Camille Saint-Saëns: *String Quartet No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 112* (1899)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) stands as a pillar of the late Romantic French tradition, often described in opposition to the German and Austrian composers we associate with the nineteenth century (*e.g.,* Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms). Indeed, the styles that we now characterize as "French" owe much to the innovations of Saint-Saëns. In an era riddled with uncertainty around national identity and numerous state-backed attempts to imbibe a sense of nationalism in its citizens, it is no wonder that Saint-Saëns was taken to represent all that was *French* and not *German*. For Saint-Saëns and his contemporaries like Gabriel Fauré, the aesthetic construction of their music came to be co-constitutive with their identity.

Saint-Saëns was one of the earliest composers to actively destabilize the rigid structures of sonata-allegro form by never truly giving us the same musical material twice within one movement. Instead, he riffed on the concept of the earworm, focusing on a single motif or theme throughout a work, slightly altering it at each subsequent iteration such that it never became stale. While a piece in true sonata-allegro form would repeat the entire introduction, Saint-Saëns rarely exploits this kind of wholesale repetition and instead composes new material throughout the piece, tweaking important events every time they resurface. This creates a sense of "*déjà entendu*" or ('I heard that'); repetition is recognizable but still shrouded in the fog of imperfect memory. Extending the visual metaphor further, Saint-Saëns also has a penchant for taking the musical payoff (that is, the return to the opening theme and harmonies) and letting it disintegrate into something new, creating a sort of "*trompe l'oreille*" ('a trick of the ears'). This technique is, in essence, what musicologists would call "cyclic form."

To return to the quartet, this string quartet was the first of two quartets that he composed. He was also not the first French composer to write a quartet by far, even Claude Debussy's groundbreaking string quartet preceded his by six years. Unlike Ravel or Debussy, who both composed their string quartets in the prime of their youth, Saint-Saëns wrote his first at the ripe age of 64, one of many crowning moments during a long and illustrious career. *The E Minor Quartet*, composed in 1899, was dedicated to the Belgian violinist and titular "King of the Violin," Eugène Ysaÿe, who performed the première alongside members of his own string quartet that same year.

To give a sense of chronology, it might be pertinent to note that Saint-Saëns was appointed piano teacher at the École Niedermeyer de Paris in 1861, where he met his most illustrious pupil, Gabriel Fauré, a few years later. Fauré went on to teach at the Conservatoire de Paris beginning in 1892. While there, he was the teacher of the controversial modernist, Maurice Ravel (we shall hear more about him soon), and went on to become the head of the conservatory in 1905, a post which he held until his retirement in 1920. With such an outsized impact on the French conservatory tradition

and its most illustrious names, it is no wonder that Saint-Saëns is so often considered to be one of the most significant influences on what we consider to be "French" music.

This string quartet unfolds in four movements, beginning with a traditional *Allegro* opening movement. In a nod to his Classical predecessors, Saint-Saëns gives the first violin a heavily melodic role, opening the quartet with a rhapsodic solo flowing into the *Più allegro* with a virtuosic spiral into a terse debate between the upper strings and cello. Then the second violin leaps into a running figure of sixteenth notes, and then the viola sings out a dark countermelody below heroic octaves in both violins. The melody bubbling up from the cello and viola then takes root in the violins who lift it up into the highest register. The development begins with an incredible run in the cello which is once again passed around the quartet like a hot potato. A shift into B minor is accompanied by a drastic thinning out of the music texture. The viola, accompanied only by the first violin, insists on a syncopated ostinato outlining the new harmonic territory. The first violin then introduces a short fugue, all the while keeping with the movement's minimalistic counterpoint. A transition into simple meter signals the start of a series of quick harmonic progressions which ultimately lead back to E minor after lingering for a while on A minor. The ending, not quite a recapitulation, brings us back to our opening 6/8 meter and the first violin once again takes priority of place as Saint-Saëns hints at the opening gambit, closing off the movement with a suave and uncomplicated flourish.

