

String Quartet in E minor, Op. 121

Dichotomies of Innovation and Tradition in Gabriel Fauré's "Swan Song"

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Regardless of their medium or genre, works of art may present challenges for later artists to confront. The legacy of earlier masterpieces exerts a staggering force. For example, the remnants of Classical civilizations dictated paradigms of fine taste in architecture and sculpture during the Renaissance. Likewise, the strict etiquette of ballet is anchored to steps established by Louis XVI and his courtiers of Versailles. Artists of all eras tread a fine line: emulating the geniuses of past ages places their work solidly within an established tradition, but they must also express their own artistry and individuality if they are to win their own place in the pantheon of great art. Breaking with the past may damage or enhance the artist's place in history.

The sole string quartet of Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), Op. 121 in E minor, owes much to the weight of tradition. Exhibiting a strange duality between youthful creativity and a contemplative, sage-like atmosphere, the piece is in this regard representative of the composer himself. Trained in the formal tradition of counterpoint since the age of nine at the École Niedermeyer in Paris, Fauré exhibited lifelong deference to the erudite style of composition amidst the revolutionary musical changes occurring at the turn of the twentieth century. He pioneered a distinctively “French” aesthetic. In fact, certain scholars have claimed that his music is “non-exportable” beyond the borders of his homeland.¹ During the fin de siècle, other French composers sought to tear away historical conventions. For example, Claude Debussy justified his innovative compositional techniques, claiming exemption from tradition due to his familiarity with it: “True enough, I feel free...I don't write in the fugal style because I know it”.² In contrast, Fauré's contributions to the French canon of classical music were subtle, forward-thinking innovations which refreshed creative possibilities without destroying the musical dome of antiquity. In this respect, Fauré's string quartet is unique, but “free” in a manner which differs from that of his slightly younger (and perhaps more hot-headed) contemporary Debussy.

Although Fauré wrote a significant amount of chamber music, he adamantly delayed confronting the most ambitious genre of chamber music – the string quartet – until the very end of his life. Composed during the year before his death in September 1924, this oeuvre may be regarded as a veritable “swan song”. However, rather than an acquiescent farewell to life, the piece is wrought with hidden tension. In a letter to his wife, Fauré states that the quartets of Beethoven (who spectacularly redefined the genre after Haydn established it) should cause any man attempting the string quartet “to

¹ Edward R. Philips, *Gabriel Fauré: A Research and Information Guide*, Second Edition (Routledge: New York, 2011), 144. Philips states that Louis Aguettant identifies Fauré as being non-exportable to foreigners, “quintessentially French” or in other words ‘too French to travel.’

² Pierro Weiss and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd Edition (Belmont: Thomson-Schirmer, 2008), 356, from Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London: Cassel, 1962).

be *terrified* of it”.³ Feelings of insecurity due to the imposition of the past are certainly not unprecedented. After Beethoven’s momentous Symphony No. 9 (and its eight formidable precursors) Brahms hesitated for twenty years before publishing his first symphony. Beethoven himself opted to write string trios, piano trios, and even a string quintet before challenging the established string quartet masterpieces by Haydn and Mozart.

Given these examples, one cannot fault Fauré for his misgivings. The point remains that even if Op. 121 was written under a cloud of apprehension and reserve, the resulting composition benefited from these very conditions. Aware of his position between two ages of musical and aesthetic thought, Fauré encapsulates the old and the new in his string quartet by cautiously filtering ingenuity through a sieve of discretion; a lifetime of experience tempers the work. When viewed in this comprehensive manner, formal and thematic complexities, harmonic idiosyncrasies, and innovative use of counterpoint can be addressed in the *Quatuor à cordes*. The sum of these elements comprises a quest for aesthetic equilibrium in a work that would be the capstone for nearly eight decades of musical output. One must remember that the need for compromise was not unfamiliar to Fauré. Even in administrative aspects – take for example Fauré’s mediating role between the Société Nationale de Musique and the Société Musicale Indépendante, his moderate actions as head of the Conservatoire – “restraint and elegance “are qualities that numerous scholars identify in Fauré’s composition.⁴ In reference to other quartets of the age (namely those of Ravel, Debussy, and Franck), Fauré’s own composition is remarkable due to his subtle incorporation of traditional elements within the emerging “French” style of chamber music. Through careful examination of Fauré’s last composition, one may observe that the piece comprises a quiet but profound farewell to life. Liberated from the need to display novelty, yet flexible within the bounds of tradition, Op. 121 stands as an independent enigma within the great French tradition of chamber music.

Introduction: Aesthetic and Historical Background

In discussing the late nineteenth-century aesthetics of Fauré, Carlo Caballero makes a clear distinction between the values of sincerity and *arrivisme*. The latter term was officially coined in 1903 by the Académie Française to designate the “tendency to use whatever means necessary to gain worldly recognition.”⁵ Those who sought rapid musical renown through “shock value” were soon

³ J. Barrie Jones, *Gabriel Fauré – A Life in Letters* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1989), 202.

⁴ Robert Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré* (Eulenburg Books: London, 1979), 3.

⁵ *arrivisme* - « disposition à user de n'importe quel moyen pour se pousser dans le monde, » gr.bvdep.com, Le Grand Robert, 2 April 2013, University of Minnesota Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota, in-text translation mine.

known as *arrivistes*, acquiring their reputation through passing vogues. Fauré himself used the neologism in 1910, condemning such action and expressing a measure of rue over the current “era of operators [*faiseurs*] and *arrivistes*.”⁶ Caballero goes on to note that Fauré was more inclined to a “noble, disinterested career,” as modeled to him by his father-in-law Emmanuel Fremiet. This proclivity towards “disinterest” does not comprise a cold, detached view of art but rather conveys a refreshing lack of concern towards society’s trends. Fremiet (and his son in law after him) demonstrated an unwillingness to bend to fashionable whims, keeping instead the lofty ideal of sincerity close to their hearts. At the height of the *arriviste* frenzy, Paul Landormy also disparaged the loss of a musical age:

This was not the time for unhurried careers that bring a man glory in his old age or in the grave....The rush to success was general....Art took on an aggressive aspect it had never presented before. This was no longer the age of works pondered for many years, patiently polished and repolished.⁷

This description of *arrivisme* stands in direct contrast to the way in which Fauré approached his own quartet. Starting with his Violin Sonata No. 1 in A (1875-76), Fauré’s steady output of chamber music spanned fifty years. The elderly Fauré finally confronted a genre that he had indeed pondered for many years, but only during the last months of his life. There is no evidence to suggest that Fauré harbored earlier aspirations toward the creation of a string quartet. However, his deference for the string quartet was, in a sense “polished and repolished” by a historically defined sensitivity to the ambition that the genre represented. The string quartet has shaped the French conception of *all* chamber music since the eighteenth century:

In France the string quartet, from those of Cherubini to the single example of Debussy, is certainly the form that takes on the greatest significance. The entire concept of chamber music gravitates around it, even as that concept evolves... After 1850, influenced by the revelation of Beethoven’s last works (among others), composers considered the string quartet the speculative genre par excellence, which could only be the *fruit of long experience* [emphasis mine].⁸

Fauquet notes the significance of Fauré’s self-reference to themes from his first period. In this respect, the reappearance of several melodies under a slightly new guise, tempered by a lifetime’s work, complements the urge to carefully approach the esteemed genre. In Op. 121, Orledge identifies themes from the unfinished Violin Concerto, Op. 14 (written 1878-79, performed for the Société Nationale de Musique in 1880). Both orchestral and soloistic in their original form, the themes have been recycled into a more intimate medium. Fauré reworks his youthful creation with a *sagesse*

⁶ Albert Bertelin, “Quelques souvenirs sur Gabriel Fauré,” *Musique et theatre* (1 April 1925):14, cited in Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

⁷ Paul Landormy, *La musique française après Debussy*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1943), p. 41, cited in Callabero, p. 21.

⁸ Joël-Marie Fauquet, “Chamber Music in France from Luigi Cherubini to Claude Debussy,” in *Nineteenth Century Chamber Music*, ed. Stephen Hefling (New York: Routledge, 2004), 291.

acquired through time.⁹ Thus, the quartet as a “fruit of long experience” corresponds directly to the aesthetic of sincerity, an artistic value that Landormy fears was effaced by *arrivisme*. Sincerity is therefore worth mentioning here in a musical sense; Fauré sees the string quartet (particularly those of Beethoven, as we shall see) to be the ideal vessel for the expression of true artistic personality.

