

Piano Quartets

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There are probably many different criteria for listing standard chamber music works, so it may be difficult to agree on what works should be included in a standard list. However, a chamber musician, particularly a pianist, who would like to start acquainting himself or herself with the literature, might appreciate any help in the daunting task. And so I shall essay to attempt such a list.

Mozart

Without a doubt the first works recommended would be the two piano quartets of Mozart. He contracted to write three quartets in 1785 for Hoffmeister when the combination of piano, violin, viola, and cello was still rather unusual. Mozart treated all four instruments as equals, a novel development, but the publisher complained they were too hard and refused to pay for them, so Mozart quit after writing two. The more familiar is the G minor, K. 478, with three movements, all gems. It is perhaps more balanced for the strings than the second Quartet in Eb major, K. 493. The second movement, Larghetto, is particularly delicate and lovely. The finale is again an inventive Rondo.

Beethoven

There is a piano quartet version of what was originally a wind and piano quintet by Beethoven, Piano Quartet, Op. 16 in Eb major. Published in 1801, this is a delightfully melodic work, not quite as hard as many quartets. The opening Grave, moves into an Allegro ma non troppo with three main themes. The Andante cantabile is delightfully ornamented. The final movement is a Rondo, complete with a jaunty tune, and high spirits.

Mendelssohn

I will mention in passing the three piano quartets by Felix Mendelssohn, opus numbers 1,2, & 3, written when he was only thirteen! They are somewhat simplistic, with florid, difficult piano parts, and simple string writing. I would not recommend them as standard works, but they are fun to read through.

Schumann

The next major work I would select is the Piano Quartet in Eb major, Op. 47 by Robert Schumann. It is the first masterful quartet of the Romantic era, written in 1842 immediately after his three string quartets, op. 41. Of four movements, it begins with a hymn like introduction and then a vigorous, motoric first movement. The second movement is like a Mendelssohnian scherzo, quick and magical. The Andante is highly romantic, a song of love, allegedly to his wife, Clara. The final movement is almost manic, with exuberant themes, one after another, pouring forth.

Brahms

Perhaps the highest achievements of romantic piano quartet writing are the three quartets of Johannes Brahms. Each is a masterpiece in itself. The first two were written in tandem around 1857, and served to introduce Brahms when he relocated in Vienna, the music capital of Europe.

Possibly the first, Piano Quartet in G minor, Op. 25 is the more popular. The first movement, based on a four note figure, is rich with inventiveness and vigor. The second movement, entitled Intermezzo, has muted strings and a wistful melody played over a driving, insistent rhythm. The third movement, Andante, manages to be both stately, warm and expressive, all simultaneously. The finale, a bawdy Rondo alla Zingarese, pleases both audiences and players with its drama and fun. It has four themes, pressing onto a molto presto ending.

The second Quartet, in A major, Op. 26, demonstrates Brahms's habit of composing matching works at the same time, with a variant style of working out his material. The A major Quartet is more gentle and reflective in the first two movements. The Scherzo gallops along, alternating between a plaintive melody and a turbulent trio. The Finale, Allegro, is another folk tune in Hungarian style, but much more processed and cerebral than the first's Zingarese movement - a variant of the style.

The third Quartet, Op. 60 in C minor, was written about the same time as the other two, in the agitated period around the death of Robert Schumann in 1856, but set aside for 17 years and then reworked by Brahms in 1873. It is the only work that he ever made a programmatic allusion to - referring to the younger Werther of Goethe's novel, who kills himself for unrequited love of his friend's wife. He transposed the work to C minor, and its dramatic first movement is colored by the descending second - a recurrent, yearning, tragic gesture. The second movement, a Scherzo, is in F minor, with a disturbingly misplaced accent. In the third movement, in E Major, one finds a deeply moving love song, possibly a restatement of his affection for Clara Schumann. [This movement is the favorite of many musicians.] The finale, Allegro comodo, was composed anew, and reflects an autumnal, more wistful, I think, point of view. It often reminds me of a chilly wind fluttering leaves. All of these magnificent works are very difficult for piano and strings, but possibly the most rewarding of piano quartets.

Dvorak

There are two wonderful piano quartets by Antonin Dvorak. The first, in D major, op. 23, is optimistic and charming. It was written shortly after his marriage and his first successful works had been published. The first movement is somewhat Schumannesque with a theme with varied rhythms. The second is the best movement with a series of variations on a folk melody, very Slavic. The last movement is perhaps weaker; it combines a scherzo and finale, but even this movement is fresh and enjoyable.

Dvorak's second Quartet, op. 87, in Eb major, is quite different - a big, muscular, fully developed work of an assured composer. The first movement is powerful, Allegro. The second movement is an Adagio in six flats, with exquisite melodies and fluctuating moods. The third movement, Scherzo, I call the "zither movement", because the piano part mimics café music in the back streets of Eastern Europe. The finale, again in six flats, is a rollicking folk tune, bounding along to a grand finale.

Faure

In 1877 Gabriel Faure, at age 27, suffered a romantic rejection and dissolution of his betrothal. He turned to chamber music and produced his greatest chamber work, the Piano Quartet, op. 15 in C minor. The first movement manages to be both lively and dignified, with florid piano writing. The second movement, a Scherzo, has strings playing pizzicato over a carefree melody; later the strings are muted. The whole movement is airy, sparkling. In the Adagio, a superb movement, he is working through his grief; it starts most tragically, later warms to a serenade, but dies away in an echo of the beginning. The finale, has a driving rhythm, galloping in the piano, with soaring melodies in the French manner. It leads to a joyous coda. The whole work is suffused with Faure's interesting harmonies, not quite yet Impressionistic.

Turina

Unfortunately the twentieth century has not furnished a great supply of piano quartet works, perhaps none to include in a list of standard works, but I would like to mention the Piano Quartet, op. 67, of Joaquin Turina, a Spanish composer. This is a melodic, colorful piece of four movements, all with a Spanish flavor, more modern chords. It may be easier for piano than many of the other works listed, but is very enjoyable. Try it out.

There are a myriad of other works, so that one never knows where to quit, but, I think, this is at least a beginning. Perhaps other fine works, if not so well known, can be an addendum later.

That's it, folks. Happy playing!