital and the cessation of Alsace and Lorraine lived on in the hearts of French musicians, who strove to create an artistic identity that was completely their own and even antithetical to German Romanticism.

In the entirety of the *Piano Quartet*, there is not a single hummable melody. Instead, Fauré plays with the idea of a non-melody, creating thematic fragments from basic musical structures like scales, making them grow out of the texture and timbre of the instrumentation, and eventually causing these non-melodies to become ear worms. Whereas Mozart’s *Quartet* reveled in its operatic form and delivery, Fauré’s delights in taking us off the stage, breaking the fourth wall, and forcing us to listen to the resonances of the instruments as they work together as a composite whole. Fauré began to compose this work in late 1877, soon after his engagement to Marianne Viardot (the niece of the legendary mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran) was broken.

What flowed from Fauré’s pen in the following months was a piano quartet that broke many of the conventions of the genre. The whole quartet plays with the idea of the stage, with the instruments dipping in and out of the scene as they make their respective entrances (not unlike the operatic introduction of Mozart’s quartet). Fauré plays with timbre, tone colors, and ensemble throughout, most particularly by replacing the violin with the viola as the primary melodic voice. In giving this role to the viola, which is traditionally both the physical and acoustic center of the ensemble, Fauré shifts the very acoustic foundations of the quartet which has a profound mellowing effect on its timbre. Furthermore, instead of the contrapuntal independence of voices that Mozart valued in his quartet, Fauré melds the four instruments together such that no single instrument can stand on its own without the support of the other three.

I – Allegro molto moderato

The first movement begins *in medias res*, throwing us straight into the action with all four instruments singing in impassioned homophony. The viola, in its uncharacteristic role as the melodic leader, quietly steps out of the very fabric of the ensemble's sound to present each new musical idea. In Mozart, the piano played a decidedly separate character from the strings, but in Fauré the piano has been synthesized into the strings, blending into the strings' sonorities and only occasionally rising above the composite texture when the occasion calls for it. That in no way lowers the technical virtuosity required by the pianist; this may not be a piano concerto, but it is far closer to a sonata for four voices.

II – Scherzo, Allegro vivo

The strings set up the movement with strummed *pizzicati*, not unlike a guitar, while the piano buzzes daintily around them. A quick *arco* outburst from the viola and violin is followed by a return to the tip-toed *pizzicati*. The pair then pick up their bows to sing out a quirky folk tune in parallel, before dipping back down into the perpetual motion of the *pizzicato* chords. The violin then takes on the role of a sing-song bird as the cello finally joins in the *arco* action. As carefully choreographed as any ballet, this *scherzo* is a game of hide-and-seek between the strings as the piano holds the fort with a shimmering *moto perpetuo*. More than anything, this back-and-forth between *pizzicato* and *arco* is reminiscent of a trio of puppets popping up and down behind a stage, rearing their heads to sing a few words before dipping back behind the box theater. The *Trio* section marked *con sordino* takes it all up a notch in terms of tempo, but the rules of the game remain unchanged.

III – Adagio

The piano and cello set an instantly somber mood in the following *Adagio*, where a pentatonic scale is all Fauré needs to tug at our heartstrings. There is no complicated melody, no lyrical text, just five notes outlining the harmonic setting of the movement. Beginning with the viola, each subsequent repetition of these five notes adds another instrument to the mix. Through it all, Fauré does not bother with the frivolous notion of a melody, but rather achieves interest through textural and timbral variation, making this scale come alive to sing a deeply mournful tale.

IV – Allegro molto

To finish off the quartet, the piano sets off an undulating ostinato, over which the strings begin an urgent conversation, all three talking over each other as they strive to make their voices heard. The fervor cools down to a tranquil development that almost sounds like a curtain has been drawn between us and them (another of Fauré's experiments with

performance setting and acoustics). Slowly the curtain is lifted back up as the dynamic grows back to a full-throated *forte*. This finale is far from bombastic; it is a reflection on the colors of our world, brought to life by the sounds of the piano quartet.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Gabriel Fauré, c. 1860

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Maria Malibran, c. 1831

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