

**RAVEL** Maurice

audite

Fernand de **LA TOMBELLE**



**MANDELRING QUARTETT**

**MAURICE RAVEL**

(1875-1937)

**String Quartet  
in F major**

- I. *Allegro moderato. Très doux* 7:35
- II. *Assez vif. Très rythmé* 6:26
- III. *Très lent* 7:54
- IV. *Vif et agité* 5:12

**FERNAND DE LA TOMBELLE**

(1854-1928)

**String Quartet  
in E major, Op. 36**

- I. *Largo ma non troppo – Allegro* 12:19
- II. *Allegretto assai scherzando* 3:56
- III. *Adagio con molto espressione* 7:04
- IV. *Allegro con brio* 6:43



**Maurice Ravel, the “master of tomorrow”**

Paris, in the years after 1900. On Saturday evenings, a group of musicians, writers and artists met in the apartment of the painter Paul Sordes in Rue Dulong, below Montmartre. They recited their latest poems, performed their newest compositions, discussed late into the night, enthused about Russian music, Debussy, Mallarmé and Chinese art. The group had called itself “Apaches” when a newspaper seller accidentally bumped into them on their way back from a concert and called out “Attention, Apaches!” (an expression for Parisian gangsters). Members included the pianist Ricardo Viñes, the poet Léon-Paul Fargue, the composer Florent Schmitt, later also Manuel de Falla and Igor Stravinsky, the mathematician Joaquin Boceta, the aviation pioneer Maurice Tabuteau, and, at the heart of the group, Maurice Ravel.

Despite his slight stature – he measured only 1.58 meters – his appearance was striking: he attached great importance to elegance, chose his clothes with the utmost care and never went out without his walking stick.

Ravel also stood out in the composition class at the Paris Conservatoire – though not necessarily in a way that met with approval in such a conservative institution. His teacher Gabriel Fauré was full of admiration, attested to his talent, intelligence and “strong artistic temperament”. But others had little appreciation for his new compositions. Ravel entered five times for the prestigious “Prix de Rome”: he failed five times. The final attempt, in 1905, led to a substantial scandal which resulted in the director of the Conservatoire, Théodore Dubois, being forced to resign. For Ravel was already widely regarded as being the most promising composer of his generation; some of his works had attracted attention during performances, for example at the venerable Société Nationale de Musique: the piano pieces *Pavane pour une infante défunte* and *Jeux d'eau*, *Shéhérazade* for mezzo-soprano and orchestra and last, but not least: the string quartet.

**New paths in French music: Ravel’s String Quartet in F major**

As with nearly all other works of that time, Ravel first presented his quartet, written between December 1902 and April 1903, to his “Apache” friends, playing it on the piano. And they already realised, before the work was to enthral the public at its premiere in March 1904, that it was a stroke of genius by the then 27-year-old.

Ravel was inspired by Claude Debussy’s quartet, written ten years earlier. The tempo sequence of the four movements clearly points to the model; likewise the titling of the scherzo (*Assez vif et bien rythmé* with Debussy, *Assez vif. Très rythmé* with Ravel), the use of mutes in the slow movement, the extensive use of pizzicato in the second movement, and the emergence of different movements from a single musical idea. But in this meticulously constructed œuvre, Ravel found his very own sound, even more colourful than Debussy’s, even more refined, with a touch of the artificial, akin to that in porcelain and glass artefacts, ornamental shrubs and bonsai trees, of which he was especially fond.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato. Très doux*, follows the principles of the classical sonata form with two – though not particularly contrasting – thematic ideas that set the musical material for the entire quartet. Here, as in the other movements, Ravel imparted the harmony with exotic hues by using unfamiliar modal scales and chromaticisms. The scherzo sections in the second movement, *Assez vif. Très rythmé*, reminded the Ravel specialist Arbie Orenstein of Javanese Gamelan music, rhythmically iridescent through the layering of passages in  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $\frac{6}{8}$  time.

The slow middle section appears improvisatory: two melodies, derived from the themes of the first movement, are superimposed. The third movement, to be played *très lent*, is made up of short, mosaic-like sections and appears dreamy, enraptured. In the finale, *Vif et agité*, two soundscapes collide: the first is almost aggressively motoric, its flow first stopped by garishly dissonant chords; the second is calmer and elegantly dance-like. The return of the movement's opening music follows in the manner of an apotheosis, a brilliant ascending triad in a radiant F major.

Ravel dedicated the quartet to his teacher Gabriel Fauré, who had his reservations about the work. Claude Debussy, however, not yet exasperated by the battles that were to occur in the press over his alleged rivalry with Ravel, is said to have implored his younger colleague “in the name of the musical gods and mine” not to change the slightest thing. And the music critic Jean Marnold asked the readers of his review in the *Mercure de France* to remember the name Ravel: “He is one of the masters of tomorrow.”

