



Meridian



Johannes Brahms

Piano Quartet
G minor, op.25

Gabriel Fauré

Piano Quartet
C minor, op.15

The Primrose
Piano Quartet

Recorded using an historic
Blüthner piano chosen by Brahms

Gabriel Fauré: Piano Quartet C minor, op.15

On hearing it for the first time, almost everyone is bowled over by the emotional exuberance and sheer brilliance of Fauré's first Piano Quartet. It is one of those pieces that music lovers can easily miss, for aside from the Requiem, one or two incidental pieces such as *Après un Rêve*, and the *Dolly Suite*, Fauré's music is not well known or often performed. Yet he is considered by many to be the greatest French song writer of all time, and wrote some of the finest chamber music works of the late 19th century, including this Quartet. It was composed between 1876 and 1879, when Fauré was in his early thirties.

Fauré occupies a unique place in French music. As a student he avoided the notorious and stifling conservatism of the Paris Conservatoire, studying with Saint Saëns at the Ecole Niedermeyer, where he received an unusually broad training, including study of Renaissance and Baroque music and the great German composers. (Copland described Fauré as the French Brahms). He was an unconventional young man, who was once sacked from his position as a church organist in Rennes for appearing at a service in evening dress, having come straight from an all-night ball. Saint-Saëns referred to him as a "first class organist when he wanted to be", and indeed he earned his bread and butter as a church organist for much of his life. In fact, Fauré preferred the piano. Despite the extremely demanding piano writing in his chamber music, he himself was no virtuoso and once wrote of virtuoso pianists: "the greater they are, the worse they play me", which provides some insight into both his own character and that of his music. Whatever influences one might hear in it, his music has an unmistakable identity and aesthetic of its own. Indeed Fauré was highly unusual among composers of the time in being a lover of Wagner's music without it particularly affecting his own style of composition. One can certainly hear anticipations of Debussy and Ravel and the Impressionists' love of unresolved

dissonances (Fauré was Ravel's composition teacher). Stephen Johnson writes of Fauré's "intensity of feeling balanced by elegance and formal lucidity". Fauré himself wrote that "to express what is within you with sincerity, in the clearest, most perfect manner, would seem to me the ultimate goal of art". Mozart might have said the same. The authors of the *Record Guide* in 1955 wrote perceptively that Fauré "learnt restraint and beauty of surface from Mozart, tonal freedom and long melodic lines from Chopin, and from Schumann (his favourite pianist-composer), the sudden felicities, in which his development sections abound, and those codas in which whole movements are briefly but magically illuminated." There are several such transcendent moments in the C minor Quartet, not least at the end of the last movement.

One of the outstanding qualities of Fauré's writing for the piano quartet medium is his inventiveness with textures and colours. The music unfolds through a kind of continuous melodic development, in the course of which the four instruments engage and combine with each other contrapuntally and conversationally in a never-endingly fascinating way. However exciting, Fauré's music is lyrical rather than dramatic, the sentiments in the music subtly shifting through modulation and transformation within the almost continuous flow of notes, rather than through extremes of contrast. In the first movement, the music surges forward from the first note, and is never far from ecstasy.

The Scherzo is a brilliant piece of high-spirited, scampering, light hearted fun, almost childish in its very regular and obvious phrase-lengths yet highly sophisticated at the same time, and somehow quintessentially French. The suave Trio section features the strings, wearing mutes, in seductive Parisian Café-mode, swooping suggestively to the high points in the melody.



The slow movement is elegiac, tragic, and never self-indulgent. The music moves magically from its opening sombreness to a passage dreaming of happier times. This movement must surely reflect the emotionally traumatic time Fauré was experiencing during the period of its composition. His fiancé, Marianne Viardot, with whom he was passionately in love, had recently broken off their engagement after a five-year romance. The restraint in the music, which is nonetheless deeply affecting, is entirely characteristic of Fauré.

The last movement was completely rewritten in 1883, and achieves the rare feat of being at least as good, and even more exciting, than the rest of the work. The experience of being swept along on a torrent of exuberant notes is utterly exhilarating, and the work reaches an ecstatic conclusion.

