

Program Notes

String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1826

- I. Allegretto
- II. Vivace
- III. Lento assai, cantate e tranquillo
- IV. Der schwer gefasste Entschluss
(Grave — Allegro — Grave ma non troppo
tanto — Allegro)

This quartet—Beethoven's last complete composition—comes from the fall of 1826, one of the darkest moments in his life. During the previous two years, he had written three string quartets on commission from Prince Nikolas Galitzin, and another, the Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131, composed between January and June 1826. Even then Beethoven was not done with the possibilities of the string quartet: he pressed on with yet another, making sketches for the Quartet in F Major during the summer of 1826.

At that point his world collapsed. His twenty-year-old nephew Karl, who had become Beethoven's ward after a bitter court fight with the boy's mother, attempted suicide on July 30. The composer was shattered—friends reported that he suddenly looked seventy years old. At the end of September, when the young man had recovered enough to travel, Beethoven took him—and the sketches for the new quartet—to the country home of Beethoven's brother Johann in Gneixendorf, a village about thirty miles west of Vienna. There, as he nursed Karl back to health, Beethoven's own health began to fail. He would get up and compose at dawn, spend his days walking through the fields, and then resume composing in the evening. In Gneixendorf he completed the Quartet in F Major in October and wrote a new finale to his earlier Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130. These were his final works. When Beethoven returned to Vienna in December, he

took to his bed almost immediately and died the following March.

One would expect music composed under such turbulent circumstances to be anguished, but the Quartet in F Major is radiant music, full of sunlight. It is as if Beethoven achieved in this quartet the peace unavailable to him in life. This is the shortest of the late quartets, and while this music remains very much in Beethoven's late style, it returns to the classical proportions (and mood) of the Haydn quartets.

The opening movement, significantly marked Allegretto rather than the expected Allegro, is the one most often cited as Haydnesque. It is in sonata form—though a sonata form without overt conflict—and Beethoven builds it on brief thematic fragments rather than long melodies. This is poised, relaxed music, and the final cadence—on the falling figure that has run throughout the movement—is remarkable for its understatement. By contrast, the Vivace bristles with energy. Its outer sections rocket along on a sharply-syncopated main idea, while the vigorous trio sends the first violin sailing high above the other voices. The very ending is impressive: the music grows quiet, comes to a moment of stasis, and then Beethoven wrenches it to a stop with a sudden, stinging surprise.

The slow movement—Beethoven marks it Lento assai, cantate e tranquillo—is built on the first violin's heartfelt opening melody. This opening is in D-flat Major, but for the central episode Beethoven slows down even further (the marking is *Più lento*), moves to C-sharp minor, and writes music of a prayer-like simplicity. This section, full of halting rhythms, spans only ten measures before the return of the opening material, now elaborately decorated. The final movement has drawn the most comment. In the manuscript, Beethoven noted two three-note mottos at its beginning under the heading *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*: "The Difficult Resolution." The first, solemnly intoned by viola and cello,

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asks the question: “Muss es sein?” (“Must it be?”). The violins’ inverted answer, which comes at the Allegro, is set to the words “Es muss sein!” (“It must be!”). Coupled with the fact that this quartet is virtually Beethoven’s final composition, these mottos have given rise to suggestions from some commentators that they represent Beethoven’s last thoughts, a philosophical affirmation of life’s possibilities. The actual origins of this motto are a great deal less imposing, for they arose from a dispute over an unpaid bill, and as a private joke for friends Beethoven wrote a humorous canon on the dispute, the theme of which he later adapted for this quartet movement. In any case, the mottos furnish the opening material for what turns out to be a powerful but essentially cheerful movement—the second theme radiates a childlike simplicity. The coda, which begins pizzicato, gradually gives way to bowed notes and a cadence on the “Es muss sein!” motto.

Program Note written by Eric Bromberger

impossible inventions

PAUL NOVAK

Born: 1998

Composed: 2024

- I. faster – than – light – machine
- II. quantum – clockwork
- III. anti – gravity – machine
- IV. cyborg – falling – in – love

impossible inventions (2024) makes the string quartet defy the laws of physics. Structured in four interlocking movements without pause, this piece takes its inspiration from hypothetical technologies envisioned in science fiction, reimagining the quartet as a series of fantastical machines. The first movement, the most substantial of the four, imagines a spacecraft hurtling at an extraordinary speed. The second and third movements are shorter interludes which conjures churning clockwork with pizzicati and the weightlessness of space with shimmering natural harmonics. The final movement transforms the viola in a robot falling in love, accompanied by a lyrical, gentle dance. The

“inventions” of the title have a double meaning, referring to both the wondrous sci-fi machines and to the piece’s swirling contrapuntal writing reminiscent of Bach.

impossible inventions was commissioned by the Barlow Endowment Award, and was made possible thanks to a generous residency at Avaloch Farm Music Institute in August 2024. It is dedicated with gratitude and warmth to my friends Angela, Justin, Ben, and Russell of Balourdet Quartet—an extraordinary ensemble that defies the laws of physics.

