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**LEIPZIG**

**STRING QUARTET**

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Saturday, March 21, 2015 ~ 2 pm  
Coolidge Auditorium  
Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson Building

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The Library of Congress  
Coolidge Auditorium  
Saturday, March 21, 2015 — 2 pm

THE GERTRUDE CLARKE WHITTALL FOUNDATION  
IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

# LEIPZIG STRING QUARTET

STEFAN ARZBERGER, VIOLIN  
TILMAN BÜNING, VIOLIN  
IVO BAUER, VIOLA  
MATTHIAS MOOSDORF, CELLO



## Program

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

String Quartet no. 2 in D major (1881)

*Allegro moderato*

*Scherzo. Allegro*

*Notturmo. Andante*

*Finale. Andante—Vivace*

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

Three Pieces for String Quartet (1914, rev. 1918)

I. [quarter note = 126] ("Dance")

II. [quarter note = 76] ("Eccentric")

III. [half note = 40] ("Canticle")

INTERMISSION

RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)

*Albumblatt für Cosima Wagner* (1881)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

*Premier quatuor* in G minor, op. 10 (1893)

*Animé et très décidé*

*Assez vif et bien rythmé*

*Andantino doucement expressif*

*Très modéré—Très mouvementé—Très animé—Très vif*



## About the Program

### ALEXANDER BORODIN, String Quartet no. 2 in D major

“...the Russian tone poet and patriot lost in contemplation of his native land...”  
—Gerald E.H. Abraham on Borodin<sup>1</sup>

As a composer, Alexander Borodin is best known for his symphonies, the symphonic poem *In the Steppes of Central Asia* (1880), and the *Polovtsian Dances* from his opera *Prince Igor* (1869-1870 & 1874-1887), which is an orchestral standard. His life story is much more complex than these popular works might indicate. One of the five composers recognized as “The Mighty Handful” (including Cui, Balakirev, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov), Borodin came to hold a revered place in the Russian musical society of the late nineteenth century. Music history gives him adequate—and perhaps too much—credit for his accomplishments as a composer. Borodin’s main fields were medicine and science; however he was able to work as a composer throughout his adult life—likely due to his love of music and not for any real financial gain.

As a child living in St. Petersburg, Borodin studied flute and cello. In his mid-teens he enrolled as a medical student at the Academy of Medicine and Surgery. After his medical studies Borodin went on to serve in a military hospital prior to relocating to Heidelberg, Germany to pursue studies in scientific research. He was later appointed to teaching positions at the Academy of Medicine and the Academy of Forestry in St. Petersburg. His most significant accomplishment, in terms of impacting Russian culture, was cofounding the first medical school for women in St. Petersburg. He also taught there for much of his professional life.<sup>2</sup> Borodin’s research in medicine and chemistry was regarded highly in academic circles and he published many important journal articles. Some of his noted papers include “The Solidification of Aldehydes” and “Researches upon the Fluoride of Benzole,” and his dissertation was titled “On the Analogy of Arsenic Acid with Phosphoric Acid in Chemical and Toxicological Behavior.”<sup>3</sup> Nowadays many composers accept teaching positions in music departments to provide the financial

1 Gerald E.H. Abraham, *Borodin: The Composer & His Music* (New York: AMS Press, 1977), 179.

2 In the 1880s, the Russian government led a movement to halt the medical instruction of women, but their efforts were squashed by a group of community leaders that included Borodin. For more on this matter, see Robert W. Oldani, “Borodin, Aleksandr” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/article/grove/music/40687>>.

3 Alfred Habets, *Borodin and Liszt*, transl. Rosa Newmarch (New York: AMS Press, 1977), 2-19.

stability to support composing on the side, but Borodin's model of being a distinguished scholar in a completely separate field is a significant accomplishment. Though this feat was not unusual in the nineteenth century, mainstream music history could do better to acknowledge this crucial portion of Borodin's working life. To compare this facet of Borodin's life to an American figure, he was the Charles Ives of his day:<sup>4</sup>