Robin Ireland

Johannes Brahms, Piano Quartet G minor, op.25

Conceived as early as 1857, drafted in Detmold in 1859 and finished in Hamburg in 1861, this iconic work includes both Brahms' most significant sonata form first movement to date and perhaps the most popular rabble-rousing Finale in the repertoire. Written after Schumann's death, with the on-going complications of his relationship with Clara and his all too required passions for Agathe von Siebold together with the inability to embrace this, perhaps his best chance for happiness, it is as if, in the words of his biographer Richard Specht: "Brahms offers us a piece of his own life, of his youth with all its distresses, its raptures, its frustrations, its expectations of love and a strong courage that will not be disconcerted". Or, as Nietzsche has it: "What remains as his most personal is his longing". Cobbett considers that: "The first movement is one of the most original and impressive tragic compositions since the first movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony". But it is Mozart's

association with the pathos of G minor, not least in his own Piano Quartet and in the formal complexities of its first movement, that one thinks of as the piano unfolds the opening unison theme. Just a few bars later comes the relative major, with a series of appoggiaturas in sixths alternating between the piano and upper strings (Specht imagines tender wooing). This then releases the lengthy second subject group, initiated by the 'cello, to inhabit the supremely positive key of D major - indeed, Clara complained that there was far more D major than G minor. As the development begins with a reprise of the opening ten bars, we have no way of knowing if we are listening to an exposition repeat until the theme in sixths shifts abruptly to C minor. The concise development concentrates on varying the very first bar, at one point with three canonic entries a crotchet apart (piano RH, upper strings, piano LH). After a dominant pizzicato, the recapitulation begins from the theme in sixths, now in the tonic major. One of the fascinations of sonata form in the minor is seeing new aspects of the second subject as it changes mode for recapitulation, typically from relative major to tonic minor. What Brahms does with the sixths theme (B flat, C minor, G) is surprising, but the way he handles the second subject group recapitulation may be the most astonishing example of its kind, and as revolutionary as Lisztian thematic metamorphosis. Just as he prepares to launch again into the soaring, heroic fortissimo viola melody of the exposition (accompanied with syncopated drone fifths in the piano and 'cello) the ground disappears from beneath our feet, leaving only unaccompanied strings in a gentle and moving G minor tranquillo.

Brahms changed his mind about several aspects of the second movement, including how many of the strings should be muted (we usually prefer his first suggestion-all muted). This "mysteriously tender and pathetic romance"(Cobbett) begins with a version of the "Clara-motif" on upper strings. There is much of



the lilt of old Vienna about this, and Specht identifies a folksong in the Trio, "So leb' denn wohl, du stilles Haus". As a gentle Regenerlied it complements the enormity of the other movements.

The third movement contains huge contrasts. Initially a glorious melody unfolds in E flat, but then dotted rhythms prepare for a military march (albeit a toy march in triple time). The transition at this point into C major, for the piano to state the theme pianissimo, is about as cool as the deliciously subtle way in which swing emerges from improvisatory flourish in Erroll Garner's treatment of "Autumn Leaves" ("Concert by the Sea"). After a very full realisation of the potential power of this theme, the link back is equally ingenious, the violin reprising in C over a dominant pedal before the material flowers anew in E flat.

The failed uprisings of 1848 prompted many Hungarians to flee to, or through, Hamburg. One such, Eduard Reményi, formed a duo with Brahms, giving many concerts in the years 1850-52. Specht: "He was the devil's personal friend, a gypsy nature with all its rabid and fiercely burning temperament, its cunning exuberance, its barbarously over-peppered, flashing music". There are gentle sections within this Rondo alla Zingarese, where the piano imitates a dulcimer, but mostly it's hell for leather, in rather unusual three bar phrases. Having thrown the kitchen sink at it (or, in Schoenberg's orchestration, trombone glissandi and massed percussion), I'm fond of Robin Ireland's description of the big cadenza as "chucking the piano down the stairs". Fittingly the coda is extreme - Molto Presto.

