

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937),  
String Quartet in F Major (1903)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) composed his only string quartet in 1902-03 while still a student of Gabriel Fauré at the Paris Conservatoire. More or less whole-heartedly adopting classical formal paradigms in this pivotal work, the string quartet, in Ravel's own words, "represents a conception of musical construction, imperfectly realized no doubt, but set out much more precisely than in my earlier compositions."

A central aspect of the quartet lies in its cyclic treatment of themes: the two contrasting themes presented in the first movement are altered, transformed and developed in myriad ways in the other three movements, fusing the work into a highly integrated whole. This cyclic treatment, as well as the use of modal melodic and harmonic materials, links Ravel's quartet closely with Debussy's String Quartet in G minor, another seminal work of musical "impressionism", written just ten years earlier.

The beguilingly beautiful first movement of Ravel's quartet is set in a conventional sonata allegro form, which serves to highlight the directness of the lyrical themes. Treatment of the first theme is extensive in the opening, even helping to form the transition to the sublimely languorous second theme. The only real point of ambiguity in the movement is the end of the exposition, marked as it is by contrapuntal combinations of the two central themes, suggesting that the development has already begun, an impression confirmed shortly by the elaborate figuration and thematic developments that follow. The rather brief development section is followed by a full recapitulation with no real surprises. In a transparent ternary form, the second movement juxtaposes scherzo-like material, featuring pizzicato playing and set in fairly regular 4 and 8 bar phrases (the whole of which is repeated in a new harmonic context) against a slow, contemplative middle section whose material is derived from the first movement themes. Again, at the end of middle section Ravel combines the movement's themes contrapuntally, helping to reintroduce the scherzo material to close the movement, this time without redundancy. The third movement is in the main a tranquil, amoroso reflection on the themes of the first movement. The most unusual passage, offering the movement's principal element of contrast, is a more insistent cello solo accompanied by magical, coloristic writing in the upper strings. The finale's driving energy is a much-needed foil to the lightness and serenity of the preceding movements, and it has the most complex form of the four. The scheme is one of alternation among three ideas, the opening agitated material in 5/8 meter, and two ideas drawn from the first movement's two themes. Designating these three ideas as A, B and C, the movement scans as A-B-C-A-B-C-B-C-A. The use of the A material (the agitated 5/8 theme) at the beginning, middle and end relates the movement to many rondo forms found in classical and romantic sonatas, and additionally rounds off the movement to end as it began.

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