Franz Joseph Haydn: ***Piano Trio No. 45 in E-flat Major, Hob. XV: 29*** **(1797)**

Haydn (1732-1809) has long been hailed as the father of both the symphony and the string quartet, a master of both orchestral and chamber music genres who defined the contours of these works for nearly a century after his death. In his piano (or more accurately, *keyboard*) trios, Haydn struggled with reconciling the acoustic and timbral imbalance of the ensemble. While Goethe famously described the string quartet as a conversation between four equal and "rational people," the earliest piano trios might be more accurately described as piano sonatas with string accompaniment. This, however, is not the case with this late trio by Haydn, where the musical interplay mirrors more closely the equitable conversation of the string quartet than the blustery virtuosity of the piano sonata.

The *Piano Trio No. 45* was published in 1797, having been composed during the second of Haydn's epic stints in London, which so deeply influenced his style and the performance practice of chamber music. It was dedicated to Therese Jansen Bartolozzi (1770-1843), an accomplished German concert pianist whose career spanned across western Europe. While Mozart's chamber works and Haydn's earlier works were all intended for the intimacy of the *salon*, many of the London trios and quartets were commissioned for the *stage*. But in order to train an audience of *salonnières* to pay attention in the concert hall, Haydn often began his later works with a grandiose opening chord. A call to attention if you will. While this trio does not begin with a loud or even boisterous opening chord, it subtly draws you in after having set the stage. After this gesture, the introduction begins in earnest with the piano and violin in melodic unison. In this *Poco allegretto* movement, we can hear a true independence of the three instruments—a conversation between three partners whom Haydn has rendered equal through careful orchestration.

The development leads immediately into a dark timbre and a morose soundworld. As we move slowly out of the darkness and back into the light of the opening, the violin and piano meander together. The cello then enters with the harmonic backdrop and all three continue their voyage through stormy waters together. The trio slowly walks us out of the darkness back into the light of the opening, yet even after the final chord sounds, the piano continues to linger, undecided whether to stay in the dark or enter the light. In the short and concise recapitulation, we realize that this trio, unlike many of Haydn's other works, is neither dramatic nor parodic, but rather a calm and collected conversation between the piano, violin, and cello. Not only was this chamber work written for an intimate salon, but it embodies the very manièred *façon de vivre* exemplified by salon culture.

Andantino ed innocentemente: In a most curiously labeled second movement, Haydn lets loose his most beautiful lyric writing with the first theme. We could even call it a lullaby, brought to life by the pianist's right hand and accompanied by the sparsest chord changes in the left hands. The violin picks up this simple and lilting theme, while the piano then shifts to a shimmering countermelody while the cello fills in the harmonies. Things do take a darker turn as the cello takes the spotlight for a brief moment, after which the violin and piano render the melody in an almost

tragic mode, making us question just how innocent this lullaby really is. But the clouds quickly clear and we return to the simple and unadorned beauty of the movement, played most *innocentemente*.

Then, without much warning, our pensive lullaby turns into a jovial *allemande*, where Haydn reveals his penchant for playful ornamentation and counterpoint. Built over a triple meter, this *allemande* is more accurately described as a *Ländler*, the knee-stomping and yodel-filled dance of the Alps. As elegant and contained as was the opening *Allegretto*, the Finale ands a spark of jollity, a dance to while night away.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Franz Joseph Haydn

Source: The Guardian

Maurice Ravel: *Piano Trio in A Minor* (1914)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) is a name that needs no introduction, as are the others on this program. Yet any discussion of his music would be incomplete without reference to his pride in his Basque heritage. His father, Pierre-Joseph Ravel, was born near Geneva in the small town of Versoix, while his mother, Marie née Delouart, was of Basque heritage but spent much of her early life in Madrid. Maurice himself was born in Basque country, in the seaside town of Ciboure, though his family quickly moved to Paris when he was but a few months old. Since his early childhood, Maurice Ravel was immersed in Basque culture and folk songs from his mother. As an adult, Ravel would take great pains to spotlight melodies, dance forms, and the language of the Basque people in his compositions, and his *Piano Trio in A Minor* is no exception.

