

Quartet in F Major for Oboe and Strings, K.370

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg

Died December 5, 1791, Vienna

The 24-year-old Mozart spent the second half of 1780 working on his opera *Idomeneo* and then went to Munich in January of the following year for rehearsals and the première; it was while he was in Munich in early 1781 that he composed this *Oboe Quartet*. Mozart wrote beautifully for woodwinds, and his music for winds—which includes numerous serenades, divertimentos, and other works—was much admired by the young Beethoven. Mozart, however, wrote very little for the solo oboe. There are distinguished concertos for flute, for clarinet, and for bassoon, but the one oboe concerto is a disputed work, better known in Mozart's later arrangement of it for flute.

Oboists, however, can take consolation in the *Oboe Quartet*, a brief but splendid work that gives a first-class oboist the opportunity to shine. Mozart wrote it for Friedrich Ramm, the virtuoso solo oboist of the Electoral Orchestra in Munich. Ramm was admired for the purity of his sound, and he must have been a most distinguished player, for the *Quartet* demands a fluid technique and the ability to make wide melodic skips gracefully, as well as to draw out a cantabile line to great length.

Many have commented that the *Oboe Quartet* seems to be half-concerto and half-chamber music. Mozart gives the oboist ample opportunity for virtuoso display while the strings merely accompany it, but there are also many passages of true ensemble playing where the melodic line moves easily between oboist and strings. The *Allegro* opens with a jaunty theme for oboe that will dominate the movement. The graceful development of this sonata-form movement leads to a quiet close. Strings have the opening idea of the grieving D-minor *Adagio*, with the oboe making its quiet entrance high above them. Mozart gives the oboe long and sustained melodic lines in this movement and—near the close—even offers the oboist the opportunity for a brief cadenza. The finale is a rondo marked *Allegro*. The dancing rondo theme is first heard in the oboe, but this is quickly picked up by the violin. Near the end of the movement is a passage remarkable for Mozart's use of polyrhythms: two rhythms occurring simultaneously. The strings are in 6/8 throughout, but for a thirteen-measure stretch Mozart sets the oboe in 4/4 against them. The passage makes a brilliant effect, with the strings proceeding evenly and the

oboist scurrying to get all the notes in. The very end brings a wonderful touch: the bustle of the rondo gives way to steady eighth-notes, and the oboe rises gracefully to the concluding high F.

Sonata in D Minor for Cello and Piano

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Died March 25, 1918, Paris

Near the end of his life Debussy planned a cycle of six sonatas for various combinations of instruments. He completed only the first three: for cello and piano (1915), flute, viola, and harp (1915) and violin and piano (1917). Projected—but never written—were sonatas for oboe, horn and harpsichord; for trumpet, clarinet, bassoon and piano; and a final sonata that would have included all the instruments from the five earlier sonatas.

This was not a happy period in the composer's life. He was suffering from the cancer that would eventually kill him, and World War I was raging across Europe—Paris was actually being shelled on the day the composer died there. The three sonatas that Debussy completed have never achieved the popularity of his earlier works. Audiences have found them abstract in form, severe in expression and Debussy himself deprecated them with the self-irony that marked his painful final years. Of the *Violin Sonata* he said: “This sonata will be interesting from a documentary viewpoint and as an example of what may be produced by a sick man in time of war.”

But this music has a power all its own, and listeners who put aside their preconceptions about what Debussy should sound like (and about what a sonata should be) will find the music moving and—in its austere way—painfully beautiful. One of the most impressive things about the *Cello Sonata* is its concentration: it lasts less than twelve minutes. Further intensifying this music's severity is Debussy's refusal to develop—or even to use—themes in a traditional sense: this is music not of fully developed themes but of thematic fragments appearing in various forms and shapes. The opening movement, *Prologue–Lent*, is only 51 measures long, but Debussy alters the tempo every few measures: the score is saturated with tempo changes and performance instructions. The piano's opening three-measure phrase recurs throughout, contrasting with the cello's

agitato passages in the center section. At the end, the cello winds gradually into its highest register and concludes hauntingly on the interval of a perfect fifth, played in harmonics.