### **Fernand de La Tombelle, the jack of all trades**

A photograph, probably taken around 1880, shows him next to a box-shaped camera on a tripod: a slim, tall figure with a handsome moustache. Photography was one of Fernand de La Tombelle's favourite pastimes, as were drawing, writing poetry, acting, architecture, painting, astronomy, regional history and cycling: he reportedly regularly cycled the 500 kilometres from Paris to his Dordogne chateau at Fayrac, where, at the end of his life, he enjoyed the calm between mighty trees and rosebushes.

Antoine Louis Joseph Gueyrand Fernand Fouant de La Tombelle was born in Paris on 3 August 1854. His father, Baron Adolphe Fouant de La Tombelle, had a doctorate in law and his mother had received pianistic training from Sigismund Thalberg and Franz Liszt. She taught Fernand the piano herself. At the age of eighteen he took lessons in organ and harmony with the famous organist Alexandre Guilmant and then began studying composition at the Paris Conservatoire with Théodore Dubois (who was much more sympathetic towards La Tombelle than he would be to Maurice Ravel later on). Shortly afterwards came a shock from which he was not able to recover for a long time: his father became the victim of a brutal murder.

La Tombelle plunged himself into work – successfully: he forged a brilliant career as a pianist and organist, became Dubois' assistant at the Madeleine in Paris, founded the famous organ concerts at the Palais du Trocadéro together with his teacher

Alexandre Guilmant, and toured all over France as an organist. At the same time, he also managed to compose extensively – during the course of his life he was to write around 500 works. In 1895, together with Charles Bordes, Vincent d'Indy and Alexandre Guilmant, he founded the Schola Cantorum, a private music academy dedicated, amongst other things, to early music, where he would teach harmony for almost ten years.

La Tombelle had a predilection for Gregorian chant, renaissance and baroque music, as well as for folk music – he played the hurdy-gurdy and published two collections of folk songs. This music left unmistakable traces in some of his works, as did his early (later reversed) enthusiasm for Richard Wagner and his role model César Franck. One of these works is his only string quartet, composed in 1895 at the age of 41. He dedicated it to Vincent d'Indy.

### **Refined elegance: La Tombelle's String Quartet in E major, Op. 36**

More so than the contemporaneous quartets of Debussy and Ravel, La Tombelle's quartet is committed to the classical Viennese style of music and the principle of developing thematic material. The soundscape, however, is entirely different and very expressive, characterised by extremely colourful harmonies. The opening movement, *Largo ma non troppo – Allegro*, begins with an extended slow introduction. In the allegro section, two themes encounter each other, the first spirited and with a dotted rhythm, the second gently lilting and to be played *dolce*. During the course of the movement, La Tombelle cleverly intertwined these two ideas and the theme of the slow introduction, which continually leads to musical *déjà vu* effects. The graceful *Allegretto assai scherzando* also plays with two contrasting elements, the bouncing quaver figure from the beginning and a cosy motif with long sustained notes, prompting associations with La Tombelle's hurdy-gurdy. This rather simple scherzo is enlivened by pizzicatos, rhythmic shifts and an unexpectedly complex imitative passage. The slow movement is marked *Adagio con molto espressione* – a highly emotional chant that is rhythmically extraordinarily differentiated and chromatically coloured. A passionate melody straddles the more animated middle section, accompanied by pulsating triplets. Perhaps the most interesting movement is the energetic finale, *Allegro con brio*. All four instruments begin in unison, stating the strikingly accentuated main idea, but quickly fan out for a nimble-footed game with the musical building blocks. Towards the end of the movement, themes from the opening movement and the scherzo return like old acquaintances.

A remarkable work, according to a reviewer after the premiere in January 1896, “accentuated by witty details”. Shortly afterwards, the Académie des Beaux-Arts honoured it with its prestigious “Prix Chartier” for outstanding chamber music.

Eva Blaskewitz

Translation: Viola Scheffel



## MANDELRING QUARTETT

The Mandelring Quartett's trademark is its expressivity and phenomenal homogeneity. At the same time, their approach to music is always both emotional and personal. Founded in 1983, the ensemble is winner of major competitions, among them the ARD International Music Competition and the Premio Paolo Borciani. Today their performing commitments take the quartet to international musical centres such as Vienna, Paris, London, Madrid and New York. In addition, their concert diary includes regular tours to the European neighbouring countries, the U.S., South America and Asia. They are also warmly welcomed as guest performers at leading festivals such as the Schwarzenberg and Hohenems Schubertiade, Niederrhein Musikfestival, Ludwigsburger Schlossfestspiele, Kuhmo Chamber Music and Montpellier Festival. The HAMBACHERMusikFEST 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 celebrated its 30th birthday in 2013 in the Berlin Radialsystem V with a project called "3 from amongst 30", five concerts at each of which the audience was invited to select a programme of three works from a list of thirty immediately before the start.

Numerous prize-winning CD recordings (Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik, International Classical Music Awards nominations a.o.) testify to the quartet's exceptional quality and wide-ranging repertoire. The productions with works by Schubert and Schumann, but especially the complete recordings of the string quartets by Shostakovich and Mendelssohn were acknowledged as new reference recordings. The recordings of Leoš Janáček's String Quartets and of Brahms' String Quintets and Sextets have also received numerous recognitions. The current release is the first of two volumes with French repertoire.

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