Fauré’s interest in the string quartet’s historical development can be traced beyond his surviving epistolary records. A quiet man who was more inclined to write music than manifestos, he left relatively few primary sources (with the exception of his letters, collected and published by Jean-Michel Nectoux). Given this situation, it is important to consult other available resources. In his preface to Josephe de Marliave’s book on Beethoven’s string quartets, Fauré’s reverent tone is evident. There, he holds Beethoven in highest esteem, even to the point of personally shouldering the “sad and honoured privilege” of introducing the work of a genius whose musical output was cut too short.

Those who pass by will at least read my name and know my sorrow, and should they stay to examine this fine work, the labour of loving and skilful hands, they will share too the realization of my grief.¹⁰

This sentiment of “grief” implies a reflective sadness, bemoaning what *could have been* had Beethoven lived a life as full and long as Fauré’s own seventy-nine years. Since these opening remarks were penned for De Marliave in April 1924 – just months before the completion of his own quartet in September, followed by his death on November 4th – this expression of regret is especially poignant. Lamenting Beethoven’s curtailed genius, Fauré reveals his own heightened sensitivity to and reverence for the genre. In this regard, Fauré’s words perhaps figure as a set of precursory reflections before undertaking his own quartet. In light of the work he would soon produce, Fauré details exactly what distinguishes the brilliance of Beethoven, addressing his readers in a prescriptive fashion, yet retaining a reflective tone that borders on the internal dialogue of a journal entry:

Each of these quartets is in itself an achievement of art and genius, and has a right to respect and consideration, demands the closest attention to detail, and, on the part of a conscientious critic, a proper understanding of the spirit that gave it birth, of its form, whether classical or re-created anew, or entirely novel, of its technique and of its style. He must realize the promise of the first quartets...; then must be defined the slow but uninterrupted upward progress of the inner conscientiousness, of the inspiration, style, technique, from voluntary imitation to free creation.¹¹

In this sweeping review, Fauré outlines the standards he will apply to his own Op. 121 string quartet. The marked emphasis on the necessity of “inner conscientiousness” supports the notion that Fauré maintains a personal, self-regulated approach to the genre. Merged with the self-imposed pressure to create a masterpiece capable of reflecting a lifetime’s accumulation of musical maturity,

⁹ Orledge, 72-73.

¹⁰ Gabriel Fauré, in a preface to Josephe De Marliave’s *Beethoven’s Quartets*, trans. Hilda Andrews (New York: Dover, 1961), v.

¹¹ Fauré, preface to De Marliave, v-vi.

“conscientiousness” may also have been an important factor during his compositional process. While Fauré does not explicitly exalt the string quartet, we do know that he considered chamber music as a whole to merit much esteem, as he wrote: “Indeed, in [chamber music], as in symphonic music, you’ll find real music and the sincerest translation of a personality.”¹² With this capacity for musical sincerity in mind, considered in combination with his 1924 discussion of the quartets of Beethoven, it is possible to regard Op. 121 as Fauré’s personal conception of the pinnacle of his musical career.

But how does one approach such a lofty ideal? Fauré himself outlined his apprehension in a letter to his wife from 1924: “I’ve started a Quartet for strings, without piano. This is a genre which Beethoven in particular made famous, and causes all those who are not Beethoven to be *terrified* of it!”¹³ Similar pressure in the wake of Beethoven’s looming shadow was articulated by other composers, even beyond the borders of France. In the wake of this commanding musical force, Tchaikovsky expressed a similar mix of trepidation and inspiration:

From time to time, though, I would set about studying a Beethoven symphony. How strange! This music would cause me to feel sad each time and made me an unhappy person for weeks. From then on I was filled with a burning desire to write a symphony—a desire which would erupt afresh each time that I came into contact with Beethoven’s music. However, I would then feel all too keenly my ignorance, my complete inability to deal with the technique of composition, and this feeling brought me close to despair...¹⁴

Such feelings of helplessness and ineptitude were felt even in a nationalist’s sphere of existence, where the tradition of Western Europe was mingled with a freer, nationalistic musical articulation. In France the quartet was even more stringently considered to be the “speculative genre par excellence”, the definitive criteria of a composer’s worth. Such high esteem for the genre evolved into a near coming-of-age rite¹⁵; both Debussy and Ravel wrote their spectacular quartets much earlier in their lives, ages 29 in 1893, and 28 in 1903, respectively.

Even among the older generation of French composers, the string quartet was placed upon a pedestal and regarded with both respect and trepidation. Camille Saint-Saëns (Fauré’s primary mentor at the École Niedermeyer and thereafter for nearly sixty years) also expressed reluctance to approach

¹² Fauré to Marie Fauré, 22 August 1906, *Lettres intimes*, ed. Philippe Fauré-Fremiet (Paris : La Colombe, 1951), p. 121, cited in Caballero, 12.

¹³ Jones, 202.

¹⁴ Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, « Автобиография (Autobiography) », in « Die russische Musik und ihr berufenster Vertreter' », *Nord und Süd* 54 (1890), English text translation by Louis Sundkvist, 2009, <http://www.tchaikovsky-research.net/en/Works/Articles/TH317.html>, accessed April 5, 2013.

¹⁵ Not exactly a successful coming-of-age rite for Ravel, in fact; as his final submission for the Prix de Rome after four failed attempts, the quartet was rejected and even criticized by his mentor Fauré (to whom the piece was dedicated). However, others appreciated the work; Debussy wrote to Ravel, pleading “In the names of all the Gods, and in my own, please do not [modify even the Quartet’s dynamics].” (« Au nom de tous les Dieux et, au mien, si vous le voulez bien, ne faites pas cela. ») Claude Debussy to Maurice Ravel, 4 March, 1904, *Correspondance*, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005), 830.

the string quartet after Beethoven. The Société Nationale de Musique promoted instrumental music rather than the state-sponsored genre of opera. As founders of this organization, Saint-Saëns and Bussine were keenly aware of the string quartet's importance, as befit the cultivation of French chamber music.¹⁶

For Saint-Saëns, any intimidation felt towards the genre was translated into personal obligation, serving as a model of creativity and acting for him as a "Fountain of Hippocrene."¹⁷ Also confronting the genre later in life (in 1899 at the age of 64), the first string quartet of Saint-Saëns takes a more traditionalist route even despite the recent groundbreaking example of Debussy. Saint-Saëns adheres to a formal structure of four movements, strong reliance on homophonic string writing, and experimentation with cyclic form. A quarter-century later, Fauré's three-movement work, his proclivity towards highly developed counterpoint, and his rejection of cyclic form directly differ with the choices of his mentor. In this respect, the two quartets – that of the master and that of the one-time apprentice – complement one another. Such comparison is a fitting reflection of their near father-son relationship ("*presque filial*").¹⁸ However, in some aspects, the apple does not fall far from the tree. Fauré's quartet does share similarities with the first quartet of his mentor: neither work was commissioned and both are written in the key of E minor. Even their opus numbers (Op. 112, Op. 121) are similar (although more likely by pure chance than by design).

While writing the Op. 121 quartet, Fauré had doubts about its potential success and artistic durability. Continuing in his letter to his wife, Fauré admits that "Saint-Saëns was always afraid, and only attempted [the string quartet] towards the end of his life. He did not succeed as he did in other kinds of composition. So you can well imagine that I am frightened too."¹⁹ Despite the different ways in which composers contributed to the string quartet genre, after Beethoven, their achievements are retrospectively subject to severe standards. Realistically, Fauré's approach to the genre should be examined alongside examples of other quartets by his contemporaries (within the style of the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century French tradition of chamber music). In this way the balance between innovation and tradition can be addressed, in order to underscore the musical features that may have resulted from his trepidation towards the genre.

¹⁶ Peter J. Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, *Norton Anthology of Western Music. Volume I: Ancient to Baroque*, 6th Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 751.

¹⁷ A redundant expression here, given the fact that the name Hippocrene is derived from *hippos* 'horse' + *krēnē* 'fountain'. Refers to the mythical fountain that sprung from Pegasus's hoof when he struck a rock on the Muses' sacred Mount Helicon; font of artistic inspiration. Fauquet, 307.