As a young man Borodin took up musical studies with Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), who also taught Cui, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov (making "The Mighty Handful" essentially the Balakirev group). These composers sought to capture a Russian musical idiom that was unique and nationalistic, similar to the quest for the American sound in twentieth-century art music. While they tried to create musical identities that were not solely built upon Western European art music traditions, their music was ultimately closely aligned with those stylistic norms. Serge Dianin describes the relationship as "...a synthesis of the technical achievements of European music and the melodic characteristics of Russian and oriental folk music."<sup>5</sup> Borodin in particular was influenced by the works of Beethoven, Schumann and Mendelssohn, canonic German musicians whom he was exposed to heavily during his time as a student in Heidelberg.<sup>6</sup> Though Borodin's catalog of works is small compared to those of the German composers he admired, he does deserve some credit for developing an international reputation as a composer and national cultural icon while gaining stature in a completely disparate profession of medical science. Borodin produced four works for stage (none of which he completed), three symphonies, over a dozen chamber works, piano solos, as well as a variety of songs—many of which were based on nationalistic themes.

Borodin produced two complete string quartets as well as two separate stand-alone movements for string quartet (*Scherzo* in D major—1882; *Serenata alla spagnola* in D minor—1886). String Quartet no. 1 in A major was completed between 1877-1878. The second quartet, in D major, was composed over just a short period during the summer months of 1881. It is possible that the quartet was composed in honor of Borodin's twentieth wedding anniversary; however no firm evidence exists to support this charming hypothesis. This circumstantial claim is based on the fact that the anniversary coincided with the summer of 1881 and Borodin's acknowledgement (in letters) that his wife—Ekaterina Protopopova—was "highly sentimental" and appreciated romantic gestures.<sup>7</sup> Borodin dedicated the final score of the second quartet to his wife, which is further support for the hypothesis that he composed the work in honor of their wedding anniversary. The Imperial Russian Musical Society presented the world premiere of Borodin's String Quartet no. 2 on January 26, 1882 in St. Petersburg. Also on that program were Benjamin Godard's Sonata for violin and piano in G major, op. 9, no. 3 and Beethoven's String Quartet in E minor, op. 59, no. 2 ("Razumovsky").

The first movement of String Quartet no. 2—*Allegro moderato*—is in D major and begins with a gorgeous, tender theme in the cello. The theme is then repeated in the first

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4 American composer Charles Ives (1874-1954) earned his living as an insurance salesman—founding the Ives & Co. insurance agency that later became Ives & Myrick—and composed on the side.

5 Serge Dianin, *Borodin*, transl. Robert Lord (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 329.

6 Habets, 21.

7 Dianin, 246.

violin, which segues directly into what Dianin describes as the "intermediate motif."<sup>8</sup> This transitional thematic figure is an evolution of the character and rhythms of the principal theme. A second theme (that centers on F-sharp major and is marked *cantabile*) is introduced in the first violin above a light *pizzicato* accompaniment that outlines the harmony. Fragments of the second theme are explored in a section that features deliberate accents and shifting rhythms that create a growing inner passion. The cello then takes a stab at the second theme, making it sing in D major this time. Borodin pivots to the development section via A major, which is expressed as a pedal point in the cello for eight bars. The beginning of the development is indicated when the cello moves from the pedal into a low statement of the first theme. At the same time, the harmony has shifted to D minor. Once D minor is clearly established, the second theme is developed in full (and also in fragmented bits) until the harmony naturally transitions back to D major. Here the themes are explored again, with a greater emphasis on very brief moments of canonic imitation. Borodin closes the movement with a short *Animato* ("animated") section that serves as a moment of respite from the contemplative examinations of the thematic figures. Some consider the *Animato* section to be the start of the coda, however the tonic key of D major isn't solidified in a concluding manner until the end of the *Animato*. The ensuing *Tranquillo* ("tranquil") phrase definitely acts as the coda, serving only to reemphasize D major and settle the listener into a state of calm.

Borodin shifts the mood of the quartet significantly in the *Scherzo. Allegro*. The contrast is even more noticeable because he ended the previous movement with a slow, meditative coda. He bucks convention a bit by organizing the *Scherzo* in sonata form, rather than giving it a trio section, which would have been more in line with Classical-era practices. The main theme is essentially a series of running eighth notes that are organized in two different sequences. Borodin has the viola and cello outline the contour and harmony simultaneously. Their role eventually shifts to be more antagonistic, building tension against the thematic figure that is heard in the first violin and mimicked in the second violin. A second contrasting theme is marked *Meno mosso* and is heard in the first violin with the second violin again offering a duet role. Borodin marks this new theme *molto cantabile e dolce*, giving the violins the free range needed to embrace the lush, Romantic sentiment of the theme. While the movement began in F major, the second theme centers on G major, but still passes through D (minor and major), as well as C major. One quaint summation of this movement suggests that Borodin may have been trying to give "...an impression of a light-hearted evening spent in one of the suburban pleasure-gardens of St. Petersburg."<sup>9</sup> Though this correlation is based on dubious secondary evidence, it gets at the bubbly quality of the movement. One device that Borodin uses to create textural contrast in this movement is intentional jumps from *pizzicato* to *arco* playing. In the closing *Vivace* section Borodin offers an extended arpeggiation that passes through all of the voices. By marking this *pizzicato* the effect here is of a feather being whisked up into the air by a light breeze.

