

(Editor's note: Dr. Hospers's original review contained references to specific phonograph recordings. These are no longer available (except perhaps in collectors markets that specialize in vintage vinyl). Digitally remastered versions of these performances are often available today either by downloading MP3 files from the Internet or on audio CDs as those technologies have superseded phonograph records.)

INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL MUSIC

A Guide to Recorded Classical Music in Six Parts

By John Hospers

PART II. CHAMBER MUSIC OF THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms were all first and foremost composers of chamber music. Not only did they compose more chamber music than any other kind, but the majority of their most memorable works, in the opinion of most critics and musicologists, was done in this medium — although in the popular mind all of them are best known for their orchestral works, especially their symphonies.

Ludwig von Beethoven (1770–1827) wrote sixteen string quartets, divided into three distinct periods. The early period is represented by the Opus 18 quartets, which are sometimes difficult to distinguish from late Mozart. They all exhibit a fully achieved mastery of the medium, and Op. 18 No. 5 especially is pure delight. But it is in the great middle-period quartets that we find qualities of feeling emerging which are unique to Beethoven: "classical in form, romantic in content" is one cliché which might be used to describe them. The Quartet No. 7 (Op. 59 No. 1) — with the vigorous thrust of its opening movement, is one of the most cherished quartets in the entire musical literature, and a "must" for every record library. Great in a quite different way is the No. 8 (Op. 59 No. 2); and the lyrical and pensive No. 9 (Op. 59 No. 3) with its famous passage for plucked cello. The No. 10 (Op. 74, "Harp") has a haunting ethereal beauty in every one of its four movements. And then there is the shorter and more acerbic No. 11 (Op. 95), the transitional piece to the late quartets. Each of these works is so distinctively unique, that one is reminded here particularly that if one great work of art were to be lost; not all the other works of art in the world would adequately substitute for it.

Finally we come to the quartets of Beethoven's late period — the last works he ever wrote, his farewell to the world transcending by far in depth and profundity any of his symphonies or concertos. Far from being "the ravings of a deaf man" (he had become totally deaf before creating them), they have a mysterious, other-worldly quality that to some listeners is in merely strange and eerie, but to others is the ultimate in sublimity and exaltation. Following upon the No. 12 (Op. 127), there is the haunting and unfathomable No. 13 (Op. 130), containing some of the most unforgettable movements in music, the mysterious *Kavatina*, which figures prominently in the last chapter of Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point*. The *Grosse Fugue*, which Beethoven composed as the final movement to the Op. 130, should be played as such rather than the one that he later substituted because of the difficulty of playing the *Grosse Fugue*. On some recordings the *Grosse Fugue* is happily included on the same record. The playing of these quartets

involves very special requirements, particularly an attunement to the deeply philosophical character of the late quartets, which not every ensemble is up to doing.

Next, listen to the No. 15 (Op. 132), haunting, bitter, mad, and ethereal by turns. All the above quartets are more immediately intelligible to the listener, at least after the first few times, than the profoundly disturbing No. 14 (Op. 131), which many consider Beethoven's greatest contribution to quartet literature. Finally, listen to the last work Beethoven wrote, the No. 16 (Op. 135), with its stunning slow movement ("sadness too deep for tears").

Of the many recordings available, the one to get on the middle-period quartets is the one by the fine Guarneri Quartet in a four-record set, RCA VCS-6415 (list price \$11.98). But on the profound late quartets, get either the Quartetto Italiano on Philips records or the Yale Quartet on Vanguard: for the Op. 127 I suggest the Yale Quartet on Vanguard 10054; for Op. 130, the Quartetto Italiano on Philips 839795; for Op. 131, the Yale Quartet on Vanguard 10062; for Op. 132, the Yale Quartet on Vanguard 10005; and for Op. 135, the Quartetto Italiano on Philips 839745.

Almost as great as Beethoven's legacy of string quartets is that of his 32 piano sonatas. The most famous one, No. 14 (Moonlight), has at the moment over 30 available recordings. I suggest that you skip this in favor of some of the great sonatas of the middle Period. The marvelous No. 21 (Waldstein) and No. 23 (Appassionata) both receive excellent performances by Howrwitz on Columbia M-21371. But Cliburn also is especially good on these, as on the Op. 81a (Les Adieux) (Victor LSC-4013 and 2931).