¹⁸ Gabriel Fauré, *La Revue musicale*, 1 February 1922, p. 97, cited in Jean-Michel Nectoux, « Correspondance Saint-Saëns Fauré. I Saint-Saëns et Fauré, » *Revue de musicologie*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (1972): 66, accessed 4 April 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/927664>

¹⁹ Jones, 202.

1. Complexities of Thematic and Formal Structure

Several observations may be made in regard to Fauré's conception of form and thematic use in the string quartet. Compared with string quartets of his younger contemporaries (Ravel and Debussy), certain of Fauré's organizational choices break from standards of the time. The most obvious anomaly is the number of movements in the work. Lacking a true scherzo movement, the overall balance of the quartet seems to be compromised. Especially in comparison with the classic four-movement pattern that Haydn established and Beethoven – whom Fauré clearly admired – utilized for his early and middle quartets, Op. 121 seems disproportionate. Having heard the fourth movement of his pupil Ravel's string quartet, Fauré's criticism ("truncated, ill-balanced and, in a nutshell, a failure") is slightly inconsistent in comparison with the work he would later produce; Op. 121 exhibits its own set of irregularities.²⁰ Indeed, Fauré's rebuttal may have been a reaction to the impetuous and unstable alteration between 5/8 and 3/4 meters, but Ravel does maintain a balanced organization of overall structure. Ravel, Debussy, Franck, and Saint-Saëns all adhered to the four-movement model in their quartets, implementing light or tripping scherzo movements as foils to denser slow movements. In Ravel's case, the rhythmically driven Scherzo contrasts with the opening movement (from which several lush and sweeping themes originate). Without the buoyant, glittering character of the Scherzo, the entire quartet would seem asymmetrically inclined towards a more opaque sound world.

Fauré chose to enact large-scale balance by other means. From a historical perspective, the compositional process itself reveals that the *Andante* movement serves as the center of gravity for the quartet, an anchor around which the first and third movements find equilibrium. Fauré composed the *Andante* first (September 9-13, 1924) while on leave at his residential vacation home in Annecy.²¹ It is only *after* this point that he approached the two outer movements, imbuing each with a certain measure of the *Andante*'s contemplative repose and otherworldly calm. Nectoux deems the *Andante* to be

“...one of the finest pieces of string quartet writing. From start to finish it bathes in a supernatural light... There is nothing that is not beautiful in this movement with its subtle variations of light-play, a sort of white upon white... The sublime music sinks out of sight, where it carries on, rather than seeming to come to an end.”²²

This submerged ethereal character is further underscored by the bookend movements, amplifying the sense of stillness purveyed by the lack of a contrasting scherzo movement. This is not to say that each movement exhibits the same mood to the point of redundancy. Rather, this overarching

²⁰ Stephan Perreau, trans. Wil Gowans, program notes to *Fauré/Ravel String Quartets* (Naxos Online Music Library, Ad Libitum Quartet, CD 8.554722), <http://goo.gl/DKjPh>.

²¹ Jones, 202-203.

²² Jean-Michel Nectoux, cited in Perreau.

mood is the means by which Fauré unites and balances the quartet. In a retrospective reflection on the completed work, Fauré considers the addition of a scherzo movement:

"The quartet is completed, unless I decide to have a little fourth movement which might have a place between the first and the second. But since it is in no way a necessity I shall not tire myself by searching for it, at least not at the moment."²³

Fauré is fully conscious of the traditional four-movement quartet design, yet ultimately settles for an atypical design of three movements ("...since [a fourth scherzo movement] is in no way a necessity..."). In light of Fauré's deference to Beethoven, a non-standard number of movements is justifiable; Beethoven's own late period saw string quartets with more than four movements.²⁴ Given Fauré's self-admitted respect for Beethoven's string quartets, it is interesting that he chose to reduce rather than expand the number of movements, as if to draw further emphasis to his central *Andante*. Variety of character is achieved to some degree through the third movement *Allegro*, a substitute fusion of Finale and Scherzo. There, ever-present pizzicato lines create momentum beneath a melody that features offbeat accents and vacillation between duple and triple beat divisions. These elements suggest classic scherzo temperament without distracting from Fauré's treatment of what is truly a Finale movement. Fauré has refocused and sharpened his conception of symmetry within the quartet; without a stylistically contrasting scherzo between first and third movements, he dissolves any contrast that might detract from the "sublime", anchoring *Andante*. In this fashion, he provides an innovative, interior sense of stability to the string quartet while compromising neither its balance of musical moods, nor its overarching symmetry.

With respect to the internal design of each movement, the *Andante* again is especially notable for its lack of formal organization. Sonata form (particularly favored by Fauré) is utilized in *both* the first and third movements, whereas the second movement exhibits a mildly incongruous refusal to follow an identifiable form.

Chart 1

	Exposition	Development	Recapitulation
Movt 1 <i>Allegro</i> <i>Moderato</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primary theme, m. 1, E minor (I) - Secondary theme, m. 35, G major (VI) - m. 60 – cadence to V 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recalling earlier themes in new key areas, m. 78 - Harmonic sequences, m. 95 - Retransition in m. 105 recalls opening viola/cello dialogue, cadence to V 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Return of primary theme, m. 109 - Return of secondary theme, m. 133 - Traces of Primary and Secondary themes converge for E major coda, m. 168

²³ Gabriel Fauré in a letter to his wife, *Ibid*, 205.

²⁴ Consider for example, String Quartets No. 13 in B-flat major (Op. 130) – 6 movements, No. 14 in C-sharp minor (Op. 131) – 7 movements, No. 15 in A minor (Op. 132) – 6 movements. On the other hand, Fauré's reduction in the number of movements recalls the single-mindedness and intimacy of the sonata; several of Beethoven's piano sonatas featured a two or three movement design, including No. 8 ("Pathétique"), No. 14 ("Moonlight"), No. 21 ("Waldstein"), and No. 23 ("Appassionata").

Movt 3 <i>Allegro</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Short primary theme in tonic, m. 1. Thematic pattern spun out until the secondary theme in modal region of G, m. 42. - Brief cadence in V, m. 78 - Near-exact repetition of the opening material as transition to Dev. (m. 79) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uncharacteristically long development section, using primary and secondary themes but modulating to new key areas throughout - Achieves E major m., 172 - Never settles on true cadence, but reaches V area at m. 230 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recapitulation skips primary theme, begins with secondary theme fragments, modal region of D, m. 234 - Highly imitative texture continues, using previous motifs until E major coda at 303
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If the role of the *Andante* is ballast for Fauré’s three-movement vessel, it is significant that this middle movement shakes off traditional means of design. He respects the need for comprehensive organization of the quartet, yet simultaneously liberates the very movement that achieves this balance from the fetters of customary design. As shown above, Fauré deftly navigates the interface of innovation and tradition, blending thematic materials together freely as the movement unfolds without a predictable pattern. The *Andante*’s musical mood is necessary for the unity of the whole quartet at the same time as its freedom contrasts it with the sonata form organization of the first and third movements. In the same way, Fauré’s musical style has been classified as both highly developed and conscientious to tradition, all while drawing upon innovative undercurrents.

Chart 2 – Movement 2, Andante

Section	Measure	
a	1	Theme A (section a), implications of A Phrygian mode w/ low scale-degree 2 in melody
b	16	Theme B (section b) in viola, A Dorian, overlaps w/ augmented version of Theme A in cello (m. 24)
Fragments of Theme A = p	24	Rhythmic fragments of both Themes A and B are combined for a new, forward pressing melody (also see Figure 1, page 10), or “Progressive Motive” (section p).
p	33	“Progressive Motive” continues in melody over a chromatically rising bass line in Cello: m. 33 = E, 35=F, 36=F-sharp, 37=G, 38=G-sharp, 39=40.
c	48	Theme C (section c) introduced in E minor, wavering eighth-note semitone figure, undergoes chromatic sequence mm. 52-55
ap	68	Returning reference to Theme A in A Phrygian mode, but <i>skips</i> Theme B and cites “Progressive Motif” a third lower than before, creeps upward by semitone mm. 89-97
c	106	Theme C, introduced in A minor
b	116	Only now does Theme B re-emerge, implying F Dorian, out of sequence (and over melodic imitations of Theme A in Cello m. 125).
p	128	“Progressive Motive” again propels the movement forward, pushing upwards by semitone in Violin 1 melody
coda	153	Snippets of Theme A serve as conclusive material for A major final cadence.