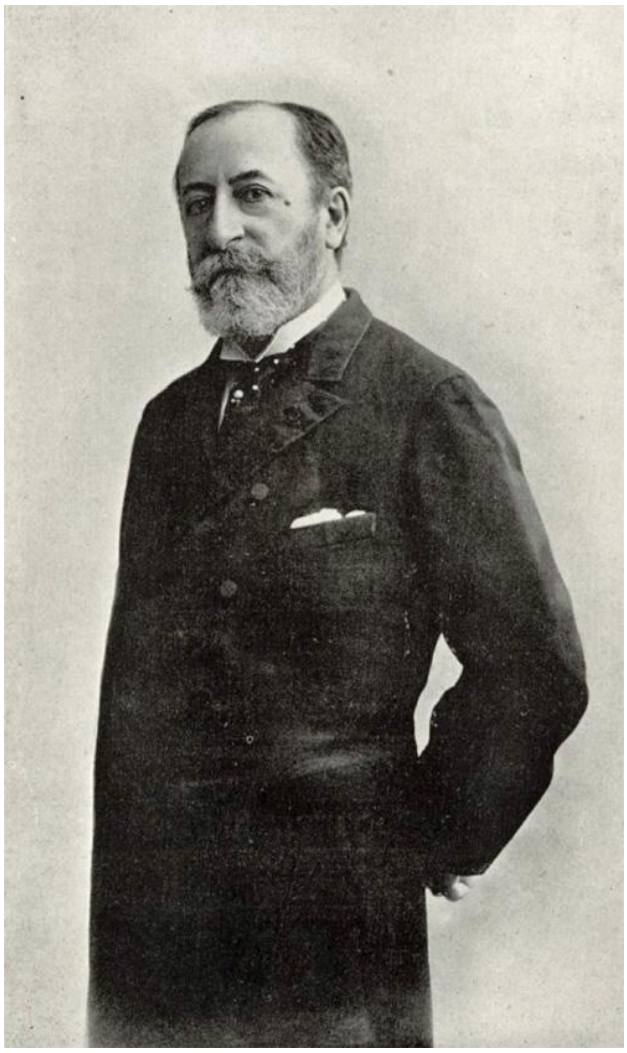
The second movement is labeled *Molto allegro quasi presto*, portending a vivacious scherzo. With the three lower strings all plucking on the downbeats, Saint-Saëns plays with our metrical grounding by offsetting the simple first violin melody by a single eighth note. The result is a bright and effervescent—almost dancing—scherzo in which the dust never quite settles. When the violin shifts to triplets, Saint-Saëns yet again offsets each note change by one eighth note such that we remain continuously destabilized. What follows are a series of variations in which these elements are combined in diverse ways and the melody passed from one voice to the next. Saint-Saëns effects constant push and pull with the texture and meter, breathing life into melodies that, taken on their own, would have seemed overly simple and even belabored. Despite the lack of technical fireworks in this movement, we constantly get the impression that each instrument is dancing among the stars.

Molto adagio: it is in this movement that Saint-Saëns shines brightest with his unparalleled melodic writing. Sitting atop a bed of spine-tingling harmonic changes, the first violin soars high, reveling in its own beauty and relishing the resonance of each individual note. Yet do not be fooled, none of the other players have an "easy" part to deal with. Technical challenges lie here in the details, most tellingly in the execution of the timbral effects Saint-Saëns writes into the accompaniment. In this movement, we recognize the erstwhile composer of the *Le Cygne*, one of the most soulful and popular tunes of the classical repertoire. Although Saint-Saëns composed the *Carnaval des*

Animaux in the 1880s, he only allowed the work to be published posthumously in 1922, for he did not consider it serious enough to be tied to his name in life.

Allegro non troppo: Much more rigidly structured than any of the three prior movements, the finale has almost militaristic feel with its boxy rhythms and orchestral textures. The lack of metrical play in this movement is rendered all the more stark in juxtaposition with all the metrical uncertainty in the preceding movements. Its rigidity is what lends the finale its stateliness. Close your eyes and you could easily imagine a scene from Enlightenment Paris, where powdered wigs were held up by silk ribbons and a strict policing of the body aestheticized by the powers that be. Social norms dictated every interaction in eighteenth-century France and etiquette was an art unto itself. This movement, written a century after the French Revolution brough an end to the *manierism* of the aristocracy, serves as a reminder of those times when subversion and play all operated within the narrow confines of social mores.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Camille Saint-Saëns

Source: Wikimedia Commons

George Walker: *Lyric for Strings* (1946)

"I never played a string instrument, but somehow strings have always fascinated me."

