



From the Front Lines to the New World: Discovering the Music of Gold Line Quartet

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[Maurice Ravel - Tombeau de Couperin](#)

World War I encompassed Ravel's psyche almost entirely, and for a while it brought his creativity to a standstill. He had been exempted from military service some years before due to his diminutive stature and feather-light weight (five-foot-three and 108 pounds). When war was declared, in 1914, he nonetheless hoped to train to become a pilot in the French Air Force, but he was rejected due to fragile health—decisively so once military physicians diagnosed a heart condition. He managed to serve as a medical assistant, however, and in March 1916 he headed to the front lines at Verdun as a driver in the Army Motor Transport Corps. His eagerness to serve may have exceeded his skill behind the wheel, as his correspondence reveals several incidents of one-car fender-benders.

After six months he fell ill with dysentery and was sent back to Paris to convalesce. While he was there his mother



Maurice Ravel (seated at piano) with Oscar Fried, Eva Gauthier, Manoah Leide-Tedesco, and George Gershwin. 1928. Courtesy NYPL Digital Collections.

passed away, in January 1917, after which he sank into deep depression. He returned to his military assignment only briefly before succumbing to another breakdown, at which point the army discharged him for good. He spent the remaining months of the War in a village in Normandy, gradually recouping his creative energies.

His suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* embraced that period of his life. When Ravel sketched it, he reported in a letter to his pupil Roland-Manuel (on October 1, 1914): “I’m beginning ... a French Suite—no, it’s not what you think—the Marseillaise doesn’t come into it at all but there’ll be a forlane and a jig; not a tango, though.” In his *Autobiographical Sketch*, penned in 1929 as a promotional piece for the Aeolian Company, Ravel said of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, “The homage is directed less in fact to Couperin himself than to French music of the eighteenth century.” Nonetheless, he did gear up for the project by making a piano transcription of a forlane from the fourth of the *Concerts royaux* of François Couperin, a forlane being a lively Venetian folk dance that became popular, in a stylized form, in French courts.

Couperin (1668-1733) was indeed an emblem of the distinctive tradition of French music. This past November the musical world marked the 350th anniversary of the birth of this figure, who during the reign of Louis XIV held the title of *Organiste du roi* (King’s Organist) and in 1717, two years after that monarch’s death, was elevated to *Ordinaire de la musique de la chambre du roi pour le clavecin* (Musician-in-Ordinary as Harpsichordist for the King’s Chamber Music), the king at that point being the seven-year old Louis XV, great-grandson of Louis XIV. Although Couperin wrote important sacred works, organ compositions, and chamber music, he is most famous for his harpsichord oeuvre, which comprises some 230 pieces published in four collections and an instructional treatise from 1713 through 1730. These are marked by fanciful imagination, wry wit (or sometimes somber introspection), meticulous craftsmanship, and, above all, clarity—which is how one might also describe Ravel’s keyboard works.

Ravel’s suite initially took the form of six pieces for solo piano. By the time he finished it, what had begun as a celebration of French musical tradition was transformed into another sort of commemoration, as its movements were dedicated to various friends lost in combat during the War. (The cover of the original piano edition included a drawing, by Ravel himself, of a memorial drapery and a funerary urn.) In June 1919, he selected four of the suite’s movements for orchestral arrangements, dropping the original second and sixth movements (a fugue and a toccata, respectively) and re-ordering those that remained. It would be hard to argue that the piano originals come close to making the effect of the crystalline orchestral versions, in which, as Roland-Manuel observed, “strict necessity governs every move” and “with extreme economy and simplicity Ravel obtains translucence and variety of color throughout the whole work.” Ravel’s appreciation for textural clarity is made clear through an anecdote recounted in a radio interview by the composer and conductor Manuel Rosenthal, who spent time as a pupil of Ravel’s:

One day he was speaking to me in glowing terms about Puccini. And being the silly, impertinent young man I was, I started to sneer. At that Ravel flew into a towering rage, locked us both into his little studio at Monfort l’Amaury and sat down at the piano. He

then played me the whole of *Tosca* from memory, stopping about fifty times on the way to ask: “Have you anything to complain of about that passage? Look how good the harmony is, how he respects the form, what a clever, original, and interesting modulation there is in that tune.” Finally he took down the score to show me how perfect the orchestration is. He said, “This is exactly what I did with *Le Tombeau de Couperin*: this economy of means by which two solo instruments in Puccini’s orchestra produce such an impact—that is the mark of a great artist.”

Program notes by James M. Keller

[David Maslanka – Meditation on the Gregorian Chant O Salutaris Hostia \(O Salvation’s Victim\)](#)



I have loved Italian madrigals since my student days. Recitation Book for saxophone quartet feels something like a madrigal collection, but with a grand finale. My approach to composing is vocal, and the singing quality of saxophones is one of their fine strengths. The movements in this piece are brief and intimate songs.

David Maslanka teaching a Younger Wind Ensemble, courtesy davidmaslanka.com

Much of my recent music draws its inspiration from the distant past. An old melody pushes open a door in my mind and a parallel world or dream makes its way out. Each piece in this set found its inspiration in that way.