The *Trio* was completed in 1914, just a few months after the outbreak of World War I. Indeed, before the war, Ravel was languidly moving through the composition alongside a(n incomplete) piano concerto, *Zazpiak Bat* ('The Seven Are One') based on Basque folk themes. As the war loomed, Ravel abandoned the piano concerto project and focused his energies on the *Piano Trio*, even recycling some of his favorite themes from *Zazpiak Bat* in the *Trio*. He rapidly finished the *Trio* in a few weeks after France entered the war, in a bid to wrap up his projects before enlisting in the war effort. Despite his eagerness to serve, Ravel was not accepted into the frontlines (due to health reasons—for which we might even be thankful) and instead served as a nurse's aide and truck driver for the 13th Artillery Regiment. The promise of glory soon proved to be empty for those serving amongst the carnage of the frontlines; the death and destruction of the "Great" War left an indelible impact on all those involved, and Ravel was no exception. In his *Piano Trio*, we hear the hope and pride that had yet to be replaced by darker sentiments in Ravel's post-war works.

The opening movement, *Modéré*, is moderate only in tempo. In all other ways it is a proclamation of ardent fervor for life and the beauty of the world. We begin *in medias res*, the piano in the midst of softly undulating waves and the strings floating one on top of the other in the gentle current. Ravel's theme blurs past the expected strong and weak beats in this 8/8 meter, letting us float on the gossamer threads of his melodic web. In a second statement of this opening theme, which was in fact borrowed from the *Zazpiak Bat*, the piano intensifies the theme by expanding the range and the subsequent violin and cello entry is similarly a bit more impassioned, as if foretelling the fury that is to come. IN a classic Ravelian move, the musicians are instructed to "*Animez peu à peu*" ('to get livelier bit by bit'). Thus our three soloists break out into a virtuosic interlude, sparks flying from their fingertips until the opposite direction, "*Cédez très peu*" ('Recede by just a modicum') leads them to a placid standstill. As the violin then takes a moment to sing out, followed by the cello, the piano continues to set our aquatic scene. The development that comes next is best characterized as beatific, solemn yet ethereally beautiful in the interplay of timbres between the violin, cello, and piano.

Pantoum: Assez vif: Asian poetry has long been a source of formal inspiration for European and American artists. Think for a moment about the popularity of the *haiku* as a poetic form that has now fully assimilated into Anglophone poetry.

Hugo's example
Led many a French poet
To pen a *Pantoum*

In the same vein, the Malaysian form of the *pantun berkait* was all the craze in Paris at the turn of the century. A *pantoum* comprises a series of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza are then repeated in the following stanza as the first and third lines. In every subsequent stanza after the first, the second and fourth lines are usually new verses, that are then juxtaposed against the repeated lines, allowing for several modes of re-hearing and re-contextualizing these repeated lines of verse. Ravel plays with this form by alternating two themes, one in A minor and the other in F# minor throughout the movement. Each subsequent iteration is thus recontextualized based on the preceding music, and its impact is never twice the same. This *scherzo* also plays with timbre, having the strings imitate the sharpness of the piano in the opening *pizzicati*, and the piano imitating the rounded sound of the strings with the *legato* second theme. As all three instruments constantly cycle through a number of articulations, from *spiccato* to harmonics, from vertical *pizzicato* to strumming, the movement never lacks in interesting experimentation. The pianist too must employ an extensive timbral palette to meet the demands of this short but action-packed *scherzo.*

