

Florence Price: *String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor* (1935)

Florence Price née Smith (1887-1953) was the first African American woman to make a career in the United States as a classical composer. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, she experienced a fairly uneventful childhood as a girl of mixed white and Black heritage, and she learned music first from her own mother, a local music teacher. However, when she moved to Boston to study organ and piano education at the New England Conservatory, she decided to register as a woman of Mexican heritage to circumvent racial discrimination directed towards African Americans. Upon graduation, she returned to Little Rock and got married to Thomas J. Price, a lawyer. However, after facing a dearth of career opportunities and seeing growing violence towards the Black community of Little Rock, she and her family decided to move to Chicago, where she was able to fully embrace her flourishing artistic life and partake in the Chicago Black Renaissance. While there, she became close friends with Margaret Bonds, Langston Hughes, and Marian Anderson. After her divorce, these connections helped give rise to her musical career. She won two prizes in the Wanamaker Foundation Awards, and her Symphony in E Minor was thereafter premiered by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933, the very first composition by an African American woman to be programmed and performed by a major US orchestra. Her second String Quartet, composed in 1935 unfolds across four movements in classic sonata allegro form.

Moderato: The solo second violin helps us board a rolling barcarolle, to which the cello adds in great depth of color as we set off on our journey down the river. The first violin then begins a lovestruck melody. The three upper voices proceed to weave in and out of the undercurrent, the second violin tying it all together with a repeated ostinato reminiscent of the undulating motion of the boat. As we take a deep breath together, the four players take the opportunity to put on their mutes, and then we all plunge ourselves beneath the currents. We swim through the waves together, always separated from the musical source by a wall of water. As we near the end of our respiratory tether, the viola takes us by the hand, leading us back out of the water to breathe in the warm summer air once again. Once we resurface, we gently float on our backs, listening to the sounds of the world around us, the calls of birds poking out over the rush of breeze in the trees surrounding the riverbank. As we float downstream, the water starts to get a little choppy and we make our way back to our boat, once again following the viola's lead as its powerful back strokes lead us through a series of *portato* eighth notes to safety. The second violin sets us back on track with a recap of the opening ostinato, but then a series of scales push us into an exciting journey towards the coda. The ending is a thrilling display of virtuosity as each instrument shows off for a few seconds, culminating in a showstopping A minor chord.

Andante cantabile: Americana at its finest, a soaring first violin melody underset by moving counterpoint in the lower three voices lets us fly out above the Great American Prairie. Blending ravishingly simple textures recalling American folk tunes and the harmonic virtuosity of the classical music sound world, this movement is satisfying on all fronts. Just as the melodies dip into bluegrass and fiddle idioms, nuanced dissonances in the accompaniment jolt us back to the concert hall. A striking demonstration of the musical richness of (African) American musical style in the context of so-called “art music,” Price’s *Andante cantabile* takes us on a journey to lands yet uncharted, the musical wild west, and leaves us yearning for more.

Juba. Allegro: Beginning with a pizzicato beat set up by the cello, we join the dance floor to show off our skills at the rollicking “Pattin’ Juba,” an African-American dance style that grew out of a desire for rhythmic elements at a moment when enslaved people were not even allowed drums on American plantations. The athletic juba thus presents the body as an alternative drum, with steps based in slapping and patting different parts of the body in complex rhythms. Other dances were often layered on top, the juba serving as an impromptu percussion section. Price’s juba brings the percussive elements of the dance to the fore as each instrument joins in with its own virtuosic display over a jaunty *moto perpetuo*.

Finale. Allegro: A lively dialogue that plays with a call and response texture throughout, each iteration of thematic material is passed from first violin to viola as each leads their respective half of the quartet. The luscious four-voice texture gives way to a viola solo, after which the cello joins in on the final chord. The first violin then takes center stage with an ethereal harmonic passage, then leads us back to the opening theme alongside the cello. A second, much briefer calm interlude punctuates the final iteration of the opening theme. In the coda, a quick buildup of frenetic energy ties up the quartet with a dazzling display of virtuosity, ending on a Hollywood-esque finale run.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Florence Price

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Franz Schubert: *String Quartet No. 14 in D Minor, D 810* “*Death and the Maiden*” (1824)

Composed in the year after Franz Schubert’s (1797-1828) health took a turn for the worse and he was allegedly diagnosed with late-stage syphilis, his penultimate string quartet grapples with his own struggles surrounding his sickness and impending sense of doom. Most outwardly, the quartet is named after a *lied* he had composed in 1817, a musical setting of Matthias Claudius’s morbid poem, “*Der Tod und das Mädchen*” (Death and the Maiden). Not only does the quartet draw its name from the earlier song, but the opening theme of the second movement (*Andante con moto*) directly quotes the *lied*. In the poem, a young girl (the maiden) comes face to face with a gruesome figure, a walking skeleton clothed in black, whom she can only understand to be the personification of Death, come to take her all too soon from the joys of this world into the next. She screams:

*Oh! Leave me! Prithee, leave me!
Thou grisly man of bone!
For life is sweet, is pleasant.
Go! Leave me now alone!
Go! Leave me now alone!*

Allegro: What is life but an eternal struggle against the all-enveloping embrace of death? Schubert opens his magnum opus with an immense unison D, which struggles against its very own existence, melting into the subdominant G through scalar motion in the inner voices. The first violin then ventures a question, “What... are you?” to which the viola replies, “I? Why I am the inevitable friend of all living beings... I am Death.” The maiden, frightened of meeting Death so early in her life cries out for Death to begone, “For life is sweet, is pleasant. Go! Leave me now alone!” This opening movement, full of intense contrapuntal dialogue across all four instruments, embodies this struggle between Death and his unwilling charge, a young person who wants to simply enjoy the happy life of which she has dreamt.

*Give me thy hand, oh! Maiden, fair to see,
For I’m a friend, hath ne’er distress’d thee.
Take courage now, and very soon
Within mine arms shalt softly rest thee!*

Andante con moto: The opening *pavane*—quoted by George Crumb in his anti-war anthem, *Black Angels*—is directly taken from Schubert’s eponymous *lied*. Here, the intensely passionate string quartet must put on an air of *sangfroid* in order to emulate the clean and dispassionate timbres of a viol consort. Listen to the nearly *senza vibrato* texture and brushy bow strokes, letting yourself be transported to an ethereal world where the maiden and Death converse in earnest. One by one, the four instruments enter with an iteration of

the theme, not engaging in any kind of fugal counterpoint but rather a much simpler organum style of melody against accompaniment. This haunting opening is then followed by an aria in which the first violin sings out in the maiden's voice as she reflects on her all-too-short time on this Earth. The cello then switches places and takes the spotlight to respond to her with the comforting voice of Death.

Scherzo – Allegro molto: An off-kilter minuet defined by its heavy syncopation, Schubert's *scherzo* movement pulls the very ground out from beneath our feet. Relying on a call and response texture between upper and lower strings, the *scherzo* continues to build the momentum as Death chases the unwilling maiden through forest and clearing, sometimes even letting her stop to catch her breath and reflect as he inevitably inches closer and closer. Within these brief interludes an entire lifetime passes by as the maiden strives to live out her fullest life in the few moments she has left, not unlike our intrepid composer himself.

Presto: This final movement is best described as a *tarantella*, a dance originating from Apulia in southern Italy. The *tarantella* owes its origins to an ancient ritual dance for warding off delirium and sweating off the venom resulting from the bite of a *Lycosa tarantula* (a wolf spider native to the region). Though it had lost its ritualistic contexts by the late Middle Ages, the *tarantella* resurged in the period as a folk courtship dance, full of displays of athleticism between dance partners. Beyond the dance, Schubert's desire for technical and musical mastery of the string quartet genre shines through, with each instrument enjoying a far greater contrapuntal autonomy than in any of his prior chamber works. The result is a thick and dense sound, nearly orchestral in its scope, characterizing both outer movements. This movement, just like the *tarantella*, was written to ward off the impending danger of death. Here Schubert, a Viennese dancer par excellence, ends his emblematic musical encounter with death on a *tarantella*, an ultimate show of defiance to the untimely end he himself was soon to meet. All hell breaks loose as he strives to avoid Death himself.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Franz Schubert
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Astor Piazzolla: *Four, for Tango* (1988)

It takes four... to tango? The tango is a dance relying on the visceral connection between two dance partners. Here it is transformed into a musical representation of sensuality for not two, but four players who must recreate the same energy onstage without letting it dissipate in between them. *Four, for Tango* is a showstopper not only because it demands the utmost in virtuosic technique from all four players, but also because they must connect on a deeper level in order to bring life to the notes on the page.

The Argentina-born American composer, Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) was known the world over for his love of the tango dance. Growing up in New York City, he learned how to play the bandoneón (button accordion) from Italian teachers, and when he returned to Buenos Aires at age 16, he pursued the instrument as his main field of study, taking up bandoneonista gigs at night. He even traveled to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger. But rather than becoming another Ravel or Copland, Piazzolla was baptized the father of *Nuevo Tango*, bringing the music of the tango to renowned concert halls across the world and attracting world class soloists like Yo-Yo Ma and Gidon Kremer to his works. The Kronos Quartet often collaborated closely with Piazzolla, and in 1988 they premiered *Four, for Tango*, a short showpiece spotlighting a number of extended techniques for which the quartet was well-known to have a great affinity.

By having the players do double stop glissandi, play behind the bridge (*sul ponticello*), pluck out chords, portamento into natural harmonics, and even knock on their instruments like tambourines, Piazzolla tears down the stuffy formalities of the concert stage. He invites the quartet (and audience) to just have fun with the music. *Four, for Tango* is both a virtuosic showpiece and a romantic dance; moving with the music (and vibing to the opening cello solo) is the only way to truly appreciate the physical and musical aspects of Piazzolla's new tango. The tango was never meant to be performed sitting still!

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Astor Piazzolla
Source: Medici TV