The third movement—*Notturmo. Andante*—is a graceful nocturne set in A major. Borodin scholars acknowledge this movement as one of the composer's most impressive chamber works. The theme starts off in the cello, marked *cantabile ed espressivo* ("singing and expressive"). It is contrasted with a constant stream of syncopation in the middle two voices.

8 Dianin, 242.  
9 Ibid., 246.

When the first violin takes over the theme the accompaniment changes; the second violin and cello have a chordal role and the viola has running eighth-notes. Later in the movement the violins engage in a duet that evokes a scene of two lovers outdoors enjoying a clear night sky. Twinkling stars are evoked by a *tremolando* ("trembling") in the viola part. The movement closes with a sense of openness that is created by each voice actively working to open up the sound, beginning with a fragmented statement of the main theme in the low range of the cello and an expansion into a high A major chord that dies away.

Borodin begins the *Finale* with an *Andante* introductory section that is mysterious in character. It is comprised of two phrases (the second of which is marked *pesante*, "heavy") that are repeated and create an unsettled feeling. Suddenly a fast *Vivace* section opens up with *staccato* pulsing in the cello. The upper three voices gradually enter with a thematic figure of churning eighth-notes and the creepy quality of the music gives way to a happy-sounding harmony (that is the arrival at D major, which comes well into the movement and is somewhat unusual since the key of the movement is D). A contrasting sweet, lyrical theme is heard in the first violin and later passed to the viola. The cello is rather static for much of this section compared to the other instruments. Restricted to an outline of the harmony, it only becomes active again after the music quickens again to the pace of the eighth-note thematic figure. The opening *Andante* figure makes another entrance, and is again repeated twice. This time the iterations are split by a *Vivace* statement of the low, menacing figure. The themes are developed again in an extended *Vivace* section. The *Andante* figure comes back for a third go-around, marking another section of repeating the thematic material. Borodin scholarship tends to look down upon this movement as lower quality work than the first three movements, though this judgment is usually offered only by musicologists.



## IGOR STRAVINSKY, *Three Pieces for String Quartet*

Between 1910-1918 Stravinsky produced some of his most significant compositions: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911); *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913); *Les Noces* (1917), and *Histoire du Soldat* (1918). In the year after the famed riotous premiere of *Le Sacre*, Stravinsky completed his opera *The Nightingale*, which premiered on May 26, 1914 in Paris. During the first months of 1914 Europe was a geopolitical powder keg, set to erupt at any moment. It was in this moment that Stravinsky moved with his family to Switzerland. His last child Milena was born in January, and in April conductor Ernest Ansermet, who would become a staunch supporter of Stravinsky's music, first conducted *Le Sacre*. As the world unraveled and the Great War erupted in July, Stravinsky paid a visit to Ukraine to collect and document folk culture.<sup>10</sup> His key composition from 1914 was *Three Pieces for String Quartet*, which Stravinsky composed in the spring and summer. That year he also produced *Pribaoutki* for voice and eight instruments.

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10 Jonathan Cross, ed., "Chronology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), x.

Three Pieces for String Quartet was premiered by the Flonzaley Quartet on May 19, 1915 in Paris, and is dedicated to Ansermet. It is an important work in Stravinsky's evolution as a composer for it connects his "Russian" period,<sup>11</sup> highlighted by works such as *The Firebird*, with his later neoclassical period—identified by the Symphony in C (1938-1940), Mass (1944-1948), and *The Rake's Progress* (1947-1951). In *Intimate Music: A History of the Idea of Chamber Music*, John H. Baron suggests that Stravinsky's Octet (1919-1923) marked the beginning of the composer's neoclassical period.<sup>12</sup> Three Pieces for String Quartet was first published in 1922. Originally, there were no names assigned to each of the pieces, just metronome markings. It was only in a later edition that the three titles, "Dance," "Eccentric," and "Canticle" were assigned.

