

DEBUSSY Claude
Jean **RIVIER**

audite



MANDELRING QUARTETT

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

**String Quartet No. 1
in G minor, Op. 10**

- I. *Animé et très décidé* 6:20
- II. *Assez vif et bien rythmé* 3:52
- III. *Andantino,
douxment expressif* 6:37
- IV. *Très modéré – Très mouvementé
et avec passion* 7:13

JEAN RIVIER (1896-1987)

String Quartet No. 1

- I. *Andantino quasi allegretto –
Allegro* 7:07
- II. *Assez vif et très rythmé* 4:46
- III. *Andante espressivo* 5:55
- IV. *Allegro molto e giocoso* 5:48

String Quartet No. 2

- I. *Moderato e grazioso* 5:51
- II. *Lento* 7:20
- III. *Moderato – Allegro molto* 5:32



Rebellious loner: Claude Debussy

Referring to Claude Debussy's life, the years around 1890 have been called his "bohemian period". The composer was in his late twenties and had broken with the musical establishment in Paris. He had come to loathe the Paris Conservatoire with its many constraints and narrow-minded academic ways. It was with a certain degree of reluctance that he had applied for the *Prix de Rome*, the most coveted award for a young French composer; whilst the jury deliberated on the award, he stood by the river Seine, unconcernedly gazing at the glittering sunlight on the water and the passing boats. He prematurely broke off his stay at the Villa Medici in Rome associated with the prize: he had developed an aversion against the rules of communal living in the villa, feeling too confined, and he could not bear his fellow housemates whom he felt were too self-assured.

Back in Paris, Debussy initially lived in an apartment in the same house as his parents. Soon afterwards he would move into an attic flat in the Rue de Londres, near the Saint-Lazare train station, together with his lover Gabrielle, "Gaby", Dupont. He eked out a living by teaching and producing occasional compositions, and he spent his time in literary cafés and in cabarets, meeting poets and writers of symbolism including Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry, as well as Pierre Louÿs, who would become one of the composer's few close friends. Debussy plunged himself into various amorous adventures, including with the singer Thérèse Roger and the sculptor Camille Claudel, and he soaked up new experiences. During his first visit to Bayreuth, he became passionate about Wagner, and at the Paris International Exposition of 1889 he enthused about Chinese orchestras and Javanese gamelan music. He admired works by Titian at the Louvre and read his way through entire libraries: Baudelaire, Poe, Dickens, and Dumas, and later also Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

For Debussy, this was a time full of impressions, a time of "fermentation" during which his musical language matured. But it was also a time of loneliness, financial worries, self-doubt, and depression. "Whatever I do, I'm unable to lighten the sad mood inside me: at times my days are soot-coloured, dark and mute like those of an Edgar Allan Poe hero, and my soul is as romantic as a ballad by Chopin!"

During this influential time, he wrote his first small masterpieces: two of the *Ariettes oubliées* on poems by Paul Verlaine, two arabesques, the *Petite suite* and the *Suite bergamasque*. He also produced the first drafts of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. And in 1893 his string quartet followed, which many consider the composer's first mature work.

An artfully woven tapestry: Debussy's String Quartet, Op. 10

Compositional work did not come easily to Debussy. "As for the finale of the quartet, it is simply not working out as I would like," he wrote to his composer friend Ernest Chausson in July 1893, "I have begun anew three times without success (it is depressing!)"

Yet the quartet seemed to bear a special significance for Debussy, as it is the only one of his works which he marked with a key, G minor, and an opus number – or should this be taken as an ironic reminiscence of the venerable Viennese classics?

This is not the only mystery which this work poses. Most of the audience at the quartet's premiere, led by the famous Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in December 1893, were left baffled. The critics barely ventured to express their opinion, the public reacted cautiously: this music must have seemed too novel, too unfamiliar, with its colourful harmonies, associative handling of the thematic material, excessive use of chromaticisms, whole-tone scales and oscillating timbres. Only Debussy's friend Paul Dukas was unreservedly enthusiastic, raving about the "predilection for sequences of colourful chords, for dissonances without harshness, which in their complexity seem more harmonious than the consonances themselves", and on which the melody "strides along as on a splendid, artfully patterned tapestry".

Formally, the quartet follows the traditional classical Viennese model and, along the lines of César Franck's example, the movements are interlocked: the entire work grows out of a single nucleus, the opening movement's principal theme which begins abruptly and from which the thematic material for three out of the four movements is directly derived. As on a theatre stage, however, moods and lighting change – the pizzicato-saturated second movement features echoes of exotic gamelan music, whereas the third movement is dominated by veiled, muted sounds. In the finale, thematic splinters briefly flash up, whilst the movement slowly awakens, embarking on a relentless surge towards the end.

Much has been written about the structure of this quartet, much has been argued about how much Beethoven, how much Franck is in it. However, is that in Debussy's interest? "The beauty of a work of art will always remain a mystery, that is to say, one will never be able to fathom entirely how it was made," he once wrote. "Let us preserve at all costs this mysterious magical power of music."

