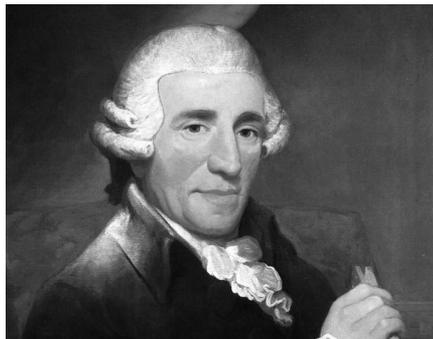


PROGRAM NOTES



String Quartet in D Minor, Op. 76, No. 2 “Fifths”

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN
*b. March 31, 1732, Rohrau
d. May 31, 1809, Vienna*

Performance Time

20 minutes

Premiere

Circa 1799

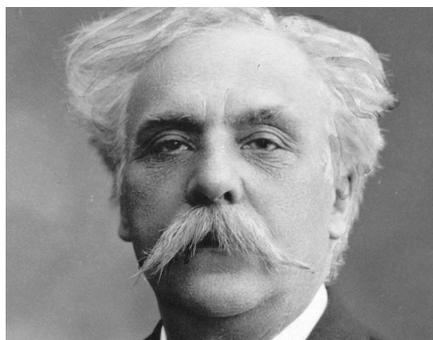
Haydn composed the six quartets of his Opus 76 shortly after returning from his second trip to London, completing them in the summer of 1797 when he was 65. This was a moment of transition for the aging composer. He was moving away from instrumental music: all his symphonies were behind him, and he would write only a few more string quartets. Even as he composed his Opus 76, he was beginning work on the oratorio *The Creation*, and he would devote the remainder of his creative energies almost exclusively to vocal music.

If Haydn was nearing the end of his purely instrumental music (the *Quartet in D Minor* is the 75th of his 83 quartets), he was also writing at a very rarefied level, and this quartet is particularly impressive. It is sometimes nicknamed the “Fifths” because the first movement is constructed so rigorously around that interval. But Haydn is just as rigorous in his handling of tonality, and much of the tension in this quartet rises from his stark opposition of D major and D minor.

The opening *Allegro* is an unusually stern movement. The first violin’s first four notes twice outline the interval of the falling fifth, and all the movement’s thematic material derives from that drop of a fifth. Haydn writes with great economy and concentration here — and with great rhythmic vitality: the movement takes much of its vigor from its constant syncopation. By contrast, the second movement brings relaxation and sunlight. The dark D minor of the opening movement gives way to D major here, and this movement belongs largely to the first violin, which soars easily over the other voices.

The third movement brings back the rigor of the first. Haydn returns to D minor and writes a minuet in strict canon: the violins (an octave apart) are followed at a one-measure interval by the viola and cello (also an octave apart). This minuet, which plows implacably forward, has sometimes been nicknamed the “Witches’ Minuet” because of its so-called “weird” sound. The trio section begins in D minor but quickly relaxes into D major as the first violin dances high above the other voices.

Haydn returns to D minor for the finale. The main theme is syncopated in a way that has suggested folk origins to some scholars, but the theme was apparently Haydn's own. Some have heard the braying of a donkey in the first violin's swooping descents in the second theme. The movement moves toward what seems a close in D minor, but in the closing moments Haydn eases gracefully into D major: the first violin makes this change *pianissimo*, gradually gathers energy, and then rushes the quartet to its radiant D-major conclusion.



String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 121

GABRIEL FAURÉ

b. May 12, 1845, Pamiers, France

d. November 4, 1924, Paris

Performance Time

24 minutes

Premiere

June 12, 1925 in Paris, France

In the final years of his long life, Fauré turned to chamber music, producing six major works between 1916 and 1924. These were extremely difficult years for the composer, for they brought not only the First World War but also the serious decline of his health. He had begun to suffer from deafness about twenty years earlier, and the gradual decay of his hearing was accompanied by a neural distortion that caused him to hear notes at incorrect pitches. Fauré also suffered from difficulty breathing (perhaps the result of his heavy smoking), and for extended periods he lived as a virtual recluse, never leaving his room in Paris.