The second and third movements are performed without pause. The second is marked *Sérénade*, but this is unlike any serenade one has heard before: there is nothing lyric about this song. The cello snaps out grumbling pizzicatos (Debussy considered calling this movement *Pierrot Angry at the Moon*), and when the cello is finally given a bowed passage, it is marked *ironique*. The finale—*Animé*—opens with abrupt pizzicatos. As in the first movement, there are frequent changes of tempo, a continuing refusal to announce or develop themes in traditional senses, sudden changes of mood (the performer is instructed to play the brief lyric section at the movement's center *con morbidezza*, which means “gently”), explosive pizzicatos. Such a description makes the sonata sound fierce, abstract, even mocking. But beneath the surface austerity of this sonata lies music of haunting emotional power.

String Quartet in F Major

MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées

Died December 28, 1937, Paris

Ravel wrote his only string quartet in 1902-3, while still a student at the Paris Conservatory, and the first performance was given by the Heymann Quartet in Paris on March 5, 1904, two days before the composer's twenty-ninth birthday. Ravel's quartet is in many ways similar to the Debussy quartet, written in 1893—there are parallels between the structure, rhythmic shape and mood of the two works—but Ravel dedicated his quartet “To my dear teacher Gabriel Fauré,” who was directing Ravel's work at the Conservatory.

One of the most distinctive features of Ravel's quartet is its cyclic deployment of themes: the first movement's two main themes return in various forms in the other three movements, giving the quartet a tight sense of unity. Some have charged that such repetition precludes sufficient thematic variety, but Ravel subtly modifies the color, harmony and mood of each reappearance of these themes so that from this unity comes enormous variety.

The first movement is marked *Allegro moderato*, but Ravel specifies that it should also be *Très doux*. This movement is built on two distinct theme-groups. The calm first subject is heard immediately in the first violin over a rising accompaniment in the other voices, and this leads—after some spirited extension—to the haunting second theme, announced by the first violin and viola, two octaves apart. The relatively brief development rises to a huge climax—Ravel marks it triple *forte*—before the movement subsides to close with its opening theme, now gracefully elongated, fading gently into silence.

The second movement, *Assez vif—Très rythmé*, is a scherzo in ternary form. The opening is a *tour de force* of purely pizzicato writing that makes the quartet sound like a massive guitar. Some of this movement's rhythmic complexity comes from Ravel's use of multiple meters. The tempo indication is 6/8(3/4), and while the first violin is accented in 3/4 throughout, the other voices are frequently accented in 6/8, with the resulting cross-rhythms giving the music a pleasing vitality. The slow center section is a subtle transformation of the first movement's second theme. At the conclusion of this section comes one of the quartet's most brilliant passages, the bridge back to the opening material. Here the pizzicato resumes quietly, gathers speed and force, and races upward to launch the return of the movement's opening theme. This is wonderful writing for quartet, and the scherzo drives straight to its explosive pizzicato cadence.

The third movement—*Très lent*—is in free form, and perhaps the best way to understand this movement is to approach it as a rhapsody based loosely on themes from the first movement. Beneath these themes Ravel sets a rhythmic cell of three notes that repeats constantly, but it remains an accompaniment figure rather than becoming an active thematic participant. The movement's impression of freedom results in no small part from its frequent changes of both key and meter.

After the serene close of the third movement, the fourth—*Agité*—leaps almost abrasively to life. Agitated it certainly is, an effect that comes from its steadily driving double-stroked passages, and this mood continues across the span of the movement. The basic metric unit here is the rapid 5/8 heard at the beginning, though Ravel changes meter frequently, with excursions into 3/4 and 5/4. Once again, material from the first movement returns, and after several lyric interludes the finale takes on once again the

aggressive mood of its opening and powers its way to the close.

Ravel's quartet generated a mixed reaction at its première in 1904. One of those most critical was the dedicatee, Gabriel Fauré, who was especially bothered by the unorthodox finale, which he thought "stunted, badly balanced, in fact a failure." But when Ravel, troubled by such criticism, turned to Debussy for his estimation, the latter offered the best possible response: "In the name of the gods of Music and for my sake personally, do not touch a note of what you have written."