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Ravel String Quartet

Igor Stravinsky famously said, “Good composers borrow...but great ones steal.”

He might have been speaking of his one-time friend and associate Maurice Ravel. Ravel’s youthful String Quartet, written in 1902, owes an immense and inarguable debt to Claude Debussy’s Quartet from nine years earlier, both in surface detail and at deeper levels. Up to this point, the young Ravel had written music that was beautiful and striking (*Pavane for a Dead Princess*, *Jeux d’Eau*), but had yet to write a substantial work that would show the full range of his vision. Debussy’s example may have seemed like a miraculous gift, a box into which he could drop his own ideas and inspirations. Had the Debussy never been written, Ravel’s quartet would no doubt have been something quite different.

But this is no slavish imitation. The delight that the listener feels when he sets these quartets side by side stems from their profound differences, not their similarities. Granted, both quartets may be organized, in the best late-Romantic tradition, around single “motto” themes (unifying ideas that resurface in each movement); they may rely on shared musical scales and harmonic worlds; they may both feature an Iberian-sounding scherzo that relies on guitar-like plucking and strumming, as well as a luminous, twilit, muted slow movement. But there is no confusing which piece came from which man. In Debussy’s quartet, we hear an artist still half in thrall to the German genius of the previous generation, mining its riches while trying furiously to disentangle himself and give utterance to a new voice: he purposely rejects the usual forms and proportions in each movement, his passionate and wayward energy makes itself felt everywhere, his “motto” theme is like a hero on a restless quest as it journeys through the movements, alone and embattled. Ravel, biographically speaking, might have had a fairer claim to feeling alone and embattled: he was virtually unacknowledged by the musical establishment in Paris, many of whom personally disliked him, and he was rejected for the Prix de Rome five years in a row. But whatever rancor may have been in his heart, it appears nowhere in his music. Elegant, glowing, and balanced, the quartet is not a rejection of past forms and traditions, but a positive celebration of them, even as it is suffused with Ravel’s own harmonic language and texture. As with the Debussy there is much that is passionate, and moving, in this music; but ultimately it is its classicism — felt at times almost as an objective distance — that stamps the quartet most strongly.

The first movement is a case in point. It is a paean to Classical sonata form, and its beauty stems in no small part from how it cleaves to that form, laying out its arches and balances transparently for us to enjoy. Haydn often achieved great things by subverting our expectations — surprising us with asymmetrical phrase lengths, lopping off parts of the expected structure, stopping short just when the music ought to continue. Ravel, a lover of Haydn's music, does not seek to surprise in that way, but rather to confirm the beauty of the archetype. His "motto" theme, stated simply and tenderly at the opening, ascends for four bars, and descends for four more; the answer to this theme, a kind of countersubject, similarly occupies eight bars, an exercise in the love of the regular. And so it proceeds: scurrying transitional material, a beautiful, recumbent second theme closing the first section of the movement, a middle developmental section that explores these melodic ideas, a towering climax, and a returning section that lovingly recapitulates every moment of the first section, leading finally to a glowing coda where the sun radiantly sets on the scene, descending chord by chord. The magic here is the marriage between such structural clarity on the one hand, and Ravel's sensuous harmonic language on the other; added to which, the composer's unerring and almost savant-like instinct for orchestration, the voicings and textures that bring such a wealth of color and vividness out of the medium.

In the second movement, Ravel seems to borrow on family capital. His mother, who was of Basque extraction and grew up in Madrid, might well have contributed the Spanish flavoring of the movement, with its plucking and strumming and its vibrant, proud cross-rhythms. Meanwhile, his father, a brilliant mechanic and inventor, makes his presence felt too: the main section of the movement is striking in its precision and intricacy, full of polyrhythmic gears that move at different rates and yet intermesh, each cog lending itself to the grander design. The motto theme is concealed in plain sight here, with its pitches contained in the main melody but reassembled, Cubism a few years early. A wistful middle section intercedes with its own mournful melody, high in the cello part over a woozy chromatic accompaniment. The atmosphere descends into a kind of opium dream, where the motifs and rhythms of the earlier section reappear, sometimes menacing, sometimes evanescent, combining and revolving in the smoky air. Ultimately, however, we are recalled to the alert, lively world of the main section, Ravel once more affirming his allegiance to the received forms and dwelling brilliantly within them.

The third movement opens with the motto theme as moody recitative: it is declaimed, and mused upon, once in the viola, once in the cello and once in the first violin, each time with a kind of wrinkle or genetic mutation. The question is asked three times, in three different ways, but the answer, for now, is postponed; instead the scene dissolves into an aria for the viola, plaintive and

lonely, accompanied by the sparest and simplest of textures. From time to time, the motto theme utters a hushed response from somewhere in the distance — hovering, beautiful, but absent. After the last of these, the cello swells threateningly, introducing a spooky nocturnal middle section: things that go bump in the night, the fluttering of invisible winged creatures, a feeling of hastening down mysterious pathways. Melodies surface here and there that are half-recognized, but nothing is quite what it seems in this gloomy demimonde. Finally the viola's song is heard again, a familiar lantern guiding us home. Near the end, the recitative that asked the earlier question resurfaces, in modified form; and this time the motto theme provides its own answer, threefold, luminous, ascending up out of sight.

The finale brings the piece full circle in more senses than one. This movement, like the first, is an elegantly proportioned sonata form, yet it houses enormous energy and turbulence. Whirling and athletic, the movement's dynamism derives not only from its unstable 5/8 meter, but also from the clever trick of starting out in the wrong key — a technique also used by Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Schumann — which creates a feeling of being dropped right into the middle of the action. The motto theme serves here as a transitional character, a guide to help us travel from place to place; and we have another visitor from the first movement, the second theme which was sultry and languorous back then, but which is here transformed into a playful and lightfooted sprite. The movement follows its appointed rounds, now jocular, now gruff, now elegant. The motto theme is everywhere to be heard, and by the time the euphoric coda arrives, the music has become so nimble that this theme is abbreviated to just its first two pitches, musical initials of a kind. The work concludes in an atmosphere of great joy, an invitation from this young composer to join him in celebrating his new discovery.

Note by Misha Amory