John Thwaites

The Primrose Piano Quartet was formed in 2004 by pianist John Thwaites and three of the UK's most renowned chamber musicians (Lindsay, Sorrell, Edinburgh, Maggini Quartets). It is named after the great Scottish violist, William Primrose, who himself played in the Festival Piano Quartet. Alongside their performances of the major repertoire, the Primrose Quartet have researched widely the forgotten legacy of 20th century English composers, and have revived a number of remarkable and unjustly neglected piano quartets. Their first CD featured works by Thomas Dunhill, William Hurlstone, Roger Quilter and Arnold Bax. It was released in 2004 to wide critical acclaim and was followed by a disc presenting music by Cyril Scott, William Alwyn, Herbert Howells and Frank Bridge, which was a Five Star choice in the Classic FM Magazine. The Primrose Quartet celebrated Hurlstone's centenary (30th May 2006) live on BBC Radio 3 and at the Wigmore Hall.

A recent highlight has been the world première of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's Piano Quartet at the Cheltenham Festival in 2008. This twenty-minute piece, commissioned by the Primrose, has proved very appealing, and was recorded in 2009 for the Meridian label.

Another exciting commission, born out of their strong Scottish connections, is the "Burns Air" project, timed to celebrate Robert Burns's 250th anniversary. Having chosen an air with a haunting melody and text, the Primrose invited a number of their composer friends to write a short variation each, and the composite work had its world première in October for Tunbridge Wells Green Room Music and the Scottish première in November 2009 at the Sound Festival in Aberdeen, followed by a London performance later in the year at King's Place. Sally Beamish, John Casken, Jacques Cohen, Peter Fribbins, Francis Pott, Zoë Martlew, Piers Hellawell and Stephen Goss are among those who are contributing. Book Two is now in its planning stages, following many more composers expressing an interest in contributing.



Having been selected for the Making Music Concert Promoters' Network in 2004/5 and again for the 2011/2012 season, the Primrose have toured throughout the UK as well as abroad, for example an extensive tour of Denmark in 2010. Alongside their rapidly growing concert schedule, they offer innovative educational workshops for schools which are attracting a lot of interest, especially in connection with the Burns Air project. Other educational work includes a residency at the London College of Music. Three exciting new CDs are being released during 2009 and 2010 on the Meridian label: Richard Strauss Piano Quartet, Violin Sonata and Cello Sonata; the new Piano Quartet by Maxwell Davies, coupled with the Burns Air Variations and a previously unrecorded Piano Quintet by Dmitri Smirnov.

www.primrosepianoquartet.org.uk



Susanne Stanzeleit, one of the leading violinists of her generation, has performed worldwide as a soloist and chamber musician. She is well known for her unusually challenging and extensive repertoire, featuring many commissions and UK premières of works by composers such as Peter Maxwell Davies, John Adams, Lou Harrison, Gyorgy Kurtág, John Woolrich, Philip Cashian and many others.

Susanne regularly broadcasts on BBC Radio 3, Classic FM, German Radio and other major TV and radio stations abroad. She has received rave reviews and a Gramophone Award nomination for her long list of commercial recordings, which feature the complete works of Bartók, Enescu and Dvorák as well as Beethoven violin sonatas, works by Charles Camilleri and a series of English sonata recordings. Chamber discs include six discs with the Edinburgh Quartet, chamber music by Kenneth Leighton and two CDs of British piano quartets with the Primrose Quartet, all on Meridian. She is also a producer for Meridian Records. Susanne is now first violin of the Maggini String Quartet and led the Edinburgh String Quartet until 2002. She was co-leader of Sinfonia 21, as well as guest-leading many of the foremost chamber orchestras and contemporary music groups in the UK. Head of Strings at the London College of Music and Media from 2002-2006, she now teaches at the Birmingham Conservatoire.

Robin Ireland was a student at Cambridge University and at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York. He was a founder member of the Piano Quartet, Domus, and was the violist of the Lindsay String Quartet, with whom he played for twenty years. He now plays with the Primrose Piano Quartet and the Anton Stadler piano/clarinet/viola trio, and has a Duo with the pianist Tim Horton.

As a soloist, he has broadcast on BBC Radio 3, performed Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante with the Liverpool Philharmonic and the London Mozart Players, and has in his repertoire all the major works

for viola, specialising in recitals of unaccompanied Bach transcribed for viola.