Passacaille: très large: A passacaglia is a series of variations built upon a repeating bassline. The earliest examples of this (often pastoral) dance date to seventeenth-century Spain, but the genre quickly spread across Europe and was a favorite of Baroque composers. In Ravel's *Trio*, the piano introduces an eight-bar bass line in only the left hand, to which the cello adds its voice with a sultry melody built in fifths on top of the bass line. The resultant counterpoint is distinctly folk inspired, perhaps even reminiscent of a *hurdy-gurdy* and its timbral affordances. We are certainly in the realm of Basque traditional music, but not the jovial street tunes of the village square. Instead we are in the deepest reaches of a grieving heart, the lament rendered all the more poignant by the repeated bass line. The violin joins with a heartbreaking rhapsody on the G string, letting forth an elegy to all we have lost. The three instruments play back and forth in this manner, finally achieving a full texture in the fourth variation. The passacaglia as a musical form is also unique in how it feels almost relentless. No matter how far we stray from the opening note, we will always return to it in a steady pattern of repetition. Upon each return, our understanding of the harmonies shift ever so slightly and we decide to wander off in a completely new direction, only to be brought right back to square one.

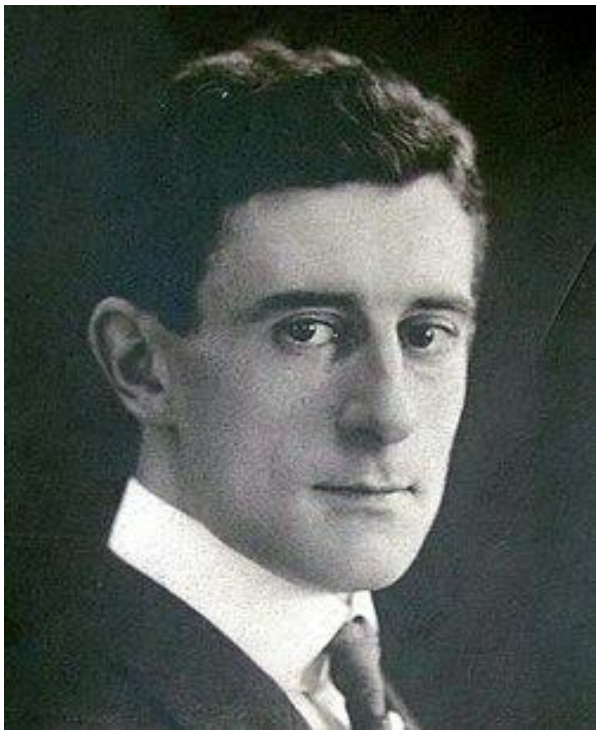
Final: Animé: In this last movement, Ravel exploits the strings to full timbral effect. The violin begins with arpeggiated harmonics and the cello with double-stopped trills, while the piano triumphantly states the opening the theme. The strings then venture out with their own statement

of the theme, passing *pizzicati* back and forth. Triumphant trills in the strings underscore the pianist's virtuosity up and down the keyboard. A meandering left-hand solo accompanied by low cello trills moves us into the next section where the whole trio joins together in unabashed glee. Extended techniques abound as Ravel revels in the full color palette afforded by these three instruments in concert. A dazzling coda lifts us out of the glorious sound world of the finale and the trio ends with the musical equivalent of a cheer.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

A young Maurice Ravel

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Felix Mendelssohn: ***Piano Trio No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 66*** **(1845)**

The 1840s saw Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) in the prime of his career, in demand as both a composer and conductor. He was then the music director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, a storied institution located in a city with ties to the musical legacy of Johann Sebastian Bach. Indeed this *Piano Trio* was one of his later works as a series of unfortunate events, including overwork, stress, and the sudden death of his beloved sister, Fanny, led to Mendelssohn's untimely passing after multiple strokes in 1847, not yet forty years old. Ironically, the *Piano Trio No. 2* was a birthday gift for Fanny's own fortieth birthday, presented to her on November 14, 1845. The work was dedicated to the acclaimed violinist, Louis Spohr (1784-1859), a good friend of the Mendelssohns. The trio unfolds across four movements, following the classic sonata-allegro form and traditional symphonic ordering of introduction—slow movement—scherzo—finale.