Flowing easily from one section to the next, segments of the *Andante* movement are blurred and nebulous, as shown in Chart 2. The lack of form (while a seemingly unorganized choice) is nevertheless driven by a higher degree of coherence. Without concrete points of reference or return that sonata form provides, the movement constantly builds upon a limited number of pre-existing

melodic fragments (a, b, p, c). Vuillermoz states that Fauré’s compositions are “daring and intelligent beneath a timid and charming surface and characterized by allusion and ellipsis governed, nonetheless, by underlying logic...”²⁵ While Vuillermoz’s assessment was not in direct reference to Op. 121, the concept of “allusion and ellipsis” is especially applicable in the context of the *Andante*. In the opening bars, melodic material is presented which will later return in a condensed form, producing a motive that provides the primary developmental impetus for the movement. The first violin’s initial ascending melody contains two smaller segments that will become crucial in later moments of building and growth of tension. Difficult to distinguish at first, the two primary figures are hidden within a burgeoning melodic line that seems to defy clear identification of phrases. Constantly overlapping with other voices (cello, m. 4 and 9, viola m. 12), one is tempted to associate it with the Wagnerian technique of “endless melody”.²⁶ However, the crucial kernels hidden within the fifteen-measure long opening statement are soon clarified, and then condensed into a smaller musical cell. This resulting segment is material that will be used to push the formless movement forward (see Chart 2, “Progressive Motive”):

Figure 1

mm. 1-4

Andante

Progressive motive
mm. 24-27

Clearly, the “Progressive Motive” at m. 24 is derived from several smaller, initially stated rhythmic motives from m. 1-4. Each is a four-measure phrase, and as indicated in Figure 1, several tone patterns and rhythmic figures are interchanged and preserved (see Figure 1). Such recycling of thematic material helps blur the lines of formal organization in the *Andante* without losing focus of recently stated melodies; while it plays a *transitional* role, the “Progressive Motive” is essentially progressive due to its constantly evolving nature. Fauré’s treatment of the two phrases shown above

²⁵ Émile Vuillermoz, *Musiques d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès, 1923), viii.

²⁶ Fauré, like many other composers of the late nineteenth century, fell under the spell of Richard Wagner’s music, if only for a short time; Fauré and his friend Messager improvised quadrilles on themes of Wagner for their own amusement (70). However, despite this initial attraction, Nectoux remarks that he was one of the few to later thoroughly reject Wagnerian influence (72). Jean-Michel Nectoux, trans. J. A. Underwood, *Gabriel Fauré: His Life through his Letters* (London: Marion Boyars, 1984).

(one a primary theme, the other refashioned as transitional material) reveals a balance between the past and the need to progress into new territory. Referencing previous musical fragments, he subtly reminds listeners of what once was, even as he provides the impetus for the quartet to gather momentum. Vuillermoz’s identification of “allusion and ellipsis” therefore holds true in this context, just as the exchange of material between musical examples illustrates Fauré’s “underlying sense of logic.”

Returning to the first movement (*Allegro Moderato*), a notable instance of thematic singularity arises via the lonely opening viola statement. This four bar phrase is a lamenting introduction, with minimal accompaniment of half-step vacillation in the cello during mm. 3-4. In terms of form, it is difficult to pinpoint the function of this statement. The contour of the viola’s line irregularly strays from what may have been a simple E minor arpeggio, adding a terse raised scale-degree four before creeping up to scale-degree five (see Figure 7, pg. 22).

This element of unsettlement is manifested in reappearances of the viola theme. Varying at each entrance (m. 9, 17), it heralds in a progressive aspect. In fact, each successive entrance harmonically mirrors a propensity towards growth, similar to Beethoven’s use of large-scale progressive form. Each viola statement prepares a tonal region (e minor in m. 9, g major in m. 17) to which the remaining instruments respond. Despite the viola’s solemn character and insinuation of key, the first violin immediately contradicts this severity with a flowing melodic contour, propelling the ensemble forward with dotted rhythms.

Figure 2

Phrase Structure in the opening of <i>Allegro Moderato</i> , Mvt. 1		
A: Iteration	c: mm. 1-4 Viola statement	d: mm. 5-8, Strings complete thought melodically, cadence on E minor (i)
A¹: Reiteration	c¹: mm. 9-12 Viola statement	d¹: mm. 13-16 Strings complete thought melodically, cadence on B (V)
B: Spinning out	c²: mm. 17-18 Viola iteration INTERRUPTED	e: mm. 19-34 Viola arpeggio figure incorporated into a larger contrapuntal texture

From a larger perspective, each eight bar phrase comprises the *iteration* and *reiteration* of what Schoenberg calls “sentence structure” (iteration, reiteration, spinning out, or A, A¹, B)²⁷. A developed species of bar form, this structural method is prevalent in Western music. It should come as no surprise

²⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (Faber and Faber Limited: London, 1967), 21. (Specifically, Schoenberg labels these as the *repetition* and *continuation* portions of sentence structure.)

to encounter such means of shaping phrases in Fauré's music. However, his choice of sentence structure is particularly poignant in the opening of this quartet for several reasons. Listeners familiar with sonata form might expect to be presented with clear and memorable themes; after being subjected to development, recognizable melodies from the Exposition are even more satisfying upon their return in the Recapitulation. Rosen speaks of the sonata form as contributing a "new dramatic power to instrumental music".²⁸ A type of journey, sonata form traditionally grants wordless compositions the capacity to express a story of their own. This quality was especially championed by Beethoven, who adhered to earlier eighteenth-century models while expanding sonata form's potential in a more impassioned Romantic style. The theorist Alfred Bernhard Marx (1795-1866) analyzed the tendencies of sonata form during the time in which Beethoven's work premiered.

Marx moves away from earlier (and later notions) of musical form as a kind of template, or mold, into which one pours themes, episodes, and the like. His concept of form as a prototypical process is comparable to Goethe's famous work on the metamorphosis of plants, wherein a similarly conceived dynamic process is subject to infinite realizations... Marx reveals a process of progressive organic integration. Sonata form is shown to be the premier form of the age, as the form which allows maximal variety within an organically conceived unity.²⁹

With Beethoven clearly at the forefront of his mind during the composition of the quartet, Fauré also wields sonata form in an organic fashion, yet even more innovatively. Fauré undermines traditional conventions not by withholding or obscuring main musical subjects, but by fusing phrase structure with the very growth of the movement. Prolonged over twenty-four bars, the opening sentence diffuses thematic expectations. Although small fragments of phrases are presented, Fauré denies a clear-cut first subject by stretching out a single musical sentence until the introduction of the second subject at m. 35. Following Marx's theory, the resulting effect is one of development and growth, a progressive approach not unlike Beethoven's. The slow unraveling of the opening theme pervades the entire movement. Although other themes emerge (ex. m. 35), they arise out of material that is predominantly inspired by the opening viola strain. Fauré takes the concept of organic unity to an extreme (without resorting to unifying techniques of cyclic form, a method promoted by Franck but rejected by Fauré). Clearly, an exaggerated emphasis on sentence phrase structure has tinted the execution of the overall sonata form.

In the first movement, the subtle reemergence of the recapitulation also witnesses to Fauré's expanded conception of sonata form. Launching into the original B portion (the "spinning out") of the opening theme (see Figure 2, page 12), the recapitulation interrupts itself, using the previous four measures as both a reference to the A portion and a retransition out of the development. In unison by

²⁸ Charles Rosen, *The Sonata Forms* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: New York, 1988), 13.

²⁹ Scott Burnham, introduction to *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven: Selected Writings on Theory and Form*, by A. B. Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9-10.

octave, viola and second violin adapt the rhythm from m. 3, weaving a replacement anacrusis for the interrupted recapitulation. Fauré has constructed the moment of crucial return in his sonata form in an illusory fashion. This recapitulation is situated above the original cello counter-melody, its arrival veiled rather than triumphant.

