

Martinu, Chausson – Piano Quartet (1970)

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Martinu - Piano Quartet No.1 A1 – *Poco Allegro* A2 – *Adagio* A3 – *Allegretto Poco Moderato*
Chausson - Piano Quartet In A Major Op. 30 B1 – *Animé* B2 – *Très Calme* B3 – *Simple Et San Hâte* B4 – *Animé*
Richards Piano Quartet: Nona Liddell – violin Jean Stewart – viola Bernard Richards – cello
Bernard Roberts – piano

Martinu's First Piano Quartet was completed in the same year as his six symphonies-- the works which taken together form his central achievement. It is a mature composition, written shortly after his settlement in the United States and nearly two decades after his departure from his native Czechoslovakia where he had studied with Joseph Suk, one of Dvorak's students. Blacklisted by the Nazis, Martinu moved to Jamaica, New York in 1941.

In his notes for the Garth Newell Piano Quartet's recording of the Quartet, Stephen Soderberg of the Music Division of the Library of Congress comments on Martinu's compositional techniques. "The entire quartet," he says, "is full of common early twentieth-century harmonic techniques--parallel fourths, chords created from stacking thirds and fourths and so on--nothing that, taken alone, is difficult for our ears today." One listening to the work is not enough, he warns, because of the intricate interrelationships among musical ideas in the movements. The "work as a whole only makes sense in the last movement" because of the tendency of twentieth century composers to use prefiguration, a process in which seemingly irrelevant materials introduced earlier in a work only become relevant near the end. Four or five listenings to the last movement followed by listening to the entire quartet, Soderberg says, enable the listener to connect musical events that are often separated by great distances temporally. Soderberg offers insight into how the quartet is constructed musically. The first movement quickly introduces a series of themes, the first a terse three-note motive passed between violin and viola. Although it recurs frequently throughout the movement, this urgent declamatory motive quickly gives way to a more subdued "sinuous" idea; shared between the strings in its first appearance, this theme will form the basis of the last movement. No sooner is this second

theme established than the cello introduces yet another idea, this one showing traces of Moravian folksong, an influence from Martinu's childhood. Later, the subdued second theme returns and builds to a climax in which the piano plays the opening motive in heavy chords. A reprise of this motive in the strings concludes the movement.

Throughout the first movement, piano and strings share equally in the presentation of ideas; in contrast, the Adagio begins with an extended passionate trio for strings alone that concludes with a brief cello cadenza. The piano appears in a mysterious middle section playing "rapid roulade-like surfaces over muted strings" (Soderberg), but it soon falls silent, allowing the strings to complete their trio.

In a reverse of the instrumentation of the Adagio, the Allegretto opens softly with the piano solo in a theme that Soderberg says, creates a "gentle rocking feeling--not the sleep-inducing regular rocking of a cradle, but the mesmerizing, irregular rocking of a rowboat tied to a pier." If we extend the rocking boat analogy, we can hear the entire movement as "what happens to the boat as the water becomes agitated, calm, placid, churning."

Martinu's tempo markings for this movement reveal its five-part structure to the listener. After the piano introduces the rocking theme (*poco allegro*), the four instruments develop it with increasingly luxuriant harmony. The tempo quickens (*allegro*) as upward-rushing scales are passed between the instruments. At the point of the *allegro*'s main climax the subdued second theme from the first movement of the quartet appears *fortissimo*. A brief *andante* follows with trills in the piano and arpeggios in the strings. As the *andante* fades, the rocking theme returns in the piano and strings (*allegretto*), building to a climax that concludes the work (*allegro*). ---
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Chausson's music, at all stages, could be called psychological in its vaulting gamut of expression -- from blackest melancholy to mercurially manic high spirits -- traversed with startling suddenness by an unexpected modulation, a subtle nuance, a brilliant coup de théâtre. Indeed, the latter occur more often in his orchestral and chamber works than in his grand opera, *Le roi Arthus*, lending them a constant effect of shimmer between articulate darkness and blithe radiance. In the first decade of his maturity, in such things as the *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* (1882-1890) and the *Symphony* (1889-1890), this bipolar oscillation is tinged with a certain morbidity checked only by the application of formal procedures inspired by Franck. But from the

mid-1890s, as Chausson entered his forties, a new prehension -- a hectically fraught serenity (or hyper-aesthetic twist on the "serene anxiety" of his mentor, César Franck) -- comes into play. Form and content, too, dovetail more deftly. The handful of works from this period are no less intense, impassioned, or volatile, but suffused with a new assurance that calls to mind Yeats' lines in his 1939 poem "Lapis Lazuli," reminding all that great actors "Do not break up their lines to weep./They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay; /Gaiety transfiguring all that dread." In this sense, the works of Chausson's last broken-off period have about them a tragic gaiety. One thinks of the *Serres chaudes* cycle of *mélodies*, the great *Poème* for violin and orchestra, the *Quelques danses* for piano, and -- pre-eminently -- of the sublime Piano Quartet. In marked contrast to the slow, agonizing gestation of many of his other works, the Piano Quartet was composed in a mere five weeks between July and September 1897. The cascading pentatonic theme that opens the work provides most of the first movement's *Animé* melodic material, with its peremptory head phrase and nether phrases lyrically shaped for contrast. Although the movement is written in orthodox sonata-allegro form, listeners are reminded, in a fine turn on Franck's "cyclic" practice, that it all originates from one long-breathed melody. Rapidly and with constant modulations, this unity in multiplicity unfurls its transformative fabric in coruscating brilliance. Marked *Très calme*, the second movement offers an orison-like lied, passionately worked, yielding to an imploring, insistently contrasting middle section before the lied returns with an air of wan melancholy. The brief third movement, woven around a folk-like tune, passes -- *Simple et sans hâte* -- with sad, balletic grace. A tempestuous *Animé* burst announces the final, long, balancing movement largely given to languishing, dreamlike evocations -- albeit dramatically rippled -- of themes from the preceding movements to conclude with a recall of the lied and an oracular reminiscence of the work's opening cascading melody. While the Concert for piano, violin, and string quartet (1892), among Chausson's chamber works, has achieved something like popularity, critics and connoisseurs rate the seldom-heard Piano Quartet a far finer work, and not merely because of its unintentionally valedictory geste. --- Adrian Corleonis, Rovi

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