It is only after hearing these middle-period sonatas that one is in a position to appreciate the grandeur of the late ones. The immense Hammerklavier sonata (Op. 106, best played by Askenazy On London 6563) far transcends the piano medium. Much more accessible to the listener, and easier on the ear, are the three consecutive last sonatas, Op. 109, 110, and 111. The second of the two movements of the Op. 111 (Sonata No. 32) is in my opinion the finest movement in the whole of piano literature; it moves step by step upward to such a height of serene exaltation that the listener feels himself levitated, remaining on the heights long after the performance has been concluded. Now that the most "spiritual" of the performances (by Artur Schnabel) has been removed by Victor from the catalog, I suggest the performance by Brendel on a cut-price disk (Turnabout 34391), where it is coupled with the Op. 110 sonata.

Beethoven wrote many other masterpieces of chamber music. Especially noteworthy among this large group are the cello and piano sonata, Op. 69; the piano trio, Op. 70 No. 1; the violin-and-piano sonata Op. 96; the Op. 102 cello and piano sonatas; and the sprightly early piano quintet Op. 29. But the finest of them all, and among all of Beethoven's chamber works the one which the listener will probably want to return to the most often, is the magnificent Archduke Trio (Op. 97); it has not only the energy and nobility of Beethoven's middle and late work, but it is very tuneful and easily accessible to the beginning listener. In fact I would invite the reader to begin his exposure to Beethoven's chamber music with this work—just as we did in Haydn's case

with his Op. 76 No. 5. It should certainly be heard several times before attempting the late quartets and sonatas. It is contained in the excellent 3-record chamber music sampler, Columbia 3DS-799.

Of Mendelssohn I would recommend only the Octet (Op. 20). We have already discussed Schubert's chamber music in Part I. Almost all the great music of Schumann and Chopin is for the piano—the solo piano, not the piano concertos or other orchestral works. These have already been discussed by other reviewers in Books for Libertarians, so I shall stop only long enough to recommend the recording of Schumann's piano works, an often undeservedly neglected composer in the same vein as the Irishman John Field (1782-1837); hear his Nocturnes on Nonesuch 71195.

Brahms, too, was primarily a composer of chamber works. He is much less direct, more involuted, than Schubert, yet as anyone who has heard his symphonies already knows, there is a quality of high drama and tension that is unique to Brahms. Many of the chamber works of Brahms (1833-1897) are too "cerebral" (ingenious but not moving) for most tastes. Accordingly, I recommend the following as the most accessible and also among the finest of his entire chamber music output: (1) the marvelous trio for piano, violin, and horn, Op. 40, each of whose four movements contains captivating melodies that one wants to whistle for days after. (A fine performance by the Boston Symphony Chamber Players is on the three-record chamber music sampler, RCA LSC-6184.) (2) The early piano quartet (piano plus three strings), Op. 25, full of lilting rhythms and high good spirits. (3) The famous quintet for piano and string quartet, Op. 115 with the long lingering "October melancholy" of the slow movement, which the clarinet so perfectly conveys. (4) The solo piano music which was Brahms' last work, Op. 118, particularly as played by Rubenstein on RCA LSC-2459 (with the excellent sonata for violin and piano, Op. 108, on the other side). Brahms' Op. 76 piano pieces are memorable too, but it is only in the Op. 118 that he attains some of the ethereal qualities of the late Beethoven quartets and piano sonatas.

There is much, much more to listen to with pleasure and profit in Brahms' piano sonatas, violin-and-piano sonatas, trios for strings and for other instrumental combinations, quartets, quintets. You miss more than 9/10 of Brahms if you know only his orchestral compositions.