Likewise, the Recapitulation of the third movement is also achieved in a non-standard way; Fauré skips the primary theme and begins the Recapitulation with the secondary theme (see Chart 1). After the unusually long Development, this deceptive return is difficult to distinguish, especially due to the imitative texture of the movement. Blurring these boundaries of perception, Fauré references traditional means of organization while subjecting them to innovative transformations.

2. *Harmonic Idiosyncrasies*

Fauré is well known for his blend of traditional and non-standard harmonies. This synthesis of styles is the very feature that distinguishes his music from both radical and traditionalist methods. As the culmination of a lifetime's work, Fauré's string quartet exhibits other elements of seamless, yet subtle variation. Even beyond harmonic elements, scholars have noted that Fauré's compositional approach during his late period is characterized by a seamless merging of formal elements. In this respect, the intimate fusing of modality and tonality is essential to Fauré's harmonic techniques; combined, they form a "unique and perfectly homogenous language."³⁰

The École Neidermeyer, where Fauré received his early musical training, fostered the study of church modes. Orledge notes that while Neidermeyer himself refrained from the use modal harmony, all the mature works of Fauré (to varying extents) incorporate it.³¹ Fauré's close relationship with Saint-Saëns proves to be another heavy influence on his harmonic language during his student years. Coming from a generation that was more entrenched in the Romantic style, Saint-Saëns' distinct musical presence also left a mark on Fauré. Nectoux claims that the aesthetic divergence between the two composers is clear-cut. Together, the "contour of lines, the length of syncopated rhythms, the harmonic sensuality are the principal characteristics of style of fin de siècle French music."³² Fauré's decision to compose a concerto for violin is perhaps a gesture of respect to his mentor (who composed three of them himself).

³⁰ Françoise Gervais, cited in Orledge, 235.

³¹ Orledge, 235.

³² Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Camille Saint-Saëns & Gabriel Fauré: Correspondance* (Paris: Société Française de Musicologie, 1994), 33 (my in-text translation).

« ...sinuosité des lignes, la langueur des rythmes syncopés, la sensualité harmonique sont les caractéristiques principaux du style de musique française. »

It is remarkable that the final stages of Fauré's composition acknowledge both the modal training of his youth as well as a more romantically indulgent past. Although the Op. 14 Violin Concerto is directly quoted, the youthful musical material in question gains maturity and intimacy within a string quartet setting. Melody should of course be considered in this respect, for it springs from the harmonic field. Orledge remarks that the removal of triplets create a smoother contour, and that the use of ties across the bar lines impart a sense of impetus.³³ While these observations hold sway in a thematic context, it is through the consideration of its essentially unchanged harmony that this phrase is significant.

Figure 3³⁴

Op. 14, mm. 134-138

Op. 121, mvt. 1, mm. 35-39

³³ Orledge, 72.

³⁴ Gabriel Fauré, *Concerto per Violino ed orchestra*, Op. 14 (Rome: P. Spada, 1985), 13-14. I have transposed the segment from Op. 14 cited here up a whole step from its original key of D minor, for ease of comparison purposes.

Apart from some additional passing tones and neighboring notes – used to create more tension and resolution beneath the melody (see Violin 2 and Viola, mm. 36-37 in Op. 121) – the basic chord qualities have remained the same. Even the texture of the Op. 14 excerpt is preserved during its resurrection in Op. 121. Because the original orchestration is in fact an expanded string quartet voicing, Fauré’s reapportionment of the material is especially fitting. The few modifications merely augment the modal quality of the harmony. While the added C-sharp and E in m. 36-37 created neighboring dissonance, they also imply a raised scale degree 4 over the cello’s G pedal. This gives a fleeting impression of the Lydian mode, which dissolves again in m. 38 through the reinstatement of C natural. This limited difference in harmony suggests that even in his old age, Fauré makes a nostalgic return to the modal-influenced style of his early years. The meeting of youth and old age is achieved gracefully, and demonstrates Fauré’s conviction in his own style of harmonization.

Although the decision to retain the basic harmonic setting indicates a degree of deference to the past, Fauré was certainly not in the dark when it came to recent musical trends. At the time of the composition of the string quartet in 1924, Fauré was fully aware of advancements in – and steps away from – tonal harmony. A man of the times, Fauré witnessed the monumental progress of Debussy and observed the early bitonality techniques of his mentee Honegger. Another pupil, Nadia Boulanger, remembers Fauré’s particular encouragement that his students find their own voices; yet, he himself adhered to other standards.³⁵ In an interview with Fauré’s biographer Nectoux, Boulanger remarks upon the strength of Fauré’s private musical convictions in a performance context:

Fauré used to play more for himself than for others...he played with a very beautiful sonority, but with discretion...Almost as if he was thinking to himself, you know. Somewhere Valéry once said: “The painter does not paint that which he sees, but that which will be seen.” And so [Fauré], he played for himself, all while thinking of that which should be seen in the music, which he didn’t need to externalize.³⁶

When extended to the realm of composition, these statements reinforce earlier conclusions. Fauré’s interior conception of harmony and his more austere style survived the multiple musical

³⁵ Nadia Boulanger, cited in “Nadia Boulanger: La rencontre avec Gabriel,” Alexandra Laederich, ed. *Nadia Boulanger et Lili Boulanger : Témoignages et études* (Lyon : Symétrie, 2007), 33.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 45 (my in-text translation).

...[Fauré] jouait plus pour lui-même que pour les autres...il jouait d’une sonorité très belle, mais avec une discrétion... Un peu comme s’il pensait, vous savez. Valéry dit quelque part: « Le peintre ne peint pas ce qu’il voit mais ce qui sera vu. » Et bien lui, il jouait pour lui-même, en se disant que ce qui devait être vu était dans la musique, qu’il n’avait pas besoin de l’extérioriser.

upheavals around him at the beginning of the 20th century. Without feeling compelled to externalize, even his treatment of harmony withstood the test of time. Copland claims that across the entirety of Fauré's output, harmonies (as well as themes and form) "have remained essentially the same, but with each new work they have all become more fresh, more personal, more profound."³⁷ Indeed, the passages from the Op. 14 Violin Concerto are now couched within a more intimate setting via chamber music. Although he did write some large orchestral pieces (*Pelléas et Mélisande* – Op. 80, *Masques et bergamasques* – Op. 121), Fauré saw chamber music as the ideal form of personal expression (see page 5, footnote 11). By reincorporating these themes in a string quartet, Fauré seems to have granted the music an additional degree of personal depth and meaningfulness. His choice to return to his own history through self-citation (also to modal traditions by way of harmony) reveals a deep reverence for not just his personal past, but for a greater past. Conservative measures taken within the quartet do not fetter Fauré's creativity, but instead connect his work to the high standards of earlier ages.

Retrospectively, these observations reveal a strikingly poignant measure of symmetry: old material written in Fauré's youth serves as a foundation for the virginal undertaking of a string quartet in his last full year of life. And yet, there remains a heightened strain of anxiety amidst the records of Fauré's correspondence. After the completion and successful premier of his Second Piano Quintet, Fauré felt artistic pressure even in his advanced years:

"Naturally a successful evening like tonight pleases me greatly. But what is *disturbing*, is that afterwards it is not simply a question of coming down to earth again, one must try to do even better."³⁸

For Fauré, the drive towards self-improvement was strongly ingrained, but not only because of lofty personal goals. Within the cadre of chamber music, this impulse was amplified to an even greater extent (due to the legacy of Beethoven's string quartets). In his discussion of poetic influence across time, Harold Bloom speaks of the masters of the past presenting a certain level of defiance to modern poets. This observation can also be expanded to the field of music, as well as to the other arts. However, even in a poetic context where language serves as the primary means of expression, the masters of the past do not pen overt provocations for future readers. Instead, Bloom speaks of a constant system of "misinterpretation", or correctives:

³⁷ Aaron Copland, "Gabriel Fauré, a Neglected Master," *The Musical Quarterly* 10 (1924): 576, accessed May 9, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/738475>.

³⁸ Gabriel Fauré, cited in Orledge, 182.

Poetic influence - when it involves two strong, authentic poets, - always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety, and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.³⁹

When transferring this concept to the realm of music, to the genre of a string quartet, where one deals with sounds and not words, this theory gains another aspect. Individual pitches do not carry concrete meaning as phonemes do; even combinations of pitches are incapable of carrying set semantic content as words can. But because of tonality's long-standing pull of tension and release, dissonance and consonance, music actually carries a great deal of connotative value via *harmony*.

