

CHIAROSCURO STRING QUARTET

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Quartettsatz in C minor D 703

Allegro assai

(approx. 10 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

String Quartet in F minor Op. 95 (“Serioso”)

Allegro con brio

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegro assai vivace ma serioso

Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato

(approx. 23 minutes)

Intermission

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

String Quartet in A minor Op. 13

Adagio – Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto

Presto

(approx. 30 minutes)

Franz Schubert

Quartettsatz in C minor D. 703

Schubert's early quartets were written as *Hausmusik* for performance at home by his father, his two brothers and Schubert himself. But in 1820 he began work on a new type of quartet, to be played by professional musicians, a quartet with the kind of dramatic intensity and wide range of expression that would come to characterize his mature style. He only finished the first movement and so this *Quartettsatz* (quartet movement) remained unpublished until the manuscript came into the hands of Brahms, who arranged for its first performance in 1867 and publication in 1870.

The spirit of Beethoven hovers over this *Quartettsatz*, and not just in Schubert's choice of key, C minor, the key associated with Beethoven's most turbulent works such as the *Pathétique* Sonata and the Fifth Symphony. There is a Beethovenian energy present from the very opening bars, which outline in tremolo the movement's first theme in a rising series of imitative entries that work their way up to a grand climax on a chromatic harmony (a Neapolitan 6th on D flat).



This is the opening salvo in a movement that will see harmonic colour as an important expressive resource in its unfolding drama. Indeed, the normal key relationships of a sonata-form movement yield in this work to Schubert's willful buoyancy of harmonic interests, no better exemplified than in his choice of A flat major (instead of G major) for the blithely 'Schubertian' second theme.



This triadic melody in the 1st violin, supported by a pillow of gentle sighs in the middle strings, contrasts vividly with the mischievously creeping chromatic lines of the first theme.

These two themes play out in a series of harmonically colourful variations on their principal motives – anxious wavering semitones alternating with carefree singable chordal skips – throughout the movement.

The juxtaposition of nervous energy and serene lyricism in this movement prompted Sir Roger Scruton to describe the work as an “outpouring of love and life in the midst of apprehension.”

Ludwig van Beethoven

String Quartet in in F minor Op. 95

This is the string quartet that Beethoven didn't want you to hear. It was composed in 1810 but Beethoven delayed publication until 1816, saying in a letter to an English acquaintance, George Smart, that “the Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public.” So there.

Which connoisseurs it was meant for is unknown, but its ‘niche’ credentials are many and varied. It is the last quartet from Beethoven's ‘heroic’ middle period and his shortest quartet of all. As such, it appears to represent the distilled essence of all that came before in its laconic formal structures, the wildness and wilfulness of its bold gestures, and in its relentless rhythmic drive.

Its nickname “*Serioso*” derives from the tempo indication of its third movement but the label could easily apply to the entire quartet, which Joseph Kerman described as a work of “extreme concentration, in dangerously high tension.”

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That concentration and tension is evident from its dramatic opening bars that feature all instruments in unison shouting out a loud, gruff and grumpy declaration of the F minor scale. This is followed by an unexpected silence and then volleys of octave leaps arriving like a spray of bullets ricocheting off the wall in a gangland ambush.

Allegro con brio. Componirt im October 1810.

Violino I.

Violino II.

Viola.

Violoncello.

The first five notes of this opening figure – an up-and-down filled-in minor 3rd – are destined to become the most important motive of this first movement, occurring more than a hundred times, mostly in the background as a kind of menacing reminder of the violence of the opening gesture.

What astonishes most in this movement is the fragmented formulation of its material, presented by roughly juxtaposing short lyrical sections and abrupt explosions of scale passages in unison that recall the defiant unisons of the opening.



Here we see bold dynamic contrasts as unison scalar drama yields to weeping, almost maudlin pathos, which in turn is undermined by restless reference to the opening up-and-down figure – all within the space of 6 bars.

This compactness is characteristic of the movement as a whole. There is no repeat of the exposition and the short development section deals entirely with the opening four bars. All the more surprising, then, is how the movement ends, with a coda that promises renewed violence but instead simply ebbs away in sullen introspection.