Another great composer of chamber music who is apt to be overlooked because he wrote fewer, orchestral compositions (which seems to be what makes composers famous with the general public) is the French master Gabriel Faure (1845-1924). I recommend particularly his tuneful Piano Quartet No 1 in C Minor. If you can get hold of the recording on Capitol SP-8558, where it is coupled with the lovely Schumann Piano Quartet in E flat on the other side, I recommend doing so; otherwise get it on Oiseau S-289, where it is coupled with Faure's fine piano trio. Memorable also are the Elegie for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 24, and the String Quartet Op. 121.

Less of a creative genius than Faure, but more famous because of his symphonic work, is Caesar Franck (1822-1890). His Sonata in A for violin and piano is his most famous chamber work; and it is one of the most resplendent violin-and-piano sonatas in the entire literature. There are seven excellent recordings of it currently available in the Schwann catalog. Almost as memorable is the string quartet in D, available in a three-record set of French quartets (Faure, Franck, Debussy, Ravel,

Roussel) on Vox SVBX-570. And not to be forgotten is his great piano work, the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue (coupled with Debussy piano preludes on Seraphim 5-60103).

The highly original founder of impressionistic music, Erik Satie (1866-1925), was influential far out of proportion to his small output. His work for solo piano is his best, including the famous *Trois Gymnopédies*, which I recommend as performed by Ciccolini on Angel 25442.

The most famous musical impressionist, Claude Debussy (1862-1918), wrote many chamber works, of which again the most memorable is for solo piano, and should be heard as such and not in orchestral transcriptions.

In my opinion the ideal interpreter of Debussy piano music is Walter Gieseking, but being on mono these have been removed from the catalog. Still, get Gieseking doing both sets of *Images* (including the lovely "Reflets dans l'eau") on Angel 35065 if you can. If you can't, get Columbia MS-6567, containing Entremont's performance of both books of *Images*, as well as his "Pour le piano" and the "Children's Corner Suite." The one other great chamber work by Debussy is the justly famous *Quartet*, Op. 10—haunting in its interweaving melodies and radiant subtle harmonies.

Debussy wrote one string quartet, as did Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), and although I think Debussy's is far superior, both are well worth having, and they are almost invariably paired on a single record. At the moment there are nine performances of them available. (The Juilliard Quartet, as always, gives fine performances, but I haven't heard them all.) But amidst the plethora of orchestral and chamber works that Ravel wrote, I recommend most highly of all the real gem, the "Introduction and Allegro for Harp, Flute, Clarinet and String Quartet"—of which again there is an abundance of good performances available in the Schwann catalog.

The greatest genius of Russian music, Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1181), was a first-rate composer of piano music (see CSP CMS-6586), particularly the famous *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Almost everyone knows this in the orchestral transcription by Mussorgsky's disciple Rimsky-Korsakov, of which there are more than 25 recordings currently available. But it was written for piano, where its clarity, precision, and power distinctly emerge. You can compare the piano version (played by Richter) and the orchestral transcription (done by Szell) for yourself on Odyssey Y-32223, which has both of them together.

The Russian musical Renaissance of the nineteenth century, of which Mussorgsky was the founder, and all the others derivative by comparison; produced Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Cui, Glinka, and Gliere, and in the twentieth century Prokofieff, Shostakovich, Khatchadourian, and others, all pretty much in the musical idiom

of Mussorgsky. The two Russians who wrote "non-Russian" music were Peter Tschaikovsky (1840-1893), of whose chamber works I can recommend only one, the *Trio* (Op. 50) in A minor for piano, violin, and cello, and Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), whose works have already been commented on in BFL. Of Prokofieff's chamber work, in a much more modern idiom, I recommend especially the *Piano Sonata No. 7* (Op. 83), and of Shostakovich, the *Quartet No. 5* (the most intimate, and most accessible

to ears accustomed to Romantic music). But chamber music doesn't seem to be the forte of Russian composers, who will be heard of again in these columns under other headings.