Program Note written by Paul Novak

Concerto for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet in D Major, Op. 21

ERNEST CHAUSSON

Born: 1855

Died: 1899

Composed: 1889–1891

- I. Décidé
- II. Sicilienne
- III. Grave
- IV. Finale. Très animé

Ernest Chausson is one of the most painful examples of what-might-have-been in the history of music. Born into a wealthy and educated family, Chausson came to music indirectly. He was an accomplished painter and art collector, but his parents wanted him to do something “sensible,” so he took degrees in law and was admitted to the bar in Paris at age 22. But he never practiced, choosing instead to pursue a career in music. Chausson studied with César Franck (he was one of that master’s final students) and tried to develop a personal style as a composer. This proved a difficult task, as it did for many young French composers at the end of the nineteenth century—Chausson found himself caught between the chromaticism of Franck, the seductive influence of Wagner, and the radical music of his friend Debussy. He wrote a handful of pieces that have found their way into the repertory—the Poème for violin and orchestra and the Chanson perpetuelle for soprano—but

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the promise of these pieces was cut short. In the summer of 1899, Chausson and his family took a vacation house in Limay, about thirty miles west of Paris. His wife and five children were returning from a day trip to Paris, and Chausson got on a bicycle to meet them at the station. Along the way, he lost control of the bicycle, crashed headfirst into a stone wall, and—before the days of bicycle helmets—was killed instantly. He was 44 years old.

Ten years earlier, in 1889, Chausson began work on a unique piece of chamber music, scored for violin, piano, and string quartet. The composer gave it an unusual name—Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet (that title is sometimes listed as Concerto rather than Concert). The uncertainty about its name may be a key to this music, for it sometimes seems a hybrid composition. At moments, it is true chamber music—the six instruments play together, and their music has the intimacy and interchange we expect of the medium. There are, however, extended periods when the string quartet drops out altogether and the two “solo” instruments play by themselves. And there are also moments when the quartet makes so huge a sound, full of massed chords and tremolos, that it takes on the sonority and character of an orchestra, and the music seems to become a true concerto.

But if there are confusions about its exact nature, there is no doubt about the power of this music, which is often full of those tantalizing, ineffable moments that characterize Chausson’s finest work. This is music of generous proportions—its four movements stretch out to about forty minutes—and it is grounded in the cyclic form Chausson had learned from Franck: its themes reappear in different forms in later movements.

At the beginning of the first movement, the piano announces—very firmly—the three-note cell that will shape much of that movement; as the quartet repeats this cell, it begins to take on a more lyrical form—this is the first of many transformations of this seemingly-simple shape. This extended movement alternates interludes

of melting sensuousness with impassioned outbursts from the combined forces. A cadenza-like flourish from the solo violin leads to a dramatic recapitulation and a very quiet close on the opening three-note cell.

The wistful second movement is a Sicilienne that rocks gently along the swaying rhythm characteristic of that old Mediterranean dance; in the course of the movement, Chausson combines its two main themes. Darkest of the movements, the Grave opens with a long duet (lasting nearly two minutes) for the solo violin and piano. The violin sings its expressive song over the chromatic wandering of the piano, and it is typical of Chausson that this piano part should be marked both *pianissimo* and *très lié*: “very heavy.” The quartet enters quietly, but rising tensions drive the music to a huge climax built on great waves of sound. These furies subside, and the piano part from the very beginning, wandering disconsolately once again, draws the movement to its rapt conclusion.

Aptly marked *Très animé*, the finale leaps to life in a rush of rhythmic energy that will drive the entire movement. Along the way, Chausson brings back the fundamental theme-shape of the first movement as well as the main theme of the Grave, and there are once again extended passages for the two solo instruments.

Chausson worked on the Concerto for two years before completing it in the summer of 1891. The first performance took place on March 4, 1892, and the soloists on that occasion were Eugène Ysaÿe and Auguste Pierret. Ysaÿe and Chausson were good friends, and it was for the great Belgian violinist that Chausson would—four years later—write his famous *Poème*.

Program Note written by Eric Bromberger