

Carl Maria von Weber: *Piano Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 8* (1809)

The German composer Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) achieved his greatest success in opera. *Der Freischütz* and *Oberon* remain cornerstones of the repertoire, and their overtures are frequently programmed by orchestras. Weber also held a special fondness for woodwinds, and his solo works for clarinet and bassoon have become staples. He even took his *Andante e Rondo Ungarese* for viola (also composed in 1809)—originally written for his younger brother, Fritz—and rescored it for bassoon at the request of a player in the Munich court orchestra. A thread running through all of his music is a gift for deeply evocative melody; even in purely instrumental works, his lyrical lines always seem to be telling a story.

The *Piano Quartet* is no exception. It shines almost like a miniature opera for chamber ensemble, and its exuberance betrays none of the hardship Weber was enduring at the time. From 1807 to 1810, he served in Stuttgart as private secretary to Duke Ludwig of Württemberg, brother of King Frederick I. The Duke was a manipulative man who exploited Weber's financial instability, entangling him in debt and dubious credit schemes. Weber and his father were eventually arrested on charges of embezzlement but were later released. Both were nonetheless banished from the kingdom, which may not have been to Weber's great chagrin, since he had been deeply unhappy in Stuttgart.

Weber was also a gifted pianist, and it shows in his writing for the instrument. All four movements put the pianist's virtuosity on display, and one can easily imagine the composer himself at the keyboard. The quartet follows the Classical four-movement mold, yet it breaks from tradition in its incessant lyricism. This is not an academic work that probes the furthest reaches of harmony. It is a chamber work that transports the listener to the stage, as if singing alongside the evening's *prima donna*.

The opening *Allegro* sets the piano apart from the strings. The violin occasionally emerges with a countermelody, but Weber gives pride of place to the piano, letting the pianist show off both the instrument's range and their own virtuosity. In this respect, the movement recalls the early Classical style of the First Viennese School, where the piano and violin dominate the texture. As the idyllic exposition draws to a close, the strings take on a much livelier role in the development. Syncopated chords lead to a denser texture in which the cello and violin trade frenetic runs up and down the scale. The piano then shifts the mood dramatically, conjuring slowly undulating waves beneath a small boat. A serene viola solo sings out above, answered by an impassioned reply from the cello. The movement feels like the overture to an opera, with each instrument taking its turn portraying a character on stage. Their tunes are all thematically linked, yet no two sound exactly alike. This variety carries us from one character to the next without so much as a backward glance, and yet the whole holds together beautifully.

In the second movement, *Adagio ma non troppo*, the strings build the opening chord one at a time, then give way to the piano's *fortissimo* entrance on the dominant; the resolution arrives with the softest *pizzicato*. What follows oscillates between *cantabile* and *agitato* lines. Suddenly, the score marks *Più moto e con fuoco*, and the mood turns tempestuous, like a late-summer thunderstorm breaking over the countryside. But the clouds clear as quickly as they came, and we return to the placid waters of the movement's primary theme. In the coda, the piano leads the strings back to the same quiet *pizzicato* resolution heard at the opening.

The *Menuetto*, marked *Allegro*, is a dance between partners: the piano leads, and the strings follow it through the minuet's customary opening steps. In the *Trio*, the cello breaks away for a dainty solo turn before the upper strings rejoin the floor and lead us back to the elegant choreography of the minuet.

The quartet's *Presto* finale is a homage to Mozart. The strings begin what at first seems to be a canon, but before any real counterpoint can take hold, it melts away into a sprightly motif in the piano. The piano scampers around the strings, and we get yet another false start at imitation before the quartet reassembles into a single unit. The texture grows dense once more, alternately spotlighting the violin, cello, and piano. The piano then bursts into a quasi-cadenza, frolicking through the meadows, lost in its own euphoria. When the strings rejoin, the viola and cello are left to play second fiddle while the violin twirls about on its own. A short interlude follows in which our protagonists wade through a muddy stream, and then we are off, all four dancing in a boisterous finale that can only be heard as an outpouring of pure joy. In the coda, Weber at last delivers the fugue he has teased since the opening bars, and as it resolves, we breathe a sigh of relief; our story has reached its happy ending.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Carl Maria von
Weber
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Frank Bridge: *Phantasy*, H. 94 (1910)

The English composer Frank Bridge (1879–1941) began his career not as a composer but as a string player. He earned his living as a chamber musician, playing violin with the Grimson Quartet and viola with the English String Quartet. He trained at the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition with Charles Villiers Stanford from 1899 to 1903. As a violist, he joined a number of his contemporaries in championing the instrument, and his *Lament* for two violas (1912) remains one of the few viola duos still regularly performed. His most famous student, a certain Benjamin Britten, held his teacher's music in the highest regard and programmed it often. At a 1948 performance of the *Phantasy Piano Quartet*, H. 94, in which Britten himself played the piano part, he described his teacher's style as "Brahms happily tempered with Fauré."

The *Phantasy Piano Quartet* is not Bridge's only work of that name. After finishing his studies, he entered the Cobbett Competition, founded by Walter Willson Cobbett, a philanthropic industrialist, amateur violinist, and devoted music aficionado. The competition called for single-movement "Phantasies," a form inspired by Cobbett's fascination with the fancies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English viol consorts. Bridge won a prize in 1905 with his *Phantasy* for string quartet, then took first prize in 1907 with a *Phantasy* for piano trio. Cobbett was so impressed that in 1910 he commissioned a third *Phantasy* from Bridge: the piano quartet, a work that fully lives up to the intrigue of its title.

