

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): String Quartet No. 21, K. 575

In 1789, the year this quartet was composed, the Classical period in Germany was slowly coming to an end. The era of humanist philosophy and poetry, the early advances of the scientific revolution, and a love of restraint, elegance and symmetry in all forms of art was beginning to give way to the political turmoil and emotional intensity of the Romantics. Watching all of this as if from afar was the then King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II. A weak statesman with a decadent character, he was nonetheless well-liked by the common man and was a committed patron of the arts.

He commissioned a cycle of six quartets from Mozart, now called the “Prussian Quartets,” of which this is the first. The King himself was a fine cellist, and Mozart made sure to write a particularly important and beautiful cello part for him to play. And so it happened that the King of Prussia was on stage performing in the premiere of this quartet, an exemplar of classicism and the old style, while the first tremors of the French Revolution were being felt half a continent away...

The Quartet is in four movements:

1. *Allegretto (Cheerful)*
2. *Andante (Strolling)*
3. *Menuetto (Little Dance)*
4. *Allegretto*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937): String Quartet in F major

Paris in 1903 was a place very much like our own modern world, with the notable difference that modernity was still new and exciting. The middle class and leisure time were stronger than they had ever been. The new structure of society led to both a feeling of excitement and bustle, and a new sort of urban alienation. The French response, unsurprisingly, was an art movement: in music as in visual art, Impressionism concerned itself with the fleeting moment, the play of light, the “flavor” of a moment rather than a precise depiction. Harmonies became more experimental and evocative, and instrumental technique became more adventurous in search of new colors and soundscapes.

The young Ravel, just 28 when he composed this quartet, took plenty of inspiration from the other Impressionists such as Claude Debussy, but also restrained himself to staying within more Classical forms. The harmonies and textures are all modern (for 1903, at least) but the structure is traditional, based on the development of themes in sonata form – listen for themes and melodies to return or be passed among the four voices.

The Quartet is in four movements:

1. *Allegro moderato - très doux (Restrained cheer - very sweet)*
2. *Assez vif - très rythmé (Quite lively - very rhythmic)*
3. *Très lent (Very slow)*
4. *Vif et agité (Lively and agitated)*

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