

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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

Gabriel Fauré

Gabriel Fauré's Piano Quartet No. 1 falls early in the composer's catalogue of chamber music, and he followed up on its success by composing the G-minor Piano Quartet several years later. He would not return to that instrumental combination again, though in his later chamber production he produced two piano quintets and, at the very end of his life, a piano trio and a string quartet. This earliest of his piano quartets underwent a lengthy gestation, perhaps slowed down by a degree of turmoil in the composer's personal life. During the 1870s Fauré was a regular attendee at the salon of the famous mezzo-soprano and composer Pauline Viardot, and in the course of his visits there he fell in love with her daughter, Marianne. After five years of semi-formal flirtation the two became engaged in July 1877, when Fauré was well along in his work on this piece. This advance in their relationship forced a realistic reckoning, and four months later Marianne broke off the engagement, leaving the 32-year-old composer temporarily heartsick.

Marguerite Long, who championed the composer's piano works, described the piece's slow movement as "the sorrowful echo of the break of Fauré's engagement with Marianne Viardot," and reported that she could not hold back her tears when she performed the piece with the Capet Quartet at the Société Nationale de Musique, with Fauré turning pages in what was her first public appearance playing the master's music. On the other hand, the composer's friend and biographer Émile Vuillermoz protested against such an interpretation. He wrote:

Nothing, in my opinion, warrants docile acceptance of such a sentimental and imprudent thesis. Fauré's reserve always prevented him from following the example of Romantic artists who allowed the whole world to witness their personal frustrations Capable of enlarging his style to treat a pathetic theme possessing something universal, Fauré would never have consented to express himself in such a spectacular manner.

Indeed, "spectacular" is never a word appropriate to Fauré's music, although the opening of the First Piano Quartet at least qualifies as forcefully dramatic, with the three string instruments announcing the surging theme against the piano's syncopated underpinnings. A sense of nervous edginess pervades much of this sonata-form movement, although the second theme —

IN SHORT

Born: May 12, 1845, in Pamiers (Ariège), France

Died: November 4, 1924, in Paris

Work composed: 1876–79, revised (with an entirely new finale) in 1883; dedicated to the Belgian violinist Hubert Léonard

World premiere: February 14, 1880, at a concert of the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris, Ovide Musin, violin; Louis van Waefelghem, viola; Ermanno Mariotti, cello, and the composer as pianist

Estimated duration: ca. 31 minutes

offered sequentially by viola, violin, cello, and piano — injects a more graceful ethos that one might hear as Debussyian.

The *Scherzo* is lighter than air, and subtle musical conflicts, including rhythmic competition between the meters of 2/4 and 6/8, keep listeners from feeling grounded for much of it. The very sound of the wispy trio section, with the strings muted, points toward the music of Fauré's pupil Maurice Ravel, who was born just a year before this piece was begun.

The *Adagio* comes next, and even if it is not heard as a confession of romantic disillusionment it may still qualify as mournful. But mournfulness in Fauré is not depressive; instead, it is an emotion supported by nobility and, ultimately, achieving serenity. In this, the *Adagio* stands not far from sections of Fauré's famous Requiem, which first began to occupy him just as he was composing this piano quartet. The *Scherzo* and *Ada-*

gio are reversed from the order listeners normally expect, although by this moment in music history the ordering of middle movements had become quite fluid. Writing in *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, Florent Schmitt proposed:

This seems the more logical plan: the scherzo, with its fluid rhythms, tempers, as it were, the austerity of the allegro, and prepares for the meditation of the slow movement; then, after this peaceful oasis, the tumult begins again with renewed ardour.

The energetic finale is not the music that concluded this work when it was premiered in 1880. Fauré replaced the movement in 1883, prior to publication. Whether the eventual finale represents a revision or a total recomposition remains uncertain: the original version does not survive, and in his correspondence Fauré suggested it was the latter.

Views and Reviews

Gabriel Fauré's scores are sturdy without being bulky, and their melodies, harmonies, and counterpoint interact with luminous, elusive beauty. The pianist Alfred Cortot, one of his leading interpreters, insisted that "in all M. Fauré's work, the true novelty lies in the quality of the musical texture much more than in an unusual style of writing." Nonetheless, his harmonic practice was also distinctive. Without discarding the dramatic tension inherent in the ebb and flow of tonic and dominant, he often imbued the standard progressions of tonality with tinges of modality, doubtless absorbed through his early study of plainchant and church accompaniment. The *Adagio* of his Piano Quartet No. 1, for example, is tinged with the Aeolian mode, which is essentially the minor mode with the seventh degree of the scale consistently flatted. Fauré's ethic was to convey much with as little noise as possible. He commented to his pupil Florent Schmitt, "To express that which is within you with sincerity, in the clearest and most perfect manner, would seem to me the ultimate goal of art." Cortot summed it up:

Using a language which has never tried to astonish or compel attention, he has set on his masterpieces the hallmark of a surprising and permanent freshness.

Fauré, as depicted in a painting by Paul Mathey, ca. 1870