Fauré was indeed subject to the anxiety of influence after Beethoven, although his consequent “misinterpretation” can be viewed more as the act of refashioning and reapportioning harmony. Ravel and Debussy's renditions of the string quartets are perhaps, in the words of Bloom, “caricatures” and “distortions”, as befits this elite definition of artistic influence. But these labels only hold true in the sense that each composer adapted an entirely novel, innovative use of harmony without fully abandoning tonality. If these actions were mildly leftist, then Fauré's own more harmonic choices within his string quartet demonstrate a sharp veer towards a corrective right. As Robert Orledge observed, “With Fauré harmony is never used purely for color and remains strongly functional,” contrary to Debussy's usage of harmony in his quartet.⁴⁰

Figure 4
Harmonic Organization in Conjunction with Form in Debussy's String Quartet, Movt. 1, Animé et très décidé

Exposition	Development	Recapitulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ m. 1 – primary theme, in G Phrygian, (loosely G minor) ▪ m. 12 – cadence on D (V), secondary theme in D minor, Phrygian ▪ Recurring sixteenth-note texture throughout ▪ m. 26 - primary theme returns, but in a mix of odd, unrelated keys (E-flat Mixolydian and A-flat Aeolian, then D-flat Mixolydian) ▪ m. 50 – B Dorian before a return to G (instead of the typical V at the end of an exposition) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ m. 75– the primary theme's motif repeated throughout, along with a new triplet texture, unique to the Development ▪ m. 92-96 – resolution to D (V) via E-flat and several modal modulations, but curiously in the <i>middle</i> of the development ▪ m. 97 – exclusive use of WT¹ scale ▪ m. 113 – B-flat Dorian, then shift in bass line to tri-tone ostinato figure for Retransition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ m. 138 – reappearance of primary theme, now with fuller chordal texture ▪ Continued triplet texture, as if to suggest that the process of becoming (usually privy to the development) has bled over into the recapitulation. ▪ m. 168 – D (V), but averted again ▪ m. 183 – cadential coda. Eighth notes are finally used as a closing gesture. ▪ Ends in G major, although preceded by an uncertain G Mixolydian (without the leading tone)

³⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 30.

⁴⁰ Orledge, 236.

To a certain degree, Debussy uses harmony across the each movement as coloration, and in a non-traditional fashion somewhat less as a structurally informative force. Although there are logical correspondences between general key areas and sections of the sonata form, these demarcations are not as clearly marked as in Fauré’s first movement of Op. 121. Orledge speaks of the Piano Trio (Op. 120, written 1922-23), noting how Fauré stabilizes tonality through overall musical design: “...harmonic development always went hand in hand with thematic development in [Fauré’s] invariably sequential approach...[providing] the listener with a feeling of security.”⁴¹ Likewise, solid harmony in Op. 121, although sometimes modally tainted, reinforces form. Although Debussy also uses sonata form in his quartet, his liberal use of tonal shifts act as an atmospheric wash, creating impressionistic textures instead of formal landmarks. In contrast, Fauré treats harmony as a functional means of distinguishing individual themes within the exposition, development, and recapitulation. Within the 1st and 3rd movements (where sonata form is employed), harmony is featured as an organizing force:

Figure 5 **Harmonic Organization in Conjunction with Form in Allegro Moderato, Mvt. 1**

Exposition	Development	Recapitulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ m. 1 – primary theme, E minor (i) ▪ m. 35 – secondary theme, G major (VI), then D major (II) ▪ m. 60 – restatement of opening theme, now in B, V. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ m. 78 – successive citation of first and second themes in A minor, then repeated in D. ▪ m. 95 – falling sequence by m3 (parallel downward motion in cello, m. 95 (A), 97 (G-flat), 99 (E-flat), 101 (C)) ▪ m. 105 – cadence in B (V) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ m. 109 – primary theme, E minor (i) ▪ m. 133 – secondary theme, E major (I), then B major (V) ▪ m. 168 - reprise of primary themes in E major coda section.

Although Fauré’s small-scale conceptions of harmony were “unmistakably personal, his harmonic conception did not allow him to begin in one key and end in another, the only exceptions being his favourite progression from minor to tonic major...”⁴² Op. 121 is a prime example of the latter; it begins in a brooding E minor, and closes in a triumphant E major. Debussy’s quartet, although branded as G minor for simplicity’s sake, undergoes many far-flung shifts in harmony. Even within the context of a standard sonata form, other musical elements (such as rhythmic motifs and texture) serve as the crucial organizational markers. Debussy’s quartet is cyclic in nature, and recurring motifs (which are often pungently modal) serve as the

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 186.

⁴² *Ibid*, 236.

glue; harmony therefore takes second place to the unique rhythmic/melodic characteristics of these returning themes. In contrast, harmony remains a strong, functionally essential force in Fauré's quartet.

Even from a rudimentary examination of the first movement, tonality – in a broad sense – is used to clearly define the framework of the movement. Fauré's personal reaction to the anxiety of influence is a purer, austere return to classic functionality. In comparison with the first movement of Debussy's string quartet, Fauré relies much more upon traditional tonality as a regulating force. Debussy's approach, while innovative and ingenious, is remarkable in some ways because of his heightened attention to elements outside of harmony. For Debussy, tonal centers become loose, colorful undertones for an exquisite overlay of shimmering textures and rhythms. Rather than straying farther left to a vague and impressionistic realm, Fauré's "act of creative correction" sends him veering right to a cleaner and more operative harmonization.

This is not to say that Fauré's conception of harmony always falls within classic boundaries. Not unlike Beethoven, Fauré also suffered from hearing loss during the last years of his life, and some scholars point to consequent irregularities in his third period works.⁴³ Symptoms appeared in 1902 and Fauré uneasily addressed the increasingly serious condition in 1910: "...my hearing goes from bad to worse. I can't tell you the torment it's causing me."⁴⁴ This auditory failure, according to Fauré's son, Philippe Fauré-Fremiet, was more a distortion of pitches than an erasure of sound. Such a selective affliction was particularly cruel. The pitches of extreme registers were adversely affected; Fauré "heard bass notes a third higher and treble notes a third lower."⁴⁵ During his last decade at the Conservatoire, Fauré struggled to maintain a normal semblance of professional life throughout these trials. As Nectoux observed, "It needs to be realized that [Fauré] too knew Schumann's torture and Beethoven's drawn out despair."⁴⁶

Scholars disagree over the possible effects that this hearing loss may have had on Fauré's third period works. Servières speaks of a "certain hardness, clumsiness", and disfiguring features

⁴³ Philips: Servières, 1930 – pg. 118, Chantavoine (whom, Philips claims, "clearly values Fauré's middle period works more than the late works"), 1924 – pg. 139, Aubert (claims to detect an element of "austerity" in the third-period works, a result of Fauré's deafness), 1946 – pg. 171, Biget-Mainfroy (who speaks of "l'équivoque de l'harmonie", the "suspicion" or "ambivalence of harmony"), 1997 – pg. 173.

⁴⁴ Gabriel Fauré, cited in Jean-Michel Nectoux, trans. Roger Nichols, *Gabriel Fauré: A Musical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 293.

⁴⁵ Philippe Fauré-Fremiet, cited in *Ibid*, 293.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 393.

that taint an otherwise masterful conclusion to a compositional career.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Orledge asserts that the changes of style between second and third style periods have perhaps been overestimated. “The deepening and internalization of Fauré’s musical thought in his final period has often been compared with that of Beethoven”.⁴⁸ Composing away from the piano, Fauré obviously had a strong aural imagery and a deeply ingrained, internalized conception of harmony. However, within the string quartet, there are several vulnerable moments where the integrity of Fauré’s inner ear comes into question. The musical result is often more intriguing than it is disfiguring. For example, in the *Andante*, the rules of voice leading are poignantly disregarded for memorable effect. Measure by measure, the progression sags by semi-tone in parallel motion:

Figure 6
(mm. 52-55, II, *Andante*)

The musical score for Figure 6 shows four staves: Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Cello. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The music begins with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. A 'dim.' (diminuendo) marking is placed above the first two staves, with a dashed line indicating the gradual decrease in volume. The Viola part is marked 'mf' and then 'p' (piano) at the end. The Cello part is marked 'mf' and 'dim.' with a dashed line. The overall effect is a gradual downward sliding motion across all instruments.