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The second movement *Allegretto ma non troppo* promises relief from all that ‘bull in a china shop’ charging about. Its opening descending scale passage in the cello almost seems to want to present a happier, less angry version of the first movement’s opening but the lyrical theme it introduces, while in the major mode, is deeply conflicted over its emotional outlook. There are just too many minor-mode inflections in this major-mode melody and its accompanying harmonies for it to be the source of songful repose that a traditional slow movement usually provides.



This underlying anxiety comes to the surface shortly afterwards when a full-on fugue, announced in the viola, embroils all four instruments in worried discussion of a fugue subject rife with chromatic ambiguities of its own.



This fugue, which eventually evolves into a more active fugato, exists in a tense relationship with the ambiguous lyricism of the opening. And this tension is left unresolved at the end of the movement when a diminished 7th chord leads immediately into the following scherzo without a pause.

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The scherzo, like the first movement, begins with a punchy dramatic gesture followed by an equally dramatic pause – two pauses, in fact – before pursuing the jumpy rhythmically off-beat scalar melody that will define the movement’s A section in this movement’s A-B-A-B-A formal structure.



The B-section trio intervenes twice with its smooth chordal undulations of harmony supporting deftly scampering filigree in the 1st violin.



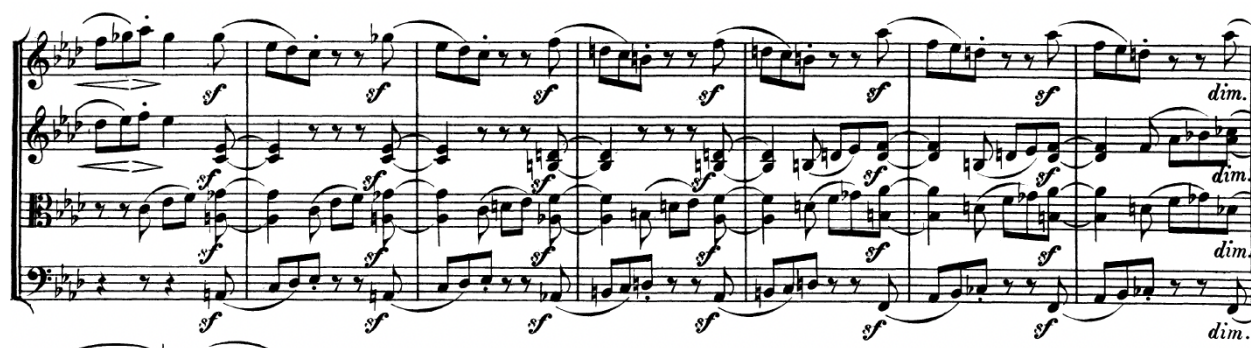
The uncompromising ending of the scherzo leaves Beethoven little place to go for his finale, so he sets up the concluding act of this moody quartet's drama with a change of pace in the form of an introductory *Larghetto espressivo*.



This is hardly a relaxing day at the beach, emotionally speaking, however, since this slow introduction lurches forward mysteriously in small hesitant phrases full of harmonic tension until the movement's rondo refrain finally enters with its simple whistle-able tune, grave in demeanour but dance-like in rhythm. This movement of the quartet lives up to its nickname. It is unrelentingly *serioso*, offering no relief whatsoever from its hand-wringing tone of restless anxiety, even intensifying it in passages of throbbing high melodrama:



and gut-punch accents on the weakest beat in the bar – a Beethoven trademark gesture:



The surprise comes, though, in the coda, when all of a sudden he bursts into a chatty whirlwind of major-mode scales and repeated cadencing patterns – worthy of a comic opera finale – to leave his players breathlessly smiling at the “serious” emotional journey they have just been through.

Felix Mendelssohn

String Quartet in A minor Op. 13

Mendelssohn was not your typical Romantic-era composer. The polished grace of his melodies and clear formal outlines of his musical structures show him to have had one foot in the Classical era of Mozart and Haydn, while his penchant for imitative counterpoint and fugal writing shows that even that foot had at least a big toe in the Baroque era of Bach and Handel, as well.