Turning from Russia to what is now Czechoslovakia, we have one of the greatest chamber works in the entire repertoire written by the greatest of Czech composers, Fedrich Smetana (1824-1884): the Quartet No. 1 (Op. 10), "From My Life." It is a totally unique work of art; clearly nineteenth century and yet different from anything else written in that century—a powerfully integrated work, of tremendous emotional intensity, from the forced gaiety of the scherzo movement to the desolating sadness of the Adagio; and by the time we get to the resumé of all the earlier themes at the end of the final movement (and of his life?), in which the tension becomes almost unbearable and the loneliness too much to be borne, we have something analogous to, and not a whit inferior to, the great quartets of Beethoven. Once you have heard a few times it will be a lifetime companion. Try it for yourself in the fine recording by the Juilliard Quartet on Columbia NS-7144.

Smetana's fellow Bohemian, Antonin Dvorak (1841 -1904), wrote a considerable number of chamber works, some of which are quite worth hearing repeatedly, particularly the Quartet in E flat (Op. 51) and the "American" quartet (Op. 96), which is usually paired on the same record with the Smetana quartet—as it is in the case of the Smetana recording just recommended. Dvorak's chamber works are highly melodic, he is the Czech Schubert and lyrical, but they are water unto wine compared with the one Work by Smetana.

One would never imagine that Richard Strauss (1864-1949), the composer of famous operas and tone-poems, would go in for chamber music; but one of his youthful works, the Sonata for Violin and Piano (Op. 18), is one of the most exquisite works of chamber music in existence. Nowhere is the contrast and dialog between the mellifluous violin and the more staccato piano better illustrated (except perhaps in the Franck sonata). It is always full of driving energy; sometimes it is pensive and even sad, sometimes happy and even positively ecstatic; but everywhere its melodies; and the marvelous interplay of the two instruments, are irresistible to anyone who has acclimated himself at all to chamber music. (The only recording currently available is a cut-price one on Nonesuch 71205.)

Ernest Bloch (1880 -1959) is a prominent twentieth-century composer, whose works are already (unfortunately) going somewhat out of fashion. He wrote many good chamber works, but there is one special gem among his chamber works that deserves special mention—it is as if all the best in Bloch's work has been encapsulated into it: the Quintet for piano and string quartet (1923), on Concert Disc 252. It is surely one of the finest chamber works of this century; though its harmonies may be too modern for some ears, it is richly textured and full of melodies, and well worth repeated hearings.

Among the moderns; Bela Bartok (1881-1945) and Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) are the most famous composers of chamber music. Each of them is richly inventive, highly ingenious, undeniably imaginative. But their chamber works (not to mention their others) represent, like very sharp cheeses, an acquired taste, and a taste in some cases never acquired even in the face of valiant efforts: they are simply too "astringent". But if

you want to try a bit of Stravinsky's chamber work, get the Octet for Wind Instruments on Columbia M-30579 (which has other interesting Stravinsky chamber works on the other side). And as for Bartok, his six string quartets (best performances are by the Juilliard Quartet on Col. D3S-717) have been compared with Beethoven's; I don't think they deserve this appellation, but if you want to delve into music that becomes progressively more atonal (or tonal in strange ways), but at the same time increasingly profound, stirring strange and untapped depths within the soul, listen to his string quartets in order, from No. 1 to No. 6: you will be either bored, bothered, bewildered, or moved to the depths. I can't claim myself to have risen to this last stage in the present case, but the strata of feeling Bartok taps are sufficiently analogous to those of the late Beethoven quartets to keep me at it--and, every once in a while, in the quiet of the wee hours of the morning, deeply moved without knowing exactly why.

RCA victor LSC-6184, a three-record set, contains the Brahms Op. 40 horn trio and some interesting modern chamber works by Villa-Lobos, Colgrass, and Haieff.

Columbia D32-799, a three-record set, contains the Beethoven Archduke trio (Op. 97), the Mendelssohn Trio No. 1, the Brahms OP. 8 String trio, and the great Schubert Op. 99 trio. Both were on last month's list.

Columbia MS-7144: Juilliard Quartet doing the Smetana Quartet Op. 10 (From My Life) and the Dvorak Quartet Op. 96 (American).

RCA Victor VCS-6415 (4-record set): Guarneri Quartet doing Beethoven's Quartets 7-11.

Vanguard 10101-4(4 -record set): Yale Quartet doing Beethoven's Quartets 12-16.