With the exception of the temporarily *tacet* viola line, each instrument sinks by half step across the diminuendo in order to effectuate a sense of fading or languishing. The intervals between Violin 1 and 2 parts are perfect 5ths, falling in direct parallel motion. In closer examination of the cello line, Fauré breaks even more voice-leading rules as the roots of each perfect fifth outlines a minor chord. In one perspective, this is similar to the technique of planing. However, in combination with the upward-striving triadic motion in the Cello line, the excerpt’s gradual downward sliding gives an overall impression of oblique motion.

⁴⁷ Georges Servières, *Gabriel Fauré* (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1930), 128 (my in-text translation).

« ...certaines duretés ou gaucheries... »

⁴⁸ Orledge, 21.

The highly chromatic Violin 1 melody that refuses to resolve also undermines the possible explanation of planing. This incessant string of dissonances stymies the effect of an easy, glassy downward wash (usually elicited by planing). From a certain perspective, although the Violin 1 line seems to *resemble* a melody, it too sinks chromatically measure by measure (D, D-flat, C, B); dragged downwards with the Cello's triads, the one-measure cells of harmony have usurped this "melody". It is interesting that Fauré (a prolific composer of *chansons* and therefore normally quite attentive to melodic lines in his part writing) has disregarded melody during these four measures.

These four measures may suggest that Fauré relied too much on his aural image, having lost the melody altogether, even if briefly. While Servières may consider this passage – neither a standard sequence nor an instance of planing – to be a *gaucherie*, this example of Fauré's poignant rule breaking may indeed stem from "deepening or internalization." Fauré himself was composing at a moment in his life when he was very aware of his own frail health.⁴⁹ The passage exhibits autumnal aspects, embodying the delicate beauty of decline and repose. Writing from his vacation estate at Annecy-le-Vieux, Fauré confirms speaks eloquently of these characteristics:

I do not think I have ever seen nature looking so beautiful, so resplendent. In the evening, around six o'clock, there is here a lighting effect, which spreads over an immense area and is deeply moving in its beauty. (6 August 1923)... At the moment we are having those marvelous autumn days – so heavenly because of the warmth, nature's colors, and the attractiveness of everything one sees. (9 September 1923).⁵⁰

The latter statement was penned just at as he was beginning the *Andante* (the first movement he was to complete). Clearly, the atmospheric repose of Annecy-le-Vieux during this unusually warm and long summer has seeped into the *Andante*. Just as he speaks of the spread out, ambient light, the above excerpt demonstrates an abstract scattering of voice leading principles in the interest of a lush, unhurried descent. Such evidence demonstrates Fauré's continued personal command of harmony despite his ailing health. Rather than a moment of

⁴⁹ Even earlier in Fauré's career, conflict between aural memory and auditory reception were noted. During the composition of his opera *Pénélope* at Lausanne in 1907, Fauré remarked: "...at that time my hearing was faulty, and when my fingers were hitting certain notes, it was *other notes* which I heard!" (19 April 1922), Barrie, 198. Clearly, there is a struggle and a disjunction between that which Fauré heard internally and that which he was physically perceiving.

⁵⁰ Barrie, 202.

Je ne crois pas avoir jamais vu la nature si belle, si resplendissante. Le soir, vers six heures, il y a ici un effet de lumière, répandu sur un espace immense, d'une beauté profondément émouvante. (6 August, 1923).⁵⁰... Nous avons actuellement des jours d'automne merveilleux par la température, par la coloration de la nature, par la douceur de tout ce qu'on voit. (9 September 1923) Fauré-Fremiet, 289.

intellectual weakness, this segment of the *Andante* instead illustrates the restrained sweetness (*la douceur*) during the downswing of the cycle of life.

3. *Innovative Use of Counterpoint*

Figuring among the final generation of Romantic composers during the fin-de-siècle France, Fauré is often remembered for his beautiful melodies above exquisite harmonies. However, his compositional language extends beyond these characteristics: sophisticated instances of counterpoint appear in the string quartet to great effect. Like Brahms, Fauré references the strict style of composition through contrapuntal means. However, while Brahms' consistent incorporation of counterpoint in his works was due to the thriving Bach revival, Fauré's inspiration is tied to the techniques to which he was exposed while at the *École Neidermeyer*. As an institution that was "distinguished by the attention it paid to choral singing," Fauré exhibited a fondness for vocal polyphony even in his old age.⁵¹ In his preface to Georges Jean-Aubry's article from 1916, Fauré makes clear his hopes for the future of French music: a return to "serious and pure form."⁵² This standard, linked to the use of learned compositional technique, is evident throughout his life and within his string quartet. Through an examination of contrapuntal techniques in Op. 121, it is possible to observe this manifestation of Fauré's early training.

One of the most obvious characteristics of the part writing within the string quartet is the constantly overlapping lines; relying upon polyphonic means, Fauré weaves harmonies together beneath an ever-shifting field of instrumental voices. Canon and fugue were used predominantly during Fauré's third period, a reflective gesture towards not only the schooling of his youth, but also towards late Beethoven.⁵³ Orledge notes that despite this proclivity, the part writing is never "dry or academic, turning imperceptibly into close imitation if there is any threat to the harmonic scheme."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Jean-Michel Nectoux, trans. J. A. Underwood, *Gabriel Fauré: His Life through his Letters* (London: Marion Boyars, 1984), 14-15.

⁵² Gabriel Fauré, preface to Jean-Aubrey, Georges, *La musique française d'aujourd'hui* (Paris : Perrin et Cie., 1916), Xiii.

⁵³ Consider for example the initial fugue from Beethoven's Op. 131 String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor.

⁵⁴ Orledge, 258.

Despite the sparseness of the very opening of the first movement, Fauré already provides a clue towards the polyphonic and imitative texture that will later develop:

Figure 7
(mm. 1-5, I, *Allegro*)

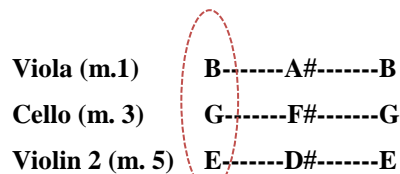


Shifted linearly over by two beats, the wavering cello line resembles the rhythmic nature of the viola’s melody. In combination with the returning tone pattern (also present in the viola line (m. 3), it is clear that each line is intrinsically bound by the same musical idea. Even once the true first theme has entered with the first violin at m. 4, Fauré carefully forges another allusion to these earlier characteristics. Hidden within the Violin 2 line – a secondary voice at this point in time – similarities are imbedded:

Figure 8
(mm. 5-6, I, *Allegro*)



This same returning tone pattern, traced from the Viola’s initial statement (m. 3), the Cello’s reply, and the hidden Violin 2 voice reveals another interesting method of organization:



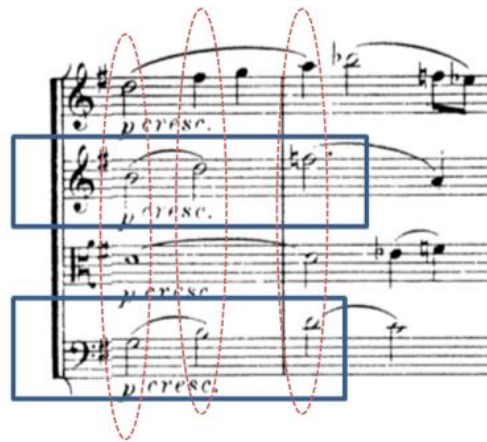
E minor triad, outlined by successive entrances

Tying together the initial viola lament with the most substantial primary theme, Fauré sets a precedent of imitative style across thematic boundaries, even to the point of outlining his tonal center through imitation. When considering the opening to be a large sentence-structure (see Figure 2, page 11), it is during the “spinning out” at m. 17 that the true imitative style settles in. After the viola’s c^2 statement at 17, e imitates the triadic contour and embellishes the musical idea via imitation between the two violin lines. This figure spreads upwards across the staff by entrances of two measures (mm. 19-26 shown below).