As a child, while his youthful contemporaries were gainfully employed in kicking over garbage cans and pulling the pigtails of young girls, Felix, at the age of 11, was writing fugues. And if his ‘retro’ musical tastes were perhaps acquired under the influence of his arch-conservative music teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832), his championing of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach remained nevertheless a lifelong endeavour. Indeed, the 1829 performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* at the Berlin Singakademie, which Mendelssohn conducted at the age of 20, is credited with initiating the revival of 19th-century interest in Bach’s music.

The String Quartet in A minor Op. 13 was composed in 1827 when Mendelssohn was still establishing himself as the most learned teenage composer in Berlin—admittedly, not a crowded field. Its frequent use of fugal textures attests to the young composer's admiration for Bach while numerous formal features, especially its cyclical design and recall of themes from earlier movements, point to the influence of Beethoven—the late string quartets and Ninth Symphony in particular.

Adagio.

Violino I. *mf* *p* *cresc.* *pp* *cresc.* *dim.* *p*

Violino II. *mf* *p* *cresc.* *pp* *cresc.* *dim.* *p*

Viola. *mf* *p* *cresc.* *pp* *cresc.* *dim.* *p*

Violoncello. *mf* *p* *cresc.* *pp* *cresc.* *dim.* *p*

The first movement opens with an endearing *Adagio* full of short coy phrases which lead to a repeated three-note motive (C# B D) derived from one of Mendelssohn's own songs (*Frage* Op. 9 No. 1). This motive will recur throughout the entire quartet, either in its dotted rhythm or in its melodic contour stretching over a minor 3rd. Lyrical repose, however, is in short supply in the remainder of the first movement. The *Allegro vivace* that follows the introductory *Adagio* is a restless affair that offers up two anxious little themes, both set in a minor key.

But “anxiety” is a relative term. In Beethoven it summons up the panicky feeling that you're swimming just slightly ahead of a shark—that's gaining on you. Mendelssohnian anxiety, by contrast, is more like not knowing where you put the car keys.

Imitative counterpoint is pervasive in this movement, not just as a “spot technique” to add intensity to the development section *à la* Mozart and Haydn, but even in the initial presentation of the movement's themes. Here, for example, are the imitative entries that introduce the first theme:



Fireside coziness arrives in the *Adagio non lento* with its serene and elegiac melody in the 1st violin, drenched in tearful sigh motives. These sigh motives, chromatically inflected, then become the basis for the full-on 4-voice fugue that follows.



This, of course, is an obvious *hommage* to a similar fugue in the second movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor Op. 95. Clever lad that he is, young Felix even inverts his fugue subject before returning to the poised serenity of the opening.

In place of a scherzo, Mendelssohn gives us a relaxed and unbuttoned *intermezzo*. The tune that begins the movement is of the utmost simplicity, one that uses the same catchy rhythm four times in a row, without somehow becoming tiresome.

Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto.



In the middle section trio, however, Mendelssohn returns to type with a fleet and light-footed romp of detached 16ths lightly peppered with repeated notes. And who could resist combining these two contrasting sections together in the movement's final bars? Certainly not Mendelssohn.

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High drama marks the opening to the *Presto* finale, with a flamboyant and wide-ranging operatic recitative in the 1st violin holding forth over melodramatic tremolos below.

The musical score is for the *Presto* finale. It is written for a first violin and piano. The first violin part starts with a recitative-like melody, while the piano accompaniment features rapid tremolos in the left hand and chords in the right hand. The tempo is marked *Presto.* and the dynamics range from *ff* to *pp*. The score includes markings for *trem.*, *dim.*, *ad libitum*, and *a tempo*.

The reference to the finale of the Ninth Symphony is obvious but this opening is even more closely patterned on the last movement of Beethoven's A minor Quartet Op. 132. The troubled theme that emerges is similar in mood, as well, to the rocking main theme of Beethoven's Op. 132 finale. Pacing back and forth in tonal space over a harmonically restless cello line it eventually issues into a cross-country horse-gallop before “remembering” the fugue subject from the second movement in a series of flashbacks.

The work closes with the same lyrical *Adagio* that opened the first movement, thereby framing the quartet's inner drama as a gently fading memory.

Program notes by
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