Given the chronological proximity of Three Pieces to *Le Sacre* it is not surprising that the ballet score exerted a significant influence upon the work for string quartet. The Three Pieces act as a miniature expression of the melodic and rhythmic ideas that Stravinsky developed in *Le Sacre*. Short fragments act as the thematic material and the instruments are treated as layers, each with its own sense of meter. Pieter C. Van Den Toorn describes this practice as "rhythmic-metric differentiation."<sup>13</sup> In the beginning of the first piece there are five separate layers, even though there are only four voices. The viola enters first with an open chord that turns into a sustained D in the fourth bar. At that moment the first violin enters with a thematic fragment consisting of four pitches, G-A-B-C. The second violin has the least input, with a descending four-eighth-note figure. The cello has a repeating *pizzicato* figure (one iteration is played across three bars) that is in a different temporal world than the first violin. Concurrently with its "drone,"<sup>14</sup> the viola plays a line of *pizzicato* quarter notes that correspond with the cello motive. Despite the shifts in meter, these rhythmic patterns keep repeating in their own sense of time. At the end of the short piece, the separate fragments all end separately. The viola shifts from the drone to the same chord from the opening. This last chord sounds awfully like the drone of a bagpipe. To those familiar with *Histoire du Soldat*, this movement (whose title is "Dance") has the same rhythmic feel of the devil's dance.

"Eccentric," the second piece of Stravinsky's Three Pieces, is bound to spark curiosity. Eric Walter White reports that this piece was inspired by Little Tich (1867-1928), a British clown-like vaudeville performer whom Stravinsky saw in performance in London.<sup>15</sup> Essentially "a montage of contrasting motifs,"<sup>16</sup> the second piece sounds like a ballet score for a terribly awkward and obtuse dancer. The music begins with a repeating sliding figure that connects two pitches (that are different) in each instrument's part. Short bursts of movement in different tempos and styles are heard, with no clear sense or coordination binding them together. After a series of these clunky vignettes, the sliding figure returns for two bars, is curtailed, and then reemerges at the conclusion.

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11 Pieter C. Van Den Toorn, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 154.

12 John H. Baron, *Intimate Music: A History of the Idea of Chamber Music* (Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 1998), 391.

13 Van Den Toorn, 147-148.

14 Robin Maconie, *Experiencing Stravinsky: A Listener's Companion* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 73.

15 Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and his Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 196.

16 Maconie, 73.

The third piece focuses on contrasting textures. Stravinsky gives the quartet chordal music that moves at a very slow rhythmic pace. In the first half he alternates between phrases that are bowed plainly with phrases that are marked *Tutti sul tasto* ("all [playing] on the fingerboard"). This has an effect of changing from a round string sound to a thinner, hollow sound. Stravinsky continues to explore the textural contrast in the second half, but the first violin emerges as more of a soloist in these phrases. The viola extends past the other three instruments and closes the work with a sustained *pppp* E in its lower range. The title, "Canticle," is a good summation of its ethereal, mystical sound qualities.

Stravinsky recycled portions of the Three Pieces in several later works. Though this was usually limited to short motivic fragments, traces of the string quartet work can be found in *Symphony in C*, *Symphony of Psalms* and *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. In 1928 Stravinsky completed an orchestration of Three Pieces for String Quartet. The orchestral version, which adds a fourth section, is called Four Studies for Orchestra. There were no major modifications to the music from Three Pieces, aside from one short addition in "Eccentric."

Three Pieces for String Quartet was included on an April 9, 1935 concert at the Library of Congress that was dedicated to the works of Stravinsky, who himself performed on the piano for the concert. Also on the program were the Suite from *Histoire du Soldat* for piano, violin and clarinet (1918), *Concertino* for string quartet (1920), *Duo concertant* for piano and violin (1932), *Divertimento* (1934), and several of Stravinsky's songs. The string quartets were played by the Gordon String Quartet. Several Stravinsky manuscripts are held by the Library of Congress, including *Oedipus Rex* (1927) and *Apollon-Musagète* (1927-1928), which was commissioned by the Library's Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation.