–George Walker

George Walker (1922-2018) was a man of many firsts for his community. He was the first African American person to graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music in 1945. He was the first African American to solo with the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he played Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. He was also the first African American man to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1996 for his work, "Lilacs." Among his many achievements was his trailblazing attitude, paving the way for countless students and artists of color to not only participate in American musical culture, but to be recognized by the system for their talents. Walker's *Lyric for Strings* actually came out of his first string quartet, originally entitled *Lament* and intended to be that work's slow middle movement. It was dedicated to his grandmother, Melvina King, who passed away shortly before the quartet was completed. In 1946, a year after he graduated from Curtis, the *Lament* was programmed by the CIM student orchestra on a radio concert under the baton of Seymour Lipkin. It was only in 1990 that he re-orchestrated the movement for a full string orchestra and christened it *Lyric for Strings*, a homage to Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1936). Since its première, the *Lyric for Strings* has carried on with a life of its own and is now Walker's most widely performed work.

Where Barber's *Adagio* captures our attention by virtue of its stillness and sheer insistence on harmonic change as the primary motor of musical interest, Walker insists on rhythmic motion. Following the lush opening, a constant eighth-note motor drives the melody forward. A momentary key change brings all four instruments together in breathless unison before returning to the *moto perpetuo* of the beginning. A dramatic opening up of the register pushes the cello to its lowest string while the violin soars high above, effecting an almost orchestral texture through the range of pitches. An idyllic violin solo reminds us that, despite the weight of our grief, life will go on. For the third and final time, we return to the opening theme, but this time something has changed. Having let loose our sorrows, our burden feels lighter, and we no longer *lament* our loss, but rather sing the *lyric* of life.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

George Walker at his piano, 2017. Source: Strings Magazine

Maurice Ravel: *String Quartet in F Major* (1903)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) is a name that needs little by way introduction, and his only work for the string quartet has attained an almost legendary status in repertoire. Yet the *F Major String Quartet's* beginnings were far from the illustrious fame it enjoys today. Composed in 1903, it was composed amidst Ravel's failed attempts to enter and win the prestigious *Prix de Rome*; he competed five times while at the Conservatoire de Paris but never scored higher than second prize. Nonetheless, Ravel's *String Quartet in F Major* has far outstripped the renown he might have earned as a Rome prizewinner. The year following its composition, it was premiered by the Heymann Quartet on March 5, 1904. In attendance was Gabriel Fauré, his teacher, mentor, and the dedicatee of the work. Also seated in the audience was a certain Pierre Lalo (son of the composer, Edouard), an acerbic critic and staunch anti-fan of Ravel. Both Lalo and Fauré were unimpressed by Ravel's quartet, Lalo deriding it as but a copy of Debussy's earlier foray into the genre. But Claude Debussy himself was greatly pleased with it and sent him a letter in which he wrote:

"In the name of the gods of music, and in mine, do not change a single note of what you have written."

The quartet, which unfolds in four movements, draws numerous parallels between Debussy's *String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10* (1893), most notably with regards to its form and structure. Yet despite the homage it pays to Debussy, Ravel's quartet is anything but derivative. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on uniqueness of the opening movement, with most commentators drawing attention to its exceedingly lyrical style, Ravel's play with textures, and the timbral experimentation that Ravel achieves with such a small ensemble. In lieu of rehashing these commentaries here, I offer here three guidelines for listening to Ravel's craft and making the most out of the experience.