But as soon as the war ended, Fauré wished to get out of Paris during the summer, and from 1919 onward he spent his summers in Annecy-le-Vieux, near the border of Switzerland (and close to the site of the 1992 Winter Olympics). There, surrounded by the beauty of the French Alps, Fauré relaxed and composed. Over the course of his career he had composed sonatas for violin and for cello, two piano quartets, two piano quintets, and a piano trio. In the summer of 1923 — at the age of 78 — Fauré set to work on his only chamber work that did not include piano, the *String Quartet in E Minor*. Like Schumann before him, Fauré was intimidated by the challenge of writing in a form made famous by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and so many others. He got the first movement done in September 1923, and after the winter — which he spent largely bed-ridden in Paris — Fauré composed the second movement in June. He returned to Annecy-le-Vieux the following summer and had the finale done on September 11, 1924. Almost immediately, however, his health collapsed. Fauré made his will, was taken back to Paris, and died two months later.

The *String Quartet in E Minor* was Fauré's final work, but at the time of his death the composer himself was not sure that the quartet was complete. He never heard it performed, and he was considering adding one more movement — a scherzo — between the first and second movements. Death took him before he could make that decision, and the quartet — published posthumously in 1925 — has come down to us in a three-movement form.

Fauré drew the two themes of the opening *Allegro moderato* from a violin concerto he had sketched in 1878 and then abandoned. Now these 45-year-old themes are treated with the chromatic freedom that marks Fauré's late music. Viola and first violin share the first idea, while first violin has the flowing second melody. This movement, in sonata form, concentrates on the first theme before concluding quietly in E major. Longest of the three movements, the *Andante* is based on four separate ideas, all full of chromatic tension. The concluding *Allegro*, in rondo form, drives to an emphatic close on great E-major chords.

The first performance of Fauré's only string quartet took place on June 12, 1925, seven months after his death. The first violinist on that occasion was the great French violinist Jacques Thibaud.



**String Quartet in E-flat Major,
Op. 74 “Harp”**

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

b. December 16, 1770, Bonn

d. March 26, 1827, Vienna

Performance Time

30 minutes

Premiere

Fall 1809

Beethoven's middle-period quartets proved difficult for audiences from the very beginning. The exception is the lovely *Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 74*, long nicknamed the “Harp.” In contrast to the other middle quartets, this one is full of graceful music executed with consummate technical skill. No battles are fought and won here — instead one savors the calm pleasures of what is perhaps Beethoven's most relaxed string quartet.

Yet this music was composed during a difficult time for Beethoven, the year 1809. That year, French armies under Napoleon bombarded and occupied Vienna, forcing most of the city's nobility and many of Beethoven's friends to flee (the composer himself hid in his brother's basement during the bombardment with a pillow held

tightly around his head). And it was during the French occupation that Beethoven's old teacher Haydn died. Anguished, Beethoven wrote to his publishers: "We are enjoying a little peace after violent destruction, after suffering every hardship that one could conceivably endure. I worked for a few weeks in success, but it seemed to me more for death than for immortality." Beethoven's music from 1809, however, shows little trace of his anxieties: from early in that year came the noble "Emperor" Concerto, and after completing the quartet (probably in September 1809) Beethoven set to work on the incidental music to Goethe's *Egmont*.

The first movement of the quartet opens with a slow introduction whose chromaticism creates an uncertain tonality; from this tonal blur, the main theme of the *Allegro* establishes the unequivocal key of E-flat major. Very quickly come the pizzicatos that have earned this quartet the (not particularly appropriate) nickname "Harp." The development is quite active, and the recapitulation features a near-virtuoso first violin part that goes swirling across all four strings before the movement's vigorous close. The *Adagio ma non troppo* can be described simply — this is lovely music. It is built on one of Beethoven's most attractive lyric ideas, which develops across three repetitions, each elaborated differently. Throughout, Beethoven constantly reminds all four performers: *cantabile* and *espressivo*.

By contrast, the *Presto* bristles with energy. It bears a strong resemblance to the scherzo movement of the *Fifth Symphony*, composed two years earlier: both are in C minor, both are built on the same characteristic rhythm, and both feature fugal writing in the trio section. Yet where the third movement of the symphony builds through a huge crescendo to a triumphant finale, Beethoven winds this movement in the quartet down very carefully, and the finale that follows seems intentionally anti-climactic. It is a variation movement consisting of an almost innocent theme, six variations, and a coda; the odd-numbered variations tend to be vigorous and fast, the even-numbered lyric and gentle. The sixth variation gives way to a coda that extends the theme and leads to a wonderful — and very appropriate — conclusion: a great rush of sixteenth-notes powers the coda *fortissimo* to the very close where instead of hammering out a cadence, Beethoven concludes with two tiny and gentle chords. It is a conclusion brilliant in its understatement.

– Program notes by Eric Bromberger