## **RICHARD WAGNER, *Albumblatt für Cosima Wagner***

During the nineteenth century many composers created short works known as *Albumblätter* ("Album Leaves," *Albumblatt* is the singular form). These musical miniatures were typically composed for piano—though many exceptions exist—and can be found in the oeuvres of figures like Wagner, Liszt, Schumann, Busoni, Schubert and Tchaikovsky. They were generally composed as gifts or tributes to loved ones, colleagues or friends, and could be written directly into someone's album (similar to a scrapbook) or inserted on a separate sheet of paper. This afternoon you will hear an *Albumblatt* composed by Richard Wagner in honor of his wife Cosima Wagner (1837-1930).

Richard and Cosima's marriage was one of the great affairs of European society in the nineteenth century. There are many books written about this, but the short of it is recounted here. Cosima was Franz Liszt's daughter and Liszt was a close friend of Wagner (at least for a period of time). A flirtation and romance with Wagner began while Cosima was married to conductor/pianist Hans von Bülow (one of the great Liszt and Wagner champions of the nineteenth century). Von Bülow was aware of the tryst, but managed to

tolerate it for a time in order to save face in his social circles. Eventually this arrangement broke down and Cosima moved in with Wagner. Their relationship went public and scandal ensued, especially in Munich when Prince Ludwig supported the Wagners with his private funds. Soap opera aside, Wagner's love and passion for Cosima informed many of his greatest compositions. *Siegfried Idyll*, WWV 103 (1870), was composed for Cosima's birthday and is a remarkably intimate portrayal of the couple's affection (and also brilliantly summarizes some major themes from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, WWV 86).

*From the artist:*

"Richard Wagner dedicated the *Albumblatt* in A-flat major to his wife Cosima, probably as a gift to her 44th birthday. The piece comprises [of] no more than thirteen bars, and reflects the late tonality of *Parsifal*. In the autograph, a handwritten remark says 'Album leaf, dedicated to mother and inserted into the *Parsifal* score. December 25, 1881.' Originally written for piano, it is very suitable to play for strings."

—Ivo Bauer, *Leipzig String Quartet*<sup>17</sup>

Mirjam Schadendorf describes this *Albumblatt* as "...a kind of musical gesture, playing with the power of harmonic suspension of which Wagner was indisputably the master."<sup>18</sup> In this relatively miniscule work Wagner is able to convey his hallmark compositional style of a slowly evolving harmony, while also incorporating elements of his personal biography (with the dedication and passionate sentiment). This type of miniature work is a perfect access point to become familiar with Wagner's music for those who may not find the prospect of experiencing his operas appealing (because of their length).

Wagner's legacy manifests itself at the Library of Congress in unexpected ways. In addition to holding many first edition publications of Wagner's music, several manuscripts and sketches, and various items of Wagner memorabilia, the Library is the repository for several pink silk fabric swatches that belonged to the composer. The swatches were provided to Wagner by Bertha Goldwag Maretschek, who was a seamstress and designer based in Vienna. Accompanying the dapper fabric examples are a hilarious set of letters between Wagner and Frau Bertha that reveal the composer's penchant for luxury fabric. Susan Clermont of the Library's Music Division has written a colorful account of these collection items for our *In the Muse* blog ([blogs.loc.gov/music](http://blogs.loc.gov/music)). Our Wagner collection items are also featured in the online exhibit, "A Night at the Opera," which may be viewed at [loc.gov/exhibits/night-at-the-opera](http://loc.gov/exhibits/night-at-the-opera)). The Library celebrated Wagner's bicentennial in 2013 with lectures from Alex Ross ("Black Wagner: African-American Wagnerism and the Question of Race") and Alan Walker ("In Defense of Transcription"). Webcasts of those lectures are available at [youtube.com/libraryofcongress](http://youtube.com/libraryofcongress).



Learn more at: [loc.gov/exhibits/night-at-the-opera](http://loc.gov/exhibits/night-at-the-opera)

17 Ivo Bauer to Nicholas Alexander Brown, March 11, 2015 (email).

18 Mirjam Schadendorf, liner notes to *Wagner Puccini Respighi Verdi Humperdinck String Quartets*, Leipziger Streichquartett and Ruth Ziesak, MDG 307 1495-2, CD, 2008.

## CLAUDE DEBUSSY, *Premier quatuor* in G minor

"One has to tell oneself that when it comes to art we are nothing, merely the instrument of some destiny, and we have to allow it to fulfill itself."