In accordance with his choice of phrase structure and its “spinning out”, Fauré chooses to expand his conception of imitative part writing. This mildly imitative aspect will permeate each movement; serving as a cohesive force, such a practice suggests that Fauré’s early training was a strong influence across his career as well as across structural boundaries during his final composition. Hidden within the second *cantando* theme in the first movement, traces of the opening viola motif are implanted, but within an accompanimental field:

Figure 9
(mm. 43-44, I, *Allegro*)



Both the cello and second violin frame a triad in half notes, moving in parallel motion to the melody while framing what is a simplified version of the viola’s opening motif’s outline. More significantly, the above excerpt occurs again during the “spinning out” phase of the sentence structured second theme; for example mm. 35-38 = A, mm. 39-42 = A¹, m. 43 marks the beginning of B). Again, Fauré’s broadens this development of the B area by implications of earlier material, all while moving forward thematically and harmonically. While the melody in the first violin is predominant throughout this contrasting secondary theme area, Fauré never resorts to a bland accompanimental texture. Instead, he subtly blends elements of the first theme into the entire movement.

Although such a technique lends a sense of organic unity to the piece, it is not cyclical in nature; Fauré references a returning imitative melody within a polyphonic context, and *not* a specific recurring theme itself. This choice is in direct contrast to César Franck’s cyclically constructed quartet. Motivic design and its contrapuntal enactment are in this way similar to

Beethoven's late quartets, in which "ideas spring from the same root, and the tiniest shoots reproduce in miniature the growth of the giant branches that bear them."⁵⁵ This sense of organic unity is maintained even in Fauré's developmental sections, where the opening viola theme appears inverted.

Figure 10
(mm. 74-75, II, *Andante*)



Such stubborn emphasis on polyphonic techniques throughout all three movements, and the respective lack of homophonic texture, is also remarkable. Even in decisive moments where the eventual direction is clear, homophonic voicing is evaded. During the retransition in movement I (mm. 101-104), forces are divided between melody (Violin 1) and countermelody (all other voices). However, the lower strings do not simply carry the first violin's melodic material; the quartet's forces are pitted against each other even in a moment of directional certainty. The closest Fauré arrives at a solely accompanimental texture is during movement II. Viola and first violin melodies (m. 16 and m. 20, respectively) soar above an even eighth note pulse. But even this simple arrangement does not last long. Along with the introduction of the second theme at m. 24, the cello presents a smooth countermelody (a rhythmically augmented version of the opening melody).

Figure 11
(m. 1, II, *Andante*)

(m. 24, II, *Andante*)



The loose use of contrapuntal forces in this respect adds to the gradual unfolding of the second movement; as the *Andante* unfolds, it builds off of previous material. With the exception of the accompanimental, less than vocal eighth notes (see above excerpt), the constant reweaving of previous material recalls a freely imitative texture. The individual string voices are throughout

⁵⁵ De Marliave, 304-5.

intertwined, yet strongly individual. Even without a choral-like setting, Fauré channels vocal influences; individual parts emerge for a brief period before sinking back into the predominantly polyphonic texture. The returning, yet augmented melody itself is somewhat similar to the way in which plainchant is varied in vocal Renaissance motets. The four-part voicing of the quartet is also conveniently suited to these vocally based aspects. Along with the quartet's pronounced polyphonic texture, the connection between Fauré's early training and final composition cannot be missed. A meeting of old and new, the quartet encompasses both realms of influence.

At no point in the first and second movements does Fauré allow the quartet to settle into a completely unison passage. By withholding the use of homophonic texture, the quartet communicates a constant state of instrumental dialogue, never at ease. This technique is different from other string quartets of the time. Ravel bolsters his sweeping melodies throughout the first movement of his string quartet, often pairing Violin 1 with Viola (ex. rehearsals D and H). Debussy also makes immediate use of homophonic part writing with the decisive unison opening of his own string quartet. As for Fauré, melody is assigned on an individual basis, and while sometimes intersecting with other countermelodies, it never takes center stage by way of unison part writing until the end of the work.

Avoiding even the simplest accompanimental texture (for example, Figure 3), Fauré preserves the use of homophony until the very conclusion of the work. In this way, the final push to the end is definitive and emphatic, a clear signal to listeners. This choice partially mirrors certain elements of Beethoven's Op. 131 Quartet in C-sharp minor. In his essay on the work, de Marliave notes several of these distinguishing features:

Here one finds a rich flowering of all the qualities that mark the later works; originality and freedom of form, which is nevertheless always a strictly logical and supple technique [...] The splendour of technique that describes this lofty ascent is attained by means of varying motifs, and 'quartet' designs and conceptions, with which the mind of Beethoven was overflowing at this period of his creative life.⁵⁶

This being said, the brimming use of motivic design throughout the C-sharp minor quartet is truly realized through contrapuntal design. Across movements and variations, motivic material is brought to full force through expert manipulation of counterpoint. This aspect of Beethoven's work, when extended, likens the bookend moments of Fauré's quartet. During the *Adagio quasi un poco andante* of No. 6, we hear a familiar treatment of solo viola, expressing "a

⁵⁶ De Marliave, 295-96.

resignation so deeply felt, an introspection so profound, as this..."⁵⁷ Consequently, the rousing unison which opens *Allegro*, No. 7, could not be more decisive.

Fauré himself, emerging from the highly complex contrapuntal texture of the third movement also ends with a stirring unison. As the buoyant pizzicato undercurrent gives way to denser and denser countermelodies, this arrival is the much anticipated congealment of forces. Beethoven's presentation of both a wistful viola line shortly linked to a bold unison may have been a condensed kernel of inspiration for Fauré's framing of his own string quartet.

Overall, the closing homophonic texture is satisfying to listeners who have, in the meantime, experienced a lengthy contrapuntally motivated tour de force throughout the preceding movements. But blended with the uncluttered arrival at the coda passage, Fauré seems to shed imitative part writing as he emerges into the triumphant coda.

Figure 12

(mm. 308-12, III, *Allegro*)

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet, specifically measures 308-12 of the third movement, 'Allegro'. The score is written for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The music is characterized by complex contrapuntal textures, with many triplets and dynamic markings such as 'ff' (fortissimo), 'arco' (arco), and 'pizz.' (pizzicato). The score ends with a final chord in measure 312.

True homophonic rhythm is not achieved until the final chords; in fact, both viola and cello persist with their pizzicato (or pizzicato-inspired) rhythms until m. 310. While the earlier stated resemblances to Beethoven are poignant, Fauré is overall more hesitant to use unison textures. The end of the Finale is the exception: here, the chordal ending is wholly conclusive, finally relinquishing the previously predominant patterns of shifting lines and multiple voices. As a final statement, the constant exchanges of conversational melodies dissipate. Up until these final chords, traces of independent textures from other movements remain. In this respect, Fauré's contrapuntally-influenced approach to the quartet seems to be deeply indebted to earlier styles; it is a method of logical organization that Fauré refuses to abandon as a source of inspiration.

⁵⁷ De Marliave, 320.

Conclusion

It is only fair to admit that Op. 121 has not secured a strong foothold in the string quartet repertoire. Some scholars posit that this is due to areas of compositional weakness on the part of the elderly Fauré. In his old age, Fauré himself harbored a measure of self-doubt, even to the point of refusing to hear the quartet performed for him on his deathbed. On the other hand, his excuse was not one of ashamedness of the quality of his composition; rather, the sounds had become so distorted in his ears that he could not endure such a disturbing ordeal. ("No! No! I would only hear a terrible noise!")⁵⁸ Clearly, Fauré's respect for the genre – and his already strongly internalized ideal of string quartet writing – factored into this apprehensive reaction. Through examination of the work's formal, harmonic, and contrapuntal particularities, it has been discovered that similar reluctance and caution was a guiding force during the composition of Op. 121. As a culmination of a lifetime's work, the quartet blends old with new beneath the razor sharp chisel of past artistic influence; previous masters of the genre inspired both admiration and trepidation. The resulting work, while atypical in some ways, deserves more attention from today's performers. Balancing precariously between the genius of the past and current styles, the work is somewhat emblematic of the modern performer, seeking to bring the genius of history's artists to today's audience. Although the String Quartet in E minor does not owe its reputation to innovation alone, it is a "swan song" that should not be forgotten.

⁵⁸ Fauré, cited in Jean-Michel Nectoux, trans. Roger Nichols, *Gabriel Fauré: A Musical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 293

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