

CMSFW Ensemble with Gary Levinson and Friends
Saturday, 8 November, 2025 — Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2025

Piano Trio in D Minor, Op. 120

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Late in life, Gabriel Fauré was quite deaf. Inevitably, one is tempted to make comparisons with Beethoven, especially considering the richness of both men's chamber music output in their final years. Fauré's late chamber works include not only the trio on this program but also the Second Violin Sonata, Op. 108, both Cello Sonatas, Opp. 109 and 117, the Second Piano Quintet, Op. 115, and the String Quintet, Op. 121. It is an impressive list, reflecting the very best of the French master's mature technique and musicianship.

The D minor trio is an anomaly in that it was Fauré's sole piano trio. He appears to have undertaken it in summer 1922 at the behest of his publisher, Jacques Durand. The slow movement was written in the Savoyard village of Annecy-le-Vieux, where Fauré spent his last three summers. He completed the trio's outer movements the following spring in Paris.

Although he was well into his seventies and unable to hear, his imagination was still fertile. In a February 1923 letter to his favorite student, Roger Ducasse, he commented: "I am taking too long over a composition in D minor, and I've not yet exhausted the relative majors and minors!"

The comment tells us much, for Fauré was a product of nineteenth-century romanticism with strong links to classicism. He continued to plumb the rainbow of tonalities long after many of his contemporaries had abandoned traditional harmony altogether.

By mid-March 1923, Fauré was writing again to Ducasse, now eager to play the trio for him and inquiring when Ducasse might be available to hear it. Even in old age, Fauré was anxious that his friends give their blessing to his new compositions. He often doubted himself until reassured by this coterie, which also included Saint-Saëns, André Messager, the music critics Camille Bellaigue and Pierre Lalo, and others. The first public performance took place in Paris on 12 May 1923, the composer's seventy-eighth birthday.

Generally speaking, the trio is much less aggressive pianistically than Fauré's earlier chamber music. Virtuosity for its own sake is absent. Rather, there is an unusual harmony of participation and balance among timbres for this historically difficult combination of instruments. In the first movement, a cello solo opens, presently echoed by the violin. Fauré entrusts the second theme to the piano, thereby establishing early a sense of equality. He uses a considerable amount of canonic and two-part writing, yielding a transparency of texture that belies his rich harmonies. Still, the sound is luxuriant. Fauré's gift is effortless modulations to keys that seem impossibly distant. He makes them sound not only logical but also inevitable.

The slow movement is one of Fauré's finest. In pastoral F major, it features an elegant main theme and beautiful ensemble writing, particularly in the dialogue between the two strings.

The unison string opening to the finale will jar any opera lover, for it bears an eerie resemblance to the climax of Canio's famous aria "Vesti la giubba" (at the line 'Ridi pagliaccio') from Leoncavallo's *I pagliacci*. The melodic similarity was apparently coincidental, and the balance of this lively and dramatic conclusion is vintage Fauré. An exuberant coda brings the trio to a close.

Two postscript thoughts color one's audition of this piece. Fauré's initial plan was for a clarinet/cello/piano trio; we do not know why he abandoned that idea. And the finale has spiritual links to a scherzo. Was there a fourth movement in the composer's mind, but he ran out of gas? We will never know.

Piano Trio No. 1 in F Major, Op. 18

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Saint-Saëns was remarkably prolific. His output includes an astonishing twelve operas, some two dozen other stage works (ballets and incidental music), more than sixty sacred choral works, and dozens of *Mélodies* [art songs]. And that's not counting his symphonies, concertos, and other concerted works for soloist and orchestra.

Though his works have appeared infrequently on this series, the French master also composed a considerable amount of chamber music. While these works are inconsistent in quality, the early piano trio in F major is one of his happiest inspirations. In 1863, the year he

composed it, he was teaching at the École Niedermeyer in Paris, where he oversaw the piano curriculum, and was also organist at the church of La Madeleine. He dedicated the trio to Alfred Lamarche, a family friend who played cello and called on Saint-Saëns's mother when the composer was on holiday in the Pyrénées. The trio was written during that vacation, a joyous sojourn that is said to have inspired the work's high spirits.

The opening movement's main theme has inspired a cornucopia of conflicting opinions, some of which border on purple prose. Arthur Hervey, an early biographer, writing in 1922, observed:

Blithely does the first movement commence, and one can well imagine the young traveller eagerly starting on his journey. The opening theme has a pleasant, easy swing about it, and the impression it creates is never allowed to weaken.

A. James Keeler largely concurred, calling it “a theme of irrepressible high spirits. . . . it reflects a traveler's sense of wonder and release.” Émile Baumann thought it “expresses the joy of adventure” and praised its “alluring gaiety.” Writing in 1923, Lyle Watson was less charitable, calling it “an irresponsible little melody.” The movement's most arresting feature, however, is its dance between duple and triple time, with misplaced beats that keep listeners on their toes. After the exposition of the opening material, the music is rich in passage work for the pianist and harmonically unpredictable as Saint-Saëns momentarily lands in foreign key centers. The thematic material is developed convincingly and with great skill.