—*Claude Debussy to Ernest Chausson*<sup>19</sup>

In the summer of 1893, Claude Debussy made periodic visits to see his friend and colleague Ernest Chausson (1855-1899) at Chausson's rental vacation home in Luzancy, a town northeast of Paris on the Marne river. Chausson fondly thought of Debussy as a surrogate older sibling. The two spent a portion of their visits together playing through the score of Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*, paying close mind to the Russian composer's employment of modal harmony. Debussy took an opportunity to also seek Chausson's input on his near-complete string quartet, which he had been working on anxiously since late 1882.<sup>20</sup> Chausson was not taken by the quartet, and offered some overly constructive criticisms that led to a chain of tension-filled correspondence between the two composers. Debussy went to the extent of criticizing Chausson's compositions, saying he was "heading in the wrong direction!"<sup>21</sup> In July of 1893 Debussy conveyed his consternation about composing this work with this comment: "As for the last movement of the Quartet, I can't get it into the shape I want, and that's the third time of trying. It's a hard slog!"<sup>22</sup> Debussy turned next to Eugène Ysaÿe, the Belgian violinist and conductor, for advice.

Ysaÿe was able to give Debussy some practical suggestions for refining his string quartet from the perspective of being a violinist.<sup>23</sup> In a snub to his friend Chausson, who was the intended dedicatee of the quartet, Debussy inscribed the final version of the quartet to Ysaÿe. This was an appropriate adjustment, given that Ysaÿe's string quartet (founded in 1892) gave the premiere of the quartet in Paris (on December 29, 1893 for the Société Nationale at the Salle Pleyelle) and in Belgium (March 1894). The premiere in Paris was met with mixed responses from the audience and critics alike. Debussy found the first Belgian performance much more successful. He reported back to Chausson that "Ysaÿe played like an angel! The Quartet moved people in a way that it didn't in Paris...and the large audience, which came simply to enjoy itself, was disarmingly keen to understand."<sup>24</sup> The likely reason for the tepid response to the Paris premiere was that the quartet was not formulaic, and would have provided an [unexpectedly] novel listening experience. This is not to say that Debussy used his string quartet as a vehicle for bucking the traditions of French string quartet composition. His interest was in applying his impressionistic sensibilities to a conservative and traditional genre.

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19 Debussy to Ernest Chausson, February 5, 1894, in Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77.

20 Eric Frederick Jensen, *Debussy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 55-56.

21 Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 77.

22 Debussy to Ernest Chausson, July 2, 1893, *Debussy Letters*, eds. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, transl. Roger Nichols (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 47.

23 Marcel Dietschy, *A Portrait Claude Debussy*, transl. William Ashbrook and Margaret G. Cobb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 84.

24 Debussy to Ernest Chausson, March 8, 1894, *Debussy Letters*, 68.

While Debussy composed his string quartet, he was also working on his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893-1895, 1898, 1900-1902), *Images* for solo piano (1894), and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1891-1894). These works belong to Debussy's "middle period" and display his matured talents as a composer.<sup>25</sup> Of these works, the string quartet was particularly influenced by the music of César Franck (1822-1890) and Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). Debussy had spent time in Franck's class for organists at the Paris Conservatoire, which would have introduced him to Franck's lush sound world. According to Roger Nichols, Debussy's exposure to Fauré's Piano Quartet no. 2 in G minor, op. 45 (1886)—which he coincidentally heard performed at the Société Nationale—had a tangible impact on Debussy's quartet, for its use of modal harmonies. Debussy also quoted the Fauré indirectly in the opening bars of his string quartet.<sup>26</sup> When composing the G-minor quartet, Debussy had expected to compose at least one other string quartet in the future. He therefore named the quartet from 1882-1883 *Premier quatuor* (First Quartet) on the holograph manuscript score. Some modern publications of the quartet account for the fact that no further quartets were composed by calling this work the Quartet in G minor.

The first movement has a tempo marking of *Animé et très décidé* ("animated and very purposeful"). Debussy's thematic premise in this opening, and throughout the quartet, is to rely upon short motives that are equally dependent on three things: rhythm, melodic contour, and harmony. He begins with a short, two-bar thematic motive in the first violin. In addition to deliberate articulation markings and a crescendo in the second bar, he establishes the triplet as an important rhythmic device. In this motive the triplet has a function of adding weight to the pitch that follows. Sometimes the triplet is set as sixteenth-notes (as in the first bar of the thematic figure in the first violin), or as eighth-notes. Harmonically, the movement is rooted in a version of G minor that is filled with modal nuance. The extended opening phrases make use of the Phrygian mode on G (a scale of G-A-flat-B-flat-C-D-E-flat-F-G). After this Phrygian material Debussy introduces a new thematic motive in the first violin (marked "expressive and sustained") that soars above a series of swells in the lower three voices. The swells are quite similar to the waves that Debussy paints in the second movement of *La Mer* (1903)—*Jeux de vagues* ("Play of the Waves"). The first motive returns, and is put through a series of intervallic shifts to explore the G Phrygian mode.