Inconspicuous genius: Jean Rivier

Hardly any important composer of the twentieth century will have gone through life as inconspicuously as Jean Rivier. Modest, amiable, sincere, reserved – this is how his personality is reflected in its rather sparse documentation. "Jean Rivier's public life lacks those events which fill the chronicles," according to an article in the *Scherzo* music magazine in 1972, written while the composer was still alive: "No scandals, no pompous titles. To the observer, it unfolds in silence and discretion."

To the observer, perhaps. However, for Rivier himself, adult life began with a jarring dissonance: aged only eighteen, he volunteered to join the army during the First World War. He received several awards and honours, but during the last year of the war, his column was caught in a mustard gas attack. Rivier was the only one among his comrades to survive.

Three years of convalescence followed, and it was not until 1921 that he was able to begin his music studies at the Paris Conservatoire. In addition to harmony, counterpoint and music history, Rivier also studied piano and cello: his preference for string instruments left clear traces in his work. Later, in 1948, he was himself appointed professor of composition. He spent most of his life in Paris with his wife and son, and during the summer months relocated to the French Riviera, where he converted a former sheep farm into a country residence and found inspiration in the seclusion and peace of nature.

During the 1930s, Rivier was an active member of the chamber music society “Triton”, which presented a wide range of new and recent compositions from France and abroad. And throughout his life, he would remain open to innovative musical developments, curious about what others wrote, even when it appeared strange or unfamiliar.

Rivier’s extensive œuvre – more than 200 works, including eight symphonies, an opera, concertos for a wide variety of instruments – remains rooted in neoclassical aesthetics. For him, inspiration was at the centre; theoretical edifices and stylistic discussions did not interest him. “I write as I think,” he explained. “I check the chords I want to use at the piano and listen to them carefully, but never do I analyse them in the moment I write them.”

Architecture and emotion – the String Quartets of Jean Rivier

One of the first works with which Jean Rivier attracted attention was his string quartet in G major, written in 1924, while he was still a student. It reveals many typical features of his style: careful shaping of the form; clearly designed themes; pronounced counterpoint; contrasts in a narrow space. And last, but not least, an extraordinarily broad expressive spectrum. The first movement is passionate, whilst the second is sensual, and its pizzicatos surprisingly allude to the “Assez vif – Très rythmé” scherzo from Ravel’s string quartet (which in turn refers to Debussy’s “Assez vif et bien rythmé”). In the quasi-religious atmosphere of the slow movement, one might sense an expression of Rivier’s deep faith as manifested in his impressive Requiem. A kaleidoscope of changing moods emerges in the finale, where accentuated dance sections flow into lyrical passages. The gently fading end comes entirely unexpectedly.

In his second quartet of 1940, Rivier reveals a more abrupt side than in this first one – despite the charming beginning, despite beguiling melodies and passages of delicate humour. Large interval leaps, aimlessly circling gestures, rhythmic shifts, harsh dissonances, extreme dynamics up to an *ffff* in the final movement challenge the listener again and again. The word “violent” is used several times as a playing instruction, as for instance before the enormous intensification in the slow movement. In the finale, sharp accents and striking rhythms reminiscent of Bartók seem to underline Rivier’s remark, “I love sweets, but I detest anything in a piece of music that reminds me of them in any way.”

“Jean Rivier enchants us, touches us, moves us, refreshes our hearts like a soothing wellspring,” wrote the music commentator Paul Landormy in 1943. “Sometimes, however, he grips us hard, shakes us, oppresses us; and we are forced to yield to his diabolical whims, to bend to his almost tyrannical will. Let us not complain. No art will give us as much as that which so subdues us.”

Eva Blaskewitz

Translation: Viola Scheffel



MANDELRING QUARTETT

The Mandelring Quartett's trademark is expressivity, spontaneity and phenomenal homogeneity. Founded in 1983, the ensemble is winner of major competitions, among them the ARD International Music Competition and the Premio Paolo Borciani. Since then, their performing commitments take the quartet to international musical centres. Their concert calendar includes regular tours to the European neighbouring countries, North and South America as well as Asia. They are warmly welcomed as guest performers at leading festivals such as the Schubertiade Voralberg, Niederrhein Musikfestival, Ludwigsburg Festival, and Kuhmo Chamber Music Festival.

The Hambacher Musikfest was initiated by the Mandelring Quartett in their home city Neustadt an der Weinstraße in 1997 and has developed into a meeting point for lovers of chamber music from all over the globe. Since 2010, the ensemble has had a concert series of its own in the Berliner Philharmonie.

The Mandelring Quartett has repeatedly performed cycles of the complete string chamber music of Mendelssohn and Brahms. The ensemble performed the cycle of Shostakovich's 15 string quartets at the Salzburg Festival and in Berlin, among others, and in the 2020/21 season as *Quartet in Residence* at the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid. Numerous prize-winning CD recordings (Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik, International Classical Music Awards nominations and others) testify to the quartet's exceptional quality and wide-ranging repertoire. The recordings of the complete Shostakovich quartets, the string quartets of Leoš Janáček and the string chamber music of Mendelssohn have attracted particular international attention and are considered reference recordings by renowned critics. The current recording completes the double release with French repertoire.

HD-DOWNLOADS

available at audite.de

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