The slow movement, an Andante in A minor, is quite original. Austere and mysterious, it opens with a double-dotted piano theme against an octave pedal point in the violin. (Later in the movement those roles reverse.) Cello gets the initial statement of a secondary theme. The central

section of this ternary structure is in A major; warmly lyrical, it features flowing arpeggios in the piano supporting the two strings. Sequential recitatives from cello and piano herald the return to the reprise of the A minor double-dotted theme.

Saint-Saëns's scherzo is heir to the Mendelssohnian tradition: feather light and fleet, with syncopations and cross-rhythms that place accents in unexpected places. His ability to spin a great deal out of very limited material is reminiscent of Beethoven. The effect is lighthearted, but it requires razor-sharp ensemble among the three players. The writing is particularly brilliant for piano.

The finale is in sonata form. Its principal material consists of violin and cello in conversation with slow notes, while the piano provides a delicate broken-chord accompaniment. The music sometimes has a scherzo-like quality, elfin and light, emphasizing the trio's predominant mood of optimism and good cheer.

Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 81

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Chamber music lovers generally smile when they see that a work by Dvořák is to be performed on a program, for they know his music is accessible, melodic, well-crafted, and enduring. Indeed, one could argue quite persuasively that, despite Dvořák's undeniable success

in the realms of orchestral and vocal music, his greatest achievement lies in the rich legacy of chamber works he left to us. There are dozens of examples for all size and measure of traditional ensembles, ranging from violin sonatas and piano trios to string quartets, quintets, and one string sextet. Sentimental favorites among them will certainly include the Terzetto, Op. 74, the "Dumky" Trio, Op. 90, and the "American" Quartet, Op. 96. Connoisseurs may prefer the fine Piano Quartet in E-Flat, Op. 87. But the crown jewel of them all is the incomparable Piano Quintet on this afternoon's program.

This work is on a par with Schubert's "Trout" Quintet and the great piano quintets of Schumann, Brahms, and Franck. Within Dvořák's own *oeuvre*, it shines with the effortless polish of his classic form, artfully merged with the Slavonic and nationalistic elements that make his music so distinctive and memorable. The quintet was composed between August and October 1887, but its real history dates from fifteen years prior. In 1872 Dvořák began work on a quintet for piano and strings in A major. Dissatisfied with his efforts, he made extensive cuts then began pasting together and writing transitional passages and other revisions in an effort to rework that piece into something satisfactory. Unable to meet his own standards, he eventually started afresh, still in the same key, to produce the masterpiece we hear today. Thus the catalogue of his chamber works includes *two* quintets in A: Op. 5 and Op. 81.

The second try clearly flowed more smoothly than the first; indeed, its path was eased by a stream of melodic genius from the late summer moment he began work on it. Alec Robertson has noted that "a joyous springtime happiness flows through the music" of the quintet. In fact, it

also blooms with the luxuriant and abundant richness of late summer: a bountiful harvest of emotions and moods, a cornucopia of luscious melodies woven together with stunning, magical skill. These four irresistible movements occasionally reveal the sad corners of the composer's soul, often cloaked in Czech garb. Ultimately, however, Dvořák's was a resolutely positive spirit, and the overall impact of the quintet is upbeat: unbridled good cheer, with a healthy dash of Bohemian sentiment thrown in for good measure.

There is a spontaneity to his composition in this work that makes it very endearing; nothing seems contrived. One reason for its success is the skillful piano writing, which is among the most effective in all Dvořák, particularly in the inner movements. Another is the skill with which he combines piano and strings and the ecumenical manner in which he distributes his ideas among the five players.

Musically, the quintet is distinguished by a duality between major and minor. From the opening measures, where the warm, languid cello melody in A major is challenged by an aggressive response in A minor from the other strings, we feel a rhetorical pull. Probing questions prompted by such abrupt switches from major to minor throughout its four movements provide much of the narrative impetus of this music. The slow movement is entitled *Dumka* [Lament], a dance of Ukrainian origin that became popular in nineteenth-century Bohemia. *Dumky* —the Czech plural — are characterized by rhapsodic, slower sections that may be interrupted by livelier sections with a distinctly brighter mood. In this instance, Dvořák alternates two themes and sets them in a type of variations.

Next comes the Scherzo, one of the most brilliant in all chamber music. This one is a *furiant*, another Czech dance favored by Dvořák. Here he avoids the customary switches between duple and triple time, maintaining the pace of a whirling waltz. He preserves a delicacy and sprightliness more often associated with Mendelssohn's scherzi. To close the quintet, he takes us to the Bohemian countryside, introducing yet another dance rhythm, this time a relative of the polka. The folksy spirit is Haydnesque; the personality, unmistakably Dvořák with intricate counterpoint building to a breathless, blazing and jubilant conclusion.