Robin is Senior Viola Tutor at the Birmingham Conservatoire and also teaches at the University of Sheffield, at Cambridge, and on courses run by ESTA, Pro Corda and Cadenza. He has recorded CDs of unaccompanied Bach and of his own compositions.

Robin plays on an Amati viola made in the early 1600s. He lives in South Yorkshire.

Andrew Fuller has a busy and varied career as a soloist, chamber musician, guest principal, session musician and teacher. His duo partnership with Pianist Michael Dussek has had great success with recent concerts and recordings, their CDs of Cello works on the Dutton Vocalion label receiving critical acclaim, several being selected as Editor's Choice in Gramophone Magazine.

He was Associate Principal with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra for seven years, leaving in 1997 to concentrate on solo and chamber music. Since then he has regularly worked as guest principal for the RPO as well as many others including the Philharmonia, BBC Concert Orchestra, the City of London Sinfonia, the Hallé Orchestra and the Orchestra of St Johns.

As chamber musician he has made many appearances at The Wigmore Hall and at festivals and music clubs around the world, and has made many live broadcasts and recordings. He was a member of the York Piano Trio, the Fibonacci sequence, Aquarius, and Primavera. A member of the ground breaking new ensemble "Chamber Music Direct" he has also been a regular guest player with other Groups including the Sorrel, Brindisi and Coull String Quartets, Endymion and the Schubert Ensemble. He was a visiting lecturer at the Birmingham Conservatoire from 1997 to 2003 and regularly coaches at the Royal Academy of Music, Royal College of Music and for UK youth orchestras.

John Thwaites has a varied performing career. He has been working with Alexander Baillie for thirty years. They appeared in the first and last Manchester International 'Cello Festivals, released a recital CD in 2000, and selected live performances in 2009. Another long-standing association is with Sue Lowe's 'Cello Schools, and John has performed with Johannes Goritzki, Louise Hopkins, Pierre Doumenge, Li Wei, Oleg Kogan, Melissa Phelps, Alexander Ivashkin and Alexander Boyarsky.

Alongside relationships with the Schidlof, Maggini, Emperor, Martinu and Brodsky Quartets, a performance of Lyapunov's Sextet with the Dante Quartet on Dutton Digital was BBC Music Magazine's chamber music choice for November 2004. John is also a member of the Audley Horn Trio (Stanzeleit, Stirling, Thwaites) and the Da Vinci Piano Trio (Moffatt, Irvine, Thwaites).

Recent concerto performances include Grieg at St John's Smith Square and Tchaikovsky at the Royal College of Music.

Formerly Head of Piano at Christ's Hospital and a tutor at GSMD, John is now Head of Keyboard Studies at the Birmingham Conservatoire and Course Director of Cadenza International Summer Music School, a piano and strings festival resident at the Purcell School, London, in July.



This CD has been produced with the support of research funding from Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University.

The Primrose Piano Quartet would also like to thank the following for their generous donations towards this project:

Penelope and John Clive,
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Yvonne and Dennis Wheeler,
Robin Pitt

and

Penelope Clive, John Clive,
Margaret Major, Katherine Jones

for giving their services as page turners.

This recording was made using an historic Blüthner piano chosen by Brahms himself in 1896 for a young British pianist, Margarita Hanson.



Margarita Robertson (née Hanson) 1869-1962 always known as Rita was born in South Australia, where her father was a merchant, but as a child was sent home to school in England. A talented pianist, she later studied music in Germany for several years, and knew Brahms. In 1896, before returning to England, she asked the composer to help her select a piano and in latter years would recall how the pair had visited the Blüthner factory in Leipzig. The resulting boudoir grand was ultimately shipped back to London where Rita taught music at a girls' school before marrying the Rev. Norman Robertson, Rector of Duckmanton, in 1905. The piano then spent 20 years in the Derbyshire rectory before returning to London with Rita when Norman died in 1925. Rita Robertson continued to play the piano regularly into her 90s. She bequeathed it to her grandson, John Clive, in whose possession it has remained since 1962.