1) Listen for the different ways that Ravel combines the four instruments in the quartet. Though we may already be accustomed to the affordances of the traditional roles played by each instrument (first violin, second violin, viola, and cello), listen and try to make sense of the ways in which Ravel subverts these stereotypes. At times he plays into them and at others he turns our expectations on their head. See how he pairs off different instruments with each other at any given moment in the work. How does a viola and cello pairing result in an entirely different soundworld than a viola and first violin pairing?
2) Listen to the resonances and "timbres" (*i.e.,* the quality or color of the sound) that Ravel achieves by combining different articulations, dynamics, techniques, and rhythms. Ravel was a master at orchestration, knowing exactly which instrument to use at a given moment to paint his musical soundscape. As the musical picture unfolds, sometimes you might find yourself floating through the clouds and

sometimes you will be knee deep in the mud. How does Ravel exploit the resonances of the instruments in ways different from his predecessors?

3) Finally, who is leading the momentum forward at each moment in the quartet? Moreso than any of his predecessors, Ravel distributes the weight of leadership among all four instruments. Each time the leader switches, so too do the colors of the soundworld we are inhabiting. How does the quartet communicate throughout this confusion and yet maintain a beautifully cohesive sound?

Armed with these tools, your enjoyment of this lyrical and seductive movement will only be enhanced as you follow along with our intrepid quartet and discover each of Ravel's innovations for yourself in real time. For the final three movements, I provide here a more traditional description.

Assez vif et très rythmé : Tutti pizzicato with a fair bit of guitar-like strumming, this scherzo movement undoubtedly mirrors the opening of Debussy's analogous movement. But unlike in Debussy's quartet, here we have a bright and effervescent mood, initiated by the first violin's arpeggiated trills followed by a Basque dance melody. In fact, the whole movement transports us to the liminal lands on the French and Spanish borders where a third culture, that of the Basque people, breathes and thrives in the towns' cobbled streets and colorful squares. This is no pastoral scene of the countryside but an urban dance, a lively (*vif*) gathering of people to celebrate their cultural heritage. In the opening bars, the first violin's continuous return to E_5 and the two-against-three hemiola in the rhythm reminds me of the Basque folk song, *Piztiak* ('Animals'), which similarly features a repeated return via leap to the melodic summit and a metrical overlay of duple and triple meters. Notwithstanding Ravel's original inspiration, he has clearly embedded his pride of heritage into this movement, which is also a homage to Debussy's (bearing a nearly identical tempo marking: *Assez vif et bien rythmé*). The movement quickly moves on from this folk-inspired dance into a virtuosic showpiece for all four musicians, in which Ravel plays with texture and timbre, oscillating between the softest of whispers to a nearly orchestral sound. The movement is punctuated by a rhapsodic cello solo, to which the viola sings its reply. The opening theme soon returns as the quartet shifts back into *pizzicato*.

Très lent: A morose viola solo opens this nocturne, to which the cello replies in the throes of agony. The viola responds, opening its soul to us in this heart-to-heart conversation laid bare to our ears. In this movement, Ravel often strives to keep the texture as thin as possible, giving a single instrument the stage while the others flutter about. It is not until the cello grabs us by the shoulders with its arresting stepwise chromatic descent from a low E down to an open C. Here he instructs the quartet: *Pas trop lent* ('Not too slow') as all four takes turns singing out over sparse accompaniments. The nocturne picks up in pace until we reach a *Modéré* ('tempered, moderate'), where a haunting eighth note figure fills our ears, unrelenting, until the first violin reaches the zenith of its melody. All motion

comes to a near standstill as the cello opens up to its lowest register, launching the quartet into the stratosphere to finish.

Vif et agité: This final movement is a *moto perpetuo* full of life's energy. The four members of the quartet each take turns passing around the implacable sixteenth-note motor. The second violin then breaks free from the trance into fiery octaves, as if a machine whose engine has overloaded. The quartet then switches to a lyrical mode highly reminiscent of the first movement and its primary theme, and the rest of the movement turns into a recapitulation of sorts in which the primary themes and motivic cells from the earlier movements are brought forth for a final bow. Like flaky sea salt atop a perfectly prepared chocolate mousse, this final movement brings together all the disparate elements and subtle nuances of the quartet and adds another dimension of flavor that we can admire as we scrape clean the faceted crystal coupe in which it was served.

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Maurice Ravel at work

Source: Pristine Classical