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Claude Debussy: *Première Rhapsodie*

Napoléon Bonaparte founded the arts academies in France in the 1790s. This included the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris. Its first director, Bernard Sarrette, drew upon the preceding military band school (the Free School of the Parisian National Guard) for instrumental instruction, and the Opéra for voice instruction. Because of the importance of outdoor, ceremonial music to Napoléon, wind instruments were given the same emphasis as strings. In the beginning Sarrette proposed and received 26 clarinet professors to teach 104 students, today an unimaginable 4-to-1 student-teacher ratio. By 1796 the numbers remained at 19 professors for clarinet compared to only 8 for violin. Because of Napoléon's ceremonial demands, Paris by 1800 had become the woodwind capital of Europe. In 1817 the Czech-born French composer Anton Reicha was appointed to the faculty of the Conservatoire, where he composed the 25 woodwind quintets that gave birth to that genre.

In 1909, Claude Debussy was appointed to the conseil supérieur of the Paris Conservatoire at the request of its director at the time, Gabriel Fauré. This position obligated him to officiate occasionally as an adjudicator of the Conservatoire's examinations in performance and composition.

In 1910, Debussy served on the clarinet jury and was asked to write a "solo de concours" (competition solo) required to be performed by the students for their annual examination. The *Première Rhapsodie* and a shorter sight-reading test, the *Petit Pièce*, were the result. Debussy was personally not looking forward to hearing eleven student clarinetists, advanced though they may be, play through his new work. But in the end he was highly satisfied. In a letter to his publisher, Jacques Durand, he wrote, "The clarinet competitions went extremely well, and, to judge by the expressions on the faces of my colleagues, the *Rhapsodie* was a success." The title "*Première*" *Rhapsodie* implies that perhaps Debussy may have considered the possibility of a second *Rhapsodie*, but unfortunately this never materialized.

The *Rhapsodie* was dedicated to Prosper Mimart, professor of clarinet at the Paris Conservatoire from 1904-1918, who gave its public premiere in 1911. Since its composition it has established itself as one of the most performed of all the works in the accompanied solo clarinet repertoire. It is an exciting work for audiences and poses immense technical and expressive challenges for the performer. What else could one ask?

Stephen Soderberg

Ottorino Respighi: *Quartetto dorico*

Ottorino Respighi began his musical career as a violinist and violist. In 1899, at age 19, he travelled to St. Petersburg, Russia, to play principal viola in the Russian Imperial Theater orchestra. While there, he studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov. Returning to Bologna, the city of his birth, he took a degree in composition from the Liceo Musicale.

Beginning with his studies at the Liceo, he began to develop an interest in early church music, the music of the Italian baroque, and the folk music of northern Italy. These ele-





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ments, along with his insistence on experimenting *within* the bounds of late 19th/early 20th-century tonality, came together to create his own characteristic voice.

As he matured, he became less tolerant of au courant progressive movements in the arts. In an interview in 1925 he proclaimed,

Atonality: thank heaven, that's done for! The future course of music? Who can say? I believe that every composer should first of all be individual. The Italian genius is for melody and clarity.

His announcement of the death of “atonality” in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, was, of course, premature. Music history is more about assimilation than replacement, and the tonal/atonal conversation continues to this day. But at the time – for Respighi – was there any way open to “experiment” in the “tonal” realm? Arnold Schoenberg explained the quandary:

An idea in music consists principally in the relation of tones to one another. But every relationship that has been used too often, no matter how extensively modified, must finally be regarded as exhausted; it ceases to have power to convey a thought worthy of expression.

This was not a declaration of the death of tonality. Schoenberg himself later said “There is plenty of good music left to be written in C major” – a motto he made good on as a teacher and, occasionally, as a composer. But how did Respighi deal with this conundrum?

The *Quartetto dorico* has much to tell us about some of the techniques Respighi absorbed and repurposed into his personal, persistently tonal language.

When Universal Edition first published the score in 1925, it included a preface with a lengthy structural analysis (a common practice at the time). The analysis quite accurately describes this single-movement quartet as what has only recently been dubbed (for good or ill) a “two-dimensional sonata form,” a double-function form that allows for a collection of movements to be conceived – and heard – as sections of a single larger musical form. One or two themes are introduced at the outset, manipulated throughout the sections of the piece, and recapitulated at the end: a kind of super-sonata form. In the *Quartetto* there are unlabeled sections – an “exposition,” a “scherzo,” an “adagio” and a “recapitulation/finale”. It's tempting to identify the overall form as A-B-C-A', but the sections are not that harmonically distinct, and this division only catches differences in the character of each section. When we consider that we are being asked to follow the manipulations of one, or at most two, themes through the entire piece, the form is more like A1-A2-A3-A1'. So this brings us to the structure of the theme, and how to follow it through its many forms.

Respighi gave this work the title “*Quartetto dorico*” as a reference to his use of the doric (dorian) mode and other old church modes derived from early plainchant. His use of these mode-derived scale patterns creates a subtly distinct, “ancient” (Respighi's word) ambience for the entire work. But there's more here than just an “aural flavor.” The





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modal background is combined with themes built from a simple rhythmic pattern found in European folk musics that made its way into much music of the Baroque. In Italy, it's known as the Lombard rhythm; to fiddlers in Scotland (and Appalachian America) it's known as the Scotch snap. Its rhythmic contour is simply a short accented note followed by a longer unaccented note: DIT-dah. It's difficult to believe that an entire string quartet hangs together structurally and maintains our interest on no more than a DIT and a dah; but then think what George Boole did with no more than a zero and a one.