The title, “Recitation Book,” implies a set of lessons. I don’t want to say explicitly what each “lesson” means, but the titles of the pieces circle around the theme of death, which for me implies the passing of the old, and the coming of the new.

Program notes by David Maslanka

Joel Love - In memoriam

On December 2nd, 2014, my Dad lost his battle with cancer. *In memoriam* is a piece about the emotions that we all went through after he was diagnosed in 2014. Today's performance will feature the second half of that composition, "Adieu."

Adieu (goodbye) is a celebration of life. My father's last words to me, other than "I love you," were "live the life you want to live and never look back," and are reflected in the ethos of the movement. The piece emerges out of the ether, stating a simple rising melody slowly and in piecemeal. The first climax is quickly averted and the music is wrested back into the depths of the first movement with a dolorous bari solo over a texture dominated by trills. A sextuplet quasi-arpeggiato gesture lifts the music out of the depths and begins a tumultuous journey that features another 'duel,' this time between melodic fragments from the first and second movements followed by a wailing bari solo that ushers in the opening material and the movement's final climax.

Program notes by Joel Love.



Joseph David Spence - The Nations Shall See



Throughout the Judeo-Christian Bible, the one constant theme that persists is redemption. Whether it be through burnt offering, miraculous medical marvels, or death and transfiguration, redemption and hope are what keeps drawing me back to these texts when I am itching to set something for choir.

In this case specifically, I've always been fascinated by the multiple instances in which the people in these texts would receive new names, such as Abraham, Sarah, Israel, Simon Peter, and Paul. In every case, their names, and thus their identities, were originally either mundane or inherently tainted with misfortune. Saul the Destroyer became Paul the Apostle, Jacob the Deceiver

became Israel the father of a nation, and so forth. This fascination is what led me to Isaiah 62 2-3, where the promise of such a powerful redemption is offered to all and not just a select few. The "Hosanna" is an addition of my own choosing, partly because it was the perfect word that fit the

declamatory rhythm that permeates the piece, but given the greater context of the text, it seemed to fit quite nicely with the theme of hope and the longing for a "Hosanna" or "savior."

And though the nature of the text and much of my explanation has been rooted in the sacred, I do think that much of the essence of this piece and text can find many secular applications. The strength of humanity is our inexplicable virtue of growth and self-redemption. Our ability to change and progress through every stumbling block and failure that is thrown our way by external and internal forces is the crowning achievement of human nature. Though the names we give ourselves are not always "glorious" and "righteous," the possibility of beauty is a choice that must be fought for.

Program notes by Joseph David Spence.

[Antonin Dvorak - American Quartet, op. 96](#)

When Dvorak arrived in New York from Prague on September 17, 1892, he immediately took up his duties as director of the National Conservatory but also continued to compose and fulfill his many obligations as a visiting celebrity. By the end of the taxing season, he was delighted to accept an invitation to spend the summer visiting the tiny (population: 300) farming community of Spillville, Iowa, made up of Czech immigrants who preserved the language, culture, and customs of their native land. Dvorak arrived in Spillville on June 5 with his wife, six children, sister, maid, and secretary. Three days later he was already at work on a new string quartet. Although he usually composed quite slowly, he finished the sketches by June 11, writing at the end, "Thanks be to the Lord God. I am satisfied. It went quickly." As soon as the final score was ready, on June 23, Dvorak, playing violin, along with three students, read it through. The "official" premiere was given in Boston by the Kneisel Quartet on January 1, 1894.

Written just after the "New World" Symphony, his most famous symphony, this quartet became Dvorak's best-known chamber music composition and acquired a similar nickname, the "American" Quartet. Many hear in the quartet strains of black spirituals and plantation songs, as well as elements of American Indian music. Others doubt that the quartet grew from the sounds Dvorak heard in America and hold rather that it is based on certain melodic and rhythmic similarities shared by both American ethnic music and the Bohemian-Slavic folk tradition. This difference of opinion really matters little in light of the "American" Quartet's enormous popularity and universal appeal.

This particular arrangement for saxophone quartet was completed by Claude Voirpy in 1993. Saxophonists have not settled on a standard arrangement for the work. While the Voirpy version you will hear today is widely published and played by university musicians due to its quality and inclusion in the Henri Lemoine catalog in Paris, other arrangements exist.



Dvorak his wife, Anna, and six children are shown here with their father, by all accounts a family man.

Contributors such as Frederick Hemke (of Northwestern emeritus status) and more recently Colin Eng in 2022 offer acceptable alternatives. Some saxophone quartets create their own in-house arrangements to satisfy their needs.

Why the arrangement variance? The main reason concerns the tonality of F, which lies awkwardly on the saxophone for this particular work as the high notes push the soprano and baritone parts into the altissimo register of the instrument. While not impossible, the string lines in that register strain the performer to

play figures that would otherwise lie smoothly on the saxophone. Sensitive to this, Voirpy created an arrangement moving the entire work down a whole step from F to Eb. While perhaps unsatisfying to purists (especially those with perfect pitch), the result allows the saxophonist to recreate Dvorak's work using the lighter approach endemic to string quartet performance.

Program notes by Melvin Berger and Jacob Hallman