Debussy provides a pastiche of the different motives, building into a dramatic climax. This gives way to a development-like section that explores each of the motives. The triplet figure comes back with a vengeance, as there is a host of fragments in all voices that feature repeating eighth-note triplets. The triplets complement the harmonic transformations of the two thematic motives. Debussy changes the character of the triplets, reducing momentarily to a series of undulating fifths in the cello. The viola enters with two statements of the first motive. The different developmental sections and recapitulating sections are marked with shifts in tempo that are gradual. Debussy varies the texture with the accompanimental use of the triplet motive; sometimes there are slurred swells, and other times the triplets are dry and scratchy. The movement closes with a sudden rush through a simplistic declamation of G minor that ends on an open, root position chord.

25 Boyd Pomeroy, "Debussy's tonality: a formal perspective" in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 156.

26 Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 75.

*Assez vif et bien rythmé* ("quite spirited and rhythmic") channels Debussy's appreciation for Iberian culture and sonic flavor. Plucked *pizzicato* chords capture the aura of Spanish classical guitar. A principal thematic motive is heard in the viola, and sounds like the clattering of a spicy set of castanets (likely played by a dashing sensual dancer). Debussy sets this movement in G major, but the harmony is very much dictated by the thematic fragments. The *pizzicato* material jockeys back and forth with the thematic fragment, like two dancers seducing each other in a flamenco routine. Later in the movement, the wave motive returns in a modified form in the middle two voices (marked with crescendos and diminuendos to create the swell effect heard in the first movement). The first violin plays an expressive, lugubrious melody above an E-flat major tonality. Debussy concludes with a quixotic phrase that sounds like the puttering-out of a moped on the streets of a small Spanish village.

In the third movement, *Andantino doucement expressif* ("moderate walking speed, gently expressive"), Debussy again breaks up iterations of a thematic motive with a *pizzicato* figure in the cello (which is muted this time). The initial pulse is marked eighth-note=80 in 6/8 time, a relatively slow tempo. Debussy's shift to a slower rhythmic pace in the *Andantino* gives the musicians the license to interpret the music as intensely Romantic or translucent and impressionistic. The harmony hovers around D-flat major with modal influences. Debussy changes the key to D major and pushes the tempo a hair faster when the viola declares a new thematic figure. In subsequent phrases this is developed in an imitative fashion, with the first violin echoing the second in a higher register. The viola returns a few bars later with a modified statement of the opening thematic motive from the first movement. The time signature is adjusted to 3/8, whereas Debussy set the motive in 4/4 time for the opening movement. The second theme, which was introduced by the viola, returns in a duet between the first violin and the viola, and is subsequently heard in a fragment from the cello. A calm meditation draws this pensive music to rest, with a momentary flash of refined virtuosity in the first violin, which has been largely subservient to the viola (relative to the previous two movements) up to this point in the *Andantino*. Of the four movements in this quartet, this third movement best represents an aural representation of the brush strokes and blurred definition that are traditionally associated with impressionism in the visual arts. The culminating phrases, in particular, convey what Marcel Dietschy called the "sparkling" of the quartet, as Debussy's "first masterpiece" (chronologically).<sup>27</sup>

*Très modéré* begins with a slow expression of carefully crafted motives that are heavily rhythmic and simultaneously whimsical. The movement begins in B minor, but waits until late in the introductory section to really push the tonic. After a sustained chord, Debussy launches the music into a vivacious new thematic statement in the cello—marked *En animant peu à peu* ("Animating little-by-little")—that is heavily based on the rhythmic principles of the introductory section. The viola jumps in, with the violins entering quickly thereafter. After a brief moment with the swell motive from the first movement, Debussy pushes the tempo drastically forward, and adjusts the time signature to 2/2. The harmony arrives back at G minor, through an outline of stepwise motion in the cello. Texturally, the thematic motives grate against each other and intensify. After a gradual deceleration the original tempo returns with a key change to C major. The first violin

