Program Notes

Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 15

GABRIEL FAURÉ

Born: 1845
Died: 1924
Composed: 1876–1879

I. Allegro molto moderato
II. Scherzo. Allegro vivo
III. Adagio
IV. Allegro molto

Fauré wrote the Piano Quartet in C minor, one of the masterpieces of his early period, between 1876 and 1879, when he was in his early thirties. Despite the work's success, the composer was dissatisfied with the final movement and rewrote it in 1883, making it—as he said— "new from top to toe." In its completed form, the quartet is an extraordinary achievement, both for the range of its expression and for Fauré's imaginative craftsmanship.

The Allegro molto moderato opens with a sturdy theme in the strings, with off-the-beat accompaniment from the piano. The vigor and drive of this opening continue throughout the movement, and its rhythm—heard almost continuously in the piano—unifies the entire movement; the gentle second subject, announced by the viola and marked espressivo, gracefully sets off the energy of the opening episode. In the development, Fauré brings back the opening theme—now slowed down and played gently—and the wonder is that a theme which moments before had moved forward martially can be so transformed and made to sing lyrically. In the coda, this opening theme recurs quietly in the viola as the movement draws to its calm conclusion.

Fauré reverses the expected order of the interior movements and places the scherzo, marked Allegro vivo, second. The piano's opening idea rocks along cheerfully above pizzicato accompaniment in the strings; alert listeners will recognize it as a variant of the espressivo second theme of the first movement. The scherzo reaches a cadence, and then in another pleasing surprise Fauré replaces the expected trio section with a graceful chorale for muted strings.

Because of their many similarities, the final two movements should be considered together. The Adagio is built on the brief dotted phrase first heard in the cello: this rising figure will unify the final two movements. The lyric second episode, introduced by the violin, contains the same rhythm, and the opening theme of the finale—Allegro molto—rushes along on this same rising, dotted theme-shape. The energetic finale seems to be in motion throughout. Even when the viola sings the second theme, marked dolce e espressivo, this graceful melody assumes the rising shape that characterizes the final two movements. It is a measure of Fauré's achievement in this music that even a simple figure can yield such a wide range of expression. Buoyed along by its inexhaustible energy, the quartet rushes to its close.

Given this music's popularity today, it comes as a surprise to learn that Fauré had a great deal of trouble getting it published. No publisher wanted to take a chance on a little-known composer. The quartet was rejected by two of France's major publishing firms and was accepted by a third only on the condition that composer surrender all his rights to it. Desperate to have his work published, Fauré could do nothing but accept those terms. He never made a penny on this music.

Program Notes

Piano Quartet No. 2 in G minor, Op. 45

Composed: 1885–1886

I. Allegro molto moderato
II. Allegro molto
III. Adagio non troppo
IV. Allegro molto

Gabriel Fauré's First Piano Quartet has become one of the cornerstones of French chamber music, but his Second Piano Quartet, composed in 1885-86, is not nearly so well-known. Fauré was still struggling for recognition when he wrote the later quartet—at age 40, he was supporting himself (and his wife and infant son) by working as an organist in Paris. Real fame would not come to the gentle Fauré until late in life, but when he composed the Second Piano Quartet he was at the height of his powers: from this same period came two of his best-known works, the Requiem and the Pavane.

Though he made his living as an organist, Fauré was an excellent pianist, and the piano is extremely active in the Second Piano Quartet, announcing themes and dominating textures even when it has a purely accompanying role. Fauré often sets the piano and strings in opposition, and the striking beginning offers one of the best examples of this. The opening of the Second Piano Quartet is said to have been inspired by a memory from Fauré's childhood. Between ages 4 and 9, he lived at Montgauzy, where there was an iron foundry driven by a stream. The beginning of the quartet is Fauré's depiction of that memory: the rippling sound of the stream is heard in the piano, while the strings' thrusting, broad-limbed melody echoes the pounding machinery. The movement has two subordinate themes; both distantly related to the opening melody. One hears machinery surging, however faintly, throughout this movement, which concludes quietly on fragments of the "foundry" theme.

The piano dominates the Allegro molto. In fact, the opening belongs almost exclusively to that instrument, with only faint comments from the strings. The structure of the movement is unusual for a scherzo, for it has no trio section. Instead, Fauré offers contrasting episodes from the strings, related to the first movement's "foundry" theme.

The restrained Adagio non troppo opens with a long duet for piano and viola, with the instruments taking turns. Fauré's student Charles Koechlin is reported to have said that if the viola did not exist, it would have been necessary to invent it just to play the theme that begins this movement. Violin and cello join the duet, and gradually the music grows to a soaring climax, then falls away to a quiet conclusion.

The energetic Allegro molto bursts to life with a triplet accompaniment in the piano that will figure importantly throughout the movement. Strings have the almost violent opening theme, the piano the lyric second idea. This movement is interesting for its rhythmic vitality. Its pleasures include details such as misplaced stresses or the brilliant waltz that breaks out from time to time before the finale concludes with an exuberant coda, pushed along by flying triplets.

Program Notes written by Eric Bromberger