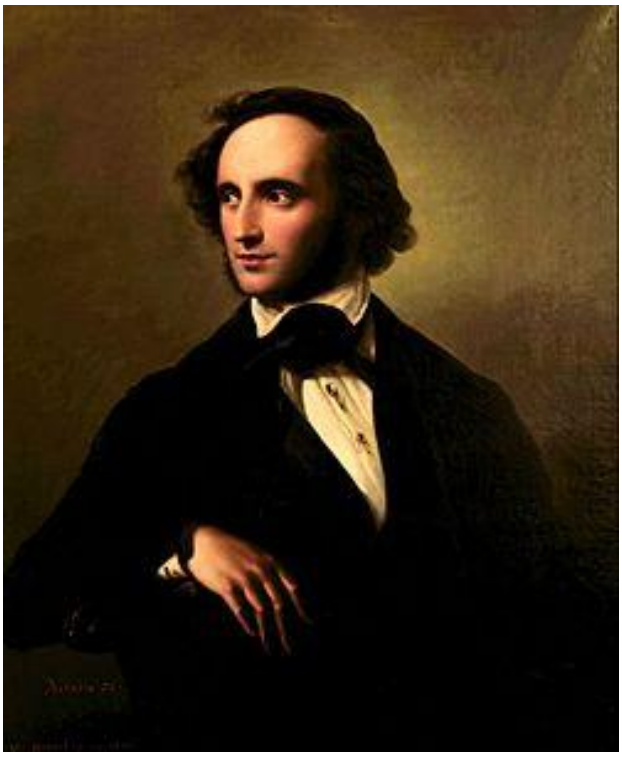
Allegro energico e con fuoco: A grandiose opening as the piano sets up a snakelike first theme that winds up and down the scale. The strings then join in unison above the piano's line. In the second iteration of the theme, the piano adds in a number of ornaments that make this otherwise simple tune shimmer like gold. After an ardent opening gambit, this movement leads us on a journey to explore a Mendelssohnian fantasy of *appassionato* and cheerful writing. This is music that cannot be characterized with just one emotion, but like both Haydn and Ravel, it takes us through a wide range of soundworlds while still staying within the confines of traditional sonata-allegro form. Indeed the instrumental imbalance between the strings and piano in the piano trio ensemble lend this genre very well to experimentation on the timbral front. Each of our evening's three composers have grappled on diverse fronts with the problem of how to balance these three wildly different instruments. An exuberant coda wraps it up as all three instruments sing together, each given a final moment to say their piece, before a jubilant ending.

Andante espressivo: Mist descends in a blanket over the stage as the piano presents yet another winding theme. Encouraged by the "*dolce*" marked into the score, the strings enter with an almost veiled articulation, the sweetness of their sound achieved by a slight movement of the bow closer to the fingerboard, *quasi sul tasto*. With just a few notes and a marked economy of thematic material, Mendelssohn pulls at our heartstrings in this most dulcet and elegant of slow movements.

Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto: Mendelssohn never shied from a technically fiendish yet musically staid *scherzo*, and some might say he wrote some of the most memorable in the genre. This movement is no exception. The observant listener will remark that the *moto perpetuo spiccato* is highly reminiscent of the *scherzo* from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a deceptively difficult movement that found its way into every major orchestra's audition repertoire. This *scherzo* is no less fiendishly difficult, if anything more so, as the strings must hold their own against an equally virtuosic pianist. The driving sixteenth-note motor might be an exercise in control and agility but musically generates excitement that pushes you to the listen at the edge of your chair, only able to breathe freely after the very last note.

Finale: Allegro appassionato: The cellist leads into the finale with a confident expression of this movement's first theme, to which the violin the responds and the piano presents a counter theme. In this movement, Mendelssohn often arrives at a nearly orchestral texture, as this combination of three instruments are then juxtaposed in dense counterpoint that when combined, adds up to more than the sum of the individual parts. In the development, the opening theme is interlaced with the Lutheran hymn "*Vor deinen Thron*" ('Before thy Throne'), a plea to God's good graces in the final moments before our passing. Bach's setting of the chorale, which he himself composed when living in Leipzig, is of course the most well-known. Mendelssohn here leverages the piece's history with the city to pay homage to his home and the Gewandhaus, Mendelssohn's own musical kingdom.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Felix Mendelssohn

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