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27 Dietschy, 84.

sings a low modified version of the first thematic motive from the first movement. The meter expands in a section marked *Tempo rubato*, which is filled with broad triplet figures that are juxtaposed against duple rhythms and hemiola-like figures. This music broods for several extended phrases until the key shifts to G major and the tempo quickens sharply again. Heavy and romantic motives return and facilitate a harmonic shift to B major for a short moment. Debussy lightens the texture, goes through D major for one phrase, and then settles into G major for the remainder of the movement. With a dramatic flair, he speeds up the already brisk tempo for maximum dramatic effect, allowing the violin one bar to exude any pent up desire to upstage the other three instruments. Debussy, apparently a showman, offers a march-like stinger to cut off the quartet.

*Nicholas Alexander Brown*  
*Music Specialist*  
*Library of Congress, Music Division*



## About the Artists

Founded in 1988, the **Leipzig String Quartet** is widely acclaimed as one of the most exciting string quartets on the international chamber music scene: the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* has described the ensemble as "one of the towering and most versatile quartets of our time" and in 2002 *The New York Times* wrote "...if there is a Leipzig sound, this is it!" Three of its members were first chairs in the famous Leipzig Gewandhausorchester. After studies with Gerhard Bosse, the Amadeus Quartet, Hatto Beyerle, and Walter Levin, the quartet went on to win numerous prizes and awards, such as the 1991 International ARD Munich competition, and the Busch and Siemens prizes.

Today, the Leipzig String Quartet concertizes extensively throughout Europe, Israel, Africa, Central and South America, Australia, Japan and Asia, including appearances at many major festivals. In North America, engagements include appearances at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, at Carnegie Hall's quartet series in Weill Recital Hall, the 92nd St. Y, the Frick Collection, Wolf Trap, the Library of Congress, and chamber music series in Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Vancouver, Ottawa, Montréal and Québec. Often offering its own thematic cycles (Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, the contemporaries), the quartet was also one of the initiators of the 1996 and 1997 Beethoven quartet cycle offered jointly with five other quartets as a sign of European friendship—in more than fifteen European cities. Since 1991, the ensemble has had its own concert series called Pro Quatuor at the Gewandhaus where it offered, among others, a multi-year cycle of the major quartets of the First and Second Viennese Schools. Within that series the quartet played the world premieres of Schnittke's *With Three* for string trio and orchestra, and works by Beat Furrer, Christian Ofenbauer, Wolfgang Rihm, Steffen Schleiermacher, Jörg Widmann, Cristóbal Halffter, among others. As a member of the Leipzig-based Ensemble Avantgarde, the quartet is dedicated to contemporary music and works by modern composers. With this ensemble, the quartet formed the musica nova series at the Gewandhaus in 1990, and was awarded the 1993 Schneider-Schott

prize from the City of Mainz, Germany (Gutenberg's hometown and the birthplace of the Giant Bible of Mainz that is on display in the Jefferson Building). Chamber music partners Juliane Banse, Christiane Oelze, Alfred Brendel, Barbara Buntrock, Menahem Pressler, Michael Sanderling, Andreas Staier, Christian Zacharias, and others, enrich and expand the quartet's already large repertoire consisting of almost 300 works by approximately 100 composers.

The quartet's almost 90 recordings, spanning from Mozart to Cage—including the complete works of Brahms, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and the complete Second Viennese School—have been met with international critical acclaim. They have earned the group such recognition as the Diapason d'Or and Premios-CD-Compact awards, two nominations for the Cannes Classical Award and the 1999, 2000, 2003, 2008 and 2012 ECHO-Klassik awards. Their recording of the complete Schubert quartet literature, a first, is considered by many one of the most important releases for the Schubert bicentennial year of 1997. Of eighteen recordings of the "Trout" quintet, the French magazine *Répertoire* voted their recording with pianist Christian Zacharias, as the best recording of this work. The quartet repeatedly won the Quarterly Prize of the German Record Reviewers, the most recent for their recording of Hindemith's *Minimax* and the quartets of Kurt Weill. Since 1992, the Quartet records exclusively for Dabringhaus & Grimm Music Productions (MDG). Since 2009, the members of the Leipzig String Quartet have been invited to play in the Lucerne Festival Orchestra and teach as guest professors at the Tokyo University of the Art (Geidai).

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