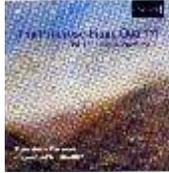
Blüthner Piano - a personal appreciation.

Much is written today about the Golden Age of piano playing, when pianists played with great individuality and personality. What is often neglected in the account of this marvellous time is the quality of the instruments they were playing. Pianists will be inspired to offer much more of their own personality if they are playing an instrument which itself has personality. This was true of the best instruments of the Golden Age both because of the quality of the materials that went into them and the craftsmanship of builders and technicians. Fortunately, the generalisation that pianos deteriorate with age is just that - if well maintained, many outperform their modern rivals. Indeed, it is a source of great sadness that so few old instruments are properly cared for, maintained, and valued. This Blüthner is small - some of the bass notes lose something as a result - but has such musicality that partnering it in music-making is sheer joy. Further, it has a quality of sound that blends ideally with strings.

John Thwaites.



The Primrose Piano Quartet on Meridian, available from www.meridian-records.co.uk



CDE84519

William M. Y. Hurlstone (1876 – 1906)

Piano Quartet in E minor, op.43

Roger Quilter (1877 – 1953)

Gipsy Life (with guest artists Celia Waterhouse - violin and Leon Bosch - double bass)

Thomas F. Dunhill (1877 – 1946)

Piano Quartet in B minor, op.16

Arnold Bax (1883 – 1953)

Quartet in one Movement (1922)

CDE84547

Frank Bridge (1879 – 1941)

Phantasy Piano Quartet in F sharp minor (1911)

Herbert Howells (1892 – 1983)

Piano Quartet in A minor, op.21

William Alwyn (1905 – 1985)

Rhapsody for Piano Quartet

Cyril Scott (1879 – 1970)

Quartet Op. 16

CDE84584 (2cds)

Richard Strauss (1864 - 1949)

Sonata in E flat for Violin and Piano, op.18

Susanne Stanzeleit - Violin

John Thwaites - Piano

Sonata in F major for 'Cello and Piano, op.6

Bernard Gregor-Smith - Cello

John Thwaites - Piano

Piano Quartet in C minor, op.13

CDE84586

Variations on a Burns Air

Robert Burns - Air "By Yon Castle Wa"

John Casken - Variation on a Jacobite air

Joe Cutler - Grunge Variation

Sally Beamish - By Yon Castle Wa'

Piers Hellowell Air Apparent

Peter Fribbins - There'll never be peace till Jamie comes home

Jacques Cohen - Castle Lament

Zoë Martlew - Variation Z, "Home"

Robin Ireland - Air on a Stroud hill

Stephen Goss - Scherzo Variation

Francis Pott - By Yon Castle Wa'

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies - Piano Quartet (2007)

Dmitri Smirnov - Quintet for Piano, Violin, Viola, Violoncello and Double-bass, Op.72 (1992)



Meridian

Piano Quartets - Fauré & Brahms
The Primrose Piano Quartet

CDE 84599

Meridian

A Natural Sound Recording

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TT 68'00"



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Recorded by Richard Hughes
Produced by Jonathan Lyness
Edited by Susanne Stanzeleit

Cover painting
At the Piano
by Kate Philip
www.katephilp.co.uk

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www.meridian-records.co.uk
P.O. Box 317, Eltham, London, SE9 4SF

Fauré & Brahms Piano Quartets

Gabriel Fauré - Piano Quartet in C minor, op.15

- | | |
|----------------------------|------|
| [1] Allegro molto moderato | 9:21 |
| [2] Scherzo (Allegro vivo) | 5:32 |
| [3] Adagio | 6:41 |
| [4] Allegro molto | 8:14 |

Johannes Brahms - Piano Quartet G minor, op.25

- | | |
|--|-------|
| [5] Allegro | 13:20 |
| [6] Intermezzo (Allegro ma non troppo) | 7:43 |
| [7] Andante con moto | 9:03 |
| [8] Rondo alla Zingarese | 8:14 |
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The Primrose Piano Quartet

Susanne Stanzeleit - Violin
Robin Ireland - Viola
Andrew Fuller - Cello
John Thwaites - Piano

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Piano Quartets - Fauré & Brahms
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