

A Tale of Youth and of Three Cities: Vienna; Bonn; Hamburg

Gustav Mahler (1860 – 1911): Piano Quartet in A minor

The Piano Quartet in A minor (also referred to as the Piano Quartet Movement in A minor) is an early work of Gustav Mahler, the intended first movement of a piano quartet that was apparently never completed. It is the only surviving piece of chamber music without voice that he composed.

Mahler began work on the Piano Quartet towards the end of his first year at the Vienna Conservatory, when he was around 15 or 16 years of age, dating the work from 1875. The piece had its first performance on July 10, 1876 at the Conservatory with Mahler at the piano, but it is unclear from surviving documentation whether the quartet was complete at this time. In several letters, Mahler mentions a quartet or quintet, but there is no clear reference to this piano quartet. Following this performance the work was performed at the home of Dr. Theodor Billroth, a close friend of Brahms. The final known performance of the Quartet in the 19th century was at Iglau (now Jihlava, Mahler's home town, in what is now the Czech Republic), on September 12, 1876, with Mahler again at the piano; it was performed along with a violin sonata by Mahler that has not survived.

Following the rediscovery of the manuscript by Mahler's widow Alma Mahler in the 1960s, the work was premiered in the United States on January 12, 1964, in New York City by Peter Serkin and the Galimir Quartet. Four years later it was performed in the United Kingdom on June 1, 1968 at the Purcell Room, London, by the Nemet Ensemble. The Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra (RPhO) commissioned an orchestration of the quartet from the Dutch pianist and composer Marlijn Helder. It was premiered in May 2013 by the RPhO. The Asian premiere was held in August 2013 with the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra. As far as we know, this weekend's performances will be the public premieres of the work in Thailand in its original format.

The single movement work, which is marked *Nicht zu schnell* (not too fast), is scored for a standard piano quartet, (piano, violin, viola, and cello) and typically takes about 13 minutes to perform. It opens quietly on the piano as the other instruments begin to join in – the gentle theme seems to be one of yearning with great persistence, a feature that was later to pervade Mahler's songs and symphonies. The work speeds up in places and is characterized by repeated phrases from the opening statement, another technique employed by Mahler in later life. A further characteristic which is dominant in all of Mahler's subsequent works is the use of gradual climaxes among the quieter passages. A long coda with cadences for all instruments brings the work to a subdued ending.

The Quartet forms part of the soundtrack in Martin Scorsese's 2010 film *Shutter Island* and is the subject of a short discussion between some of the movie's characters.

Beethoven (1770 – 1827): Duo No 1 in C major, WoO27/1

Though there is some doubt as to their authenticity, it is believed that the Three Duos, WoO27, originally composed for clarinet and bassoon come from Beethoven's years in Bonn, quite possibly as late as 1792, when the composer was just 22, the year of his departure to Vienna. The choice of instruments, the clarinet and bassoon versus perhaps the more common violin and cello, likely comes as a result from the prominent performers on these instruments that were at the electoral court in Bonn. The works were published in Paris sometime between 1810 and 1815, though it seems that their publication may have possibly gone unnoticed to the composer, or at the very least passed without comment from him.

Cast in the three movements, this first duo, in C major, opens with an energetic *Allegro comodo*, in uncomplicated sonata form; the middle movement, a *Larghetto sostenuto*, shifts to the key of C minor. A lyrical movement, it serves mainly as an introduction to the finale, which is an exuberant *rondo* in the tonic of C major. This duo has also been transcribed for multiple pairs of instruments such as violin and cello we hear tonight.

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897): Piano Quartet in G minor, Op. 25

This wonderful piece, began in 1856 when Brahms was 23, was completed in 1861 just before Brahms took up permanent residence in Vienna. Clara Schumann owned this masterpiece, as she was the pianist for the first performance in 1861 in Hamburg. The date on which the composition began was shortly after the death of Brahms's great friend and fellow composer, Robert Schumann who died in July that year, and of course husband of Clara the pianist at its first performance. It was played in Vienna in 1862, with Brahms himself at the piano. Scored for piano, violin, viola and cello, the quartet is in four movements:

1. This first movement, *allegro*, a sonata form movement in G minor, begins immediately with the first theme, a forceful statement for the piano alone. The other instruments soon join in to develop this initial theme and cadence. There are five other themes in the exposition. The development section then goes through many of the themes previously heard and extends them in new ways, changing key frequently. Very atypically, the recapitulation begins not with the first theme, but with the second theme in major mode. The recapitulation ends with a coda that is relatively brief but intense, concluding with an ascending passage built through imitation of the opening motif, suddenly crashing down in a descending 'fortissimo' phrase. The piece ends on a desolate and incomplete-sounding minor chord.
2. The second movement, *allegro*, is an Intermezzo and Trio in C minor. It is akin to a scherzo, the more traditional second or third movement of a piano quartet. The consistently repeated notes create an effect of perpetual motion, even agitation, although the themes are quite lyrical. The intermezzo flirts between major and minor and ends in C major. The trio is quicker and less agitated than the intermezzo and contains two main themes. The intermezzo is repeated, followed by a brief coda that restates the trio theme.
3. The *andante* slow movement is in E-flat major with a very lyrical first subject. A second idea begins the transition to the second main section in C major and starts with fortissimo chords in dotted rhythm for the piano solo. A long coda helps to stabilize the often dissonant and unstable harmonies of the movement. Like the previous movements, this movement develops a plethora of themes. The final cadence of this movement is a technique used to conclude many of Brahms's slow movements, such as that from the Piano Quintet. The voicing of the last chord is ominous: the highest note of the strings is the violin's open G string, while the piano plays a tonic chord two octaves higher.
4. This fast rondo (marked '*presto*') is in G minor in duple time. The subtitle "Rondo alla zingarese" has given it the nickname "Gypsy Rondo." Like many of Brahms's finales, this uses as its principle theme a very fast, rhythmic, tonal, simple idea, this one covering an irregular number of measures. The movement is notable for its difficulty, rhythmic and metrical complexity, and harmonic exploration and has remained one of the most difficult movements to perform in all of Brahms's chamber music.