The central section, marked *Allegro vivace*, opens with the piano striking an A across three octaves, and the strings dance above this ostinato. In the next phrase, the left hand tumbles into the lower register, circling three octaves of D. The pressure builds as virtuosic scales pass around the quartet. In the trio, the viola introduces a rhapsodic melody that puts Bridge's Brahmsian tendencies on full display. The other instruments join one at a time, and once again we lose our grasp of the meter as one line flows into the next. Before the dance returns, we hear a touch of Fauré in Bridge's haunting long notes, the strings suspended above rolling chords in the piano. When the opening music comes back, something profound has changed.

The quartet closes by returning to the opening tempo, *Andante con moto*, bringing the work full circle. A lush cello solo begins the final section, soon answered by an affectionate reply from the piano. The violin adds its voice, then finally the viola. Once all four are playing together, Bridge never lets the momentum flag, drawing us ever deeper into his melodies. As the mood shifts and the music slows, the piano evokes a bird calling in the distance. Its song draws closer and grows more anxious, but the strings lull us ever deeper toward sleep. The birdsong fades once more as we take a deep breath and settle into the night's embrace. The piece ends, and we drift off to chase the nightingale in our dreams. —Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Antonín Dvořák: *Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 87* (1889)

The Czech composer Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) developed a distinctive style that blends lush lyricism with a deep love for the folk traditions of his homeland. Many have called his music nationalistic, and it has certainly shaped the way modern ears hear Czech music, but his real genius lay in marrying folk idioms to the Western classical tradition. Early in his career, that gift caught the attention of Johannes Brahms, who championed the younger composer and introduced him to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock. Years later, after Dvořák moved to New York in 1892, the same instinct produced some of his most beloved works. The “*New World*” *Symphony* and the “*American*” *String Quartet*, both composed in 1893, weave the spirit of American folk song into a thoroughly European fabric. The *Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 87*, predates his American years. He wrote it in the summer of 1889, fourteen years after his first piano quartet, at his beloved country retreat in Vysoká. Its first two movements wear their Czech colors more lightly than much of his music, but the work bears the hallmarks of his style.

The first movement, marked *Allegro con fuoco*, opens with the strings in bold unison, a call to arms that the piano answers with a dramatic flourish. It is a heroic theme, one that seems to belong to a knight setting out on a quest, and it strides forward with a confidence that sweeps us along in its wake. As in the Bridge, the melodies travel freely from one instrument to another, but here we hear the piano quartet as we know it and hold it so dear: a conversation between equals, each voice given its moment to speak before handing the thread to its neighbor. This is a deeply traditional work, following the form as Mozart first established it, and from the opening bars we might easily be fooled into thinking it came from the pen of a Viennese composer. Yet Dvořák’s music is always tinged with the flavor of his Bohemian homeland, and this quartet is no exception. Lyricism reigns supreme, coupled with a style so unmistakably his own that, before long, there is no mistaking whose voice we are hearing.

The slow movement may be marked *Lento*, but it is anything but static, moving through three distinct soundworlds, one for each of its main themes. The first is calm and lyrical. It opens with a serene cello solo over *pizzicato* in the upper strings; Dvořák loved to let the cello sing across its full range, and he does so in many of his works. The piano bridges one phrase to the next, and a simple melody follows in the violin, transformed by a delicate accompaniment in the viola and piano. The second theme is far more bombastic. The violin soars above the texture before the melody is traded among the strings. The third theme is at once dazzling and delicate. Its melody is simple, not unlike the first, but here the piano plays a far more active role. We then return to the opening theme and circle once more through all three, each now charged with far more drama than before. In the closing bars, the music lifts us up to the clouds and then lets us float back to earth, one note at a time.

The third movement opens *Allegro moderato*, *grazioso*, before moving to a *trio* marked *Un pochettino più mosso*. In effect, Dvořák has swapped the roles of a traditional *scherzo*'s two halves: the opening section, usually quick and spirited, is here far more languid, while the *trio* takes us on a voyage of virtuosity. A fanfare in the piano opens the movement before settling into a quiet *ländler*, a lilting rustic dance in 3/4 time traditionally accompanied by the stamp of heavy boots. Here, however, it appears in its Viennese guise, full of grace and restraint, with none of the peasantry's stomping. In the second phrase, the piano leads until the rest of the quartet rejoins the dance. Mysterious string tremolos usher in the *trio*, and the piano's rollicking chords take the dance up a notch. Syncopations, hemiolas, and moments of heterophony give it all the drive we expect from a *scherzo*. Since *scherzo* is Italian for "joke," by turning the form on its head, Dvořák has cracked a joke of his own.

The finale, marked *Allegro ma non troppo*, is exuberant and passionate, steeped in the folk idioms of Dvořák's homeland. A striking unison opening across the strings and piano gives way to a folk dance, with the quartet conjuring the sound of a Romani band. When the viola enters with its melody, its ornaments are a clear nod to the virtuosity of those fiddlers. Through it all, the piano keeps up a simple yet boisterous accompaniment, and at moments the whole ensemble sounds not unlike a cimbalom, the hammered dulcimer at the heart of such bands. The drama builds throughout the movement, growing more *appassionato* with every passing bar, until at last it comes to a head in the coda. Dvořák teases us with one false ending after another until, with one last stamp of the heel, the quartet brings the night's revelry to a triumphant close.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Antonin Dvořák
(left)

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Frank Bridge
(right)

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