After the opening chord you will immediately hear the first DIT-dah. From that point on you will be hard pressed not to hear it everywhere, and you'll listen in amazement as this one tiny brick proliferates to build an entire house before your very ears.

Stephen Soderberg

George Enescu: *Légende*

There are two legends in Enescu's *Légende*. The first is the musician for whom it was written, Merri Franquin. M. Franquin was a celebrated performer and teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, and he was one of the principal forces in bringing the C trumpet to be the lyric lead instrument it is today. The title of the Enescu's work is said to refer to him, as a term of respect. (There doesn't seem to be any literal narrative of a legend.)

The other legend is Enescu himself, who was a truly extraordinary musician. He was a violinist, pianist, conductor and composer, all at the highest level. Enescu was admitted to the Vienna Conservatory at seven years old. He went on to teach violin to Yehudi Menuhin, Ivry Gitlis, Arthur Grumiaux and Ida Haendel. Alfred Cortot admired his piano playing. He wrote a large amount of fine and experimental music: *Légende*, written as a kind of celebration of the C trumpet in the hands of M. Franquin, lives now at the core of the solo trumpet repertoire, a crystallization of its lyric possibilities.

Tim Summers

Antonín Dvořák: *Piano Trio No.3 in F minor, Op.65*

As Europe reached the twentieth century mark, the harmonic and rhythmic fabric of European music – woven during the 300 years that we call the 'common practice period' – was beginning to unravel. American musicologist Charles Seeger put it this way:

Since sometime before the First World War there has been a general realization among both conservatives and radicals that the great romantic tradition of nineteenth-century Europe was in difficulties. It had become encrusted with so many bypaths that some sort of revision seemed inevitable, either to set it upon its feet again or to form from its honored remains a new style. ... Certainly a revolution began, but a gradual one – perhaps a series of small revolutions: first Satie, Debussy, Strauss; second Scriabin, Schönberg, and Stravinsky; then the deluge.

In the midst of nascent revolutions in music, and before the deluge, there was just enough time left for one more genuine romantic voice. Antonín Dvořák was certainly affected by the nationalistic aftermath of the revolutions of 1848 (the so-called 'Spring of Nations'), but he was no active revolutionary in either the political or musical sense. With strong flavors of the music from his native Czech background, he nevertheless made extensive use of the harmonic language and large form techniques of both Wagner and Brahms, but especially Brahms.





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In 1874 Johannes Brahms dutifully agreed to sit on the jury of the Austrian State Stipendium, which awarded financial support to promising composers within the Habsburg Empire. Brahms unexpectedly found himself faced with a massive submission – 15 works including two symphonies – from an obscure Czech composer. He was overwhelmed by the talent and technical mastery of this unknown composer, Antonin Dvořák. From that point on, Brahms became his mentor, close friend, and his most important compositional influence. (And yes, Dvořák was awarded the prize.)

It is virtually impossible to sort out the traditional and contemporary influences resulting in Dvořák's amazing skills as a craftsman. We can pick out Czech folk music, both obvious and deeply embedded, as well as characteristic 'new' harmonic practices of the period identified by the contemporary theorist Hugo Riemann. At times we actually hear Brahms himself (and many are the experts that have been occasionally fooled). But in the end, if we don't overthink it, we always know we are hearing Dvořák.

The Piano Trio, Op. 65, was composed in 1883, the same year that Brahms penned his Third Symphony. Dvořák's mother died in December 1882, and he began work on the Trio six weeks later. Just as he was beginning its composition, on February 13, Richard Wagner died. The old order was coming to an end in many ways. There is a solemnity here – some have called it his 'most Brahmsian' work. But creative genius is difficult to nail down so easily. This work contains a puzzle.

The startlingly strange little second movement doesn't seem to fit with the three other movements, either in length or character. Dvořák never wrote anything about this work, let alone this movement, so there's no way to know what was in his head at the time. The likely guess would be 'relief' between the drama of the first movement and the stunning beauty of the third, but why the unremitting 2-against-3 rhythm? Its marking, 'Allegretto grazioso', doesn't help much. It's not quite a scherzo, not quite a dance. It's lilting, but it's not really light. What is it, then? It may not solve the puzzle, but here's one clue: Dvořák had a lifelong obsession with trains, especially locomotives – right down to their mechanics and design. He once wrote, 'I'd give all my symphonies if I could have invented the locomotive'. When he came to America, he wrote of his disappointment that there weren't as many trains as in Europe. From that suggestion, we'll let the listener's ear be the judge of whether this solves the puzzle or not.

Dvořák was in a very real sense a calm island on the eve of the 20th century. He lived in the midst of revolutions – political, musical, industrial. He couldn't have failed to be affected by all these, and in fact, he was often excited by them; but somehow he remained above them. This is the final puzzle about Antonín Dvořák. We need another clue that might suggest a solution.

The Czech playwright and statesman Vaclav Havel was a leader of the 'Velvet Revolution' that toppled communism in Czechoslovakia in 1989. He went on to be the President of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic for nearly 14 years. He once wrote a few words about Dvořák that reverberate even today:

Antonin Dvořák is one of the great figures in Czech history who showed us how best to integrate ourselves into broader world contexts by being good at what we do and by doing our own work well. He, himself, entered international consciousness not by shouting his name to the world and by pointing his finger at himself, but through his entire being, through his work, his achievements, and also through his spirituality.

Stephen Soderberg

