LEONKORO

STRING QUARTET

HENRIËTTE BOSMANS (1895–1952)

String Quartet (1927)

Allegro molto moderato

Lento

Allegro molto

(approx. 13 minutes)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor Op. 13

Adagio – Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto

Presto

(approx. 32 minutes)

- INTERMISSION -

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

String Quartet in D minor D. 810 ("Death and the Maiden")

Allegro

Andante con moto

Scherzo. Allegro molto

Presto

(approx. 40 minutes)

HENRIËTTE BOSMANS

String Quartet (1927)

The artistic life of Dutch pianist-composer Henriëtte Bosmans is a remarkable story of courage, determination and endurance in the turbulent first half of 20th century Europe. As a half-Jewish, bisexual woman composer she faced down a host of prejudices to eventually become recognized as a figure of national importance in the musical life of her country.

Born into a musical family, she received her first lessons from her mother, a professor of piano at the Amsterdam Conservatory who had played piano duets with Brahms. Her father, who died while she was still an infant, had been principal cellist of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the same orchestra where, as the leading Dutch pianist of her generation, Bosmans would later perform the concertos of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninoff and Grieg under such celebrated conductors as Willem Mengelberg, Pierre Monteux and Ernest Ansermet.

She began composing small works in her teen years but soon progressed to writing chamber and orchestral works, which attracted notable attention, with Ravel himself helping to present her Concertino for Piano and Orchestra at the Geneva Festival in 1929.

But the German occupation of World War II was an especially difficult time for her, as she refused to register with the Kultuurkamer, the institution used by the Nazis to regulate musical life in Holland. As a result, she was banned from performing in 1942, forcing her to earn a living by appearing at clandestine private concerts for the remainder of the war. But nevertheless, by using her connections with Mengelberg, she was able to get her Jewish mother released from a detention facility before she could be deported to the death camps.

In June 1945 she wrote *Daar komen de Canadezen* ("Here come the Canadians"), which rose to the status of a national "anthem of liberation" at the close of the war. And in 1951, just a year before her death, she was awarded the Royal Order of Orange Nassau, the Dutch equivalent of a knighthood. Today, streets in Amsterdam and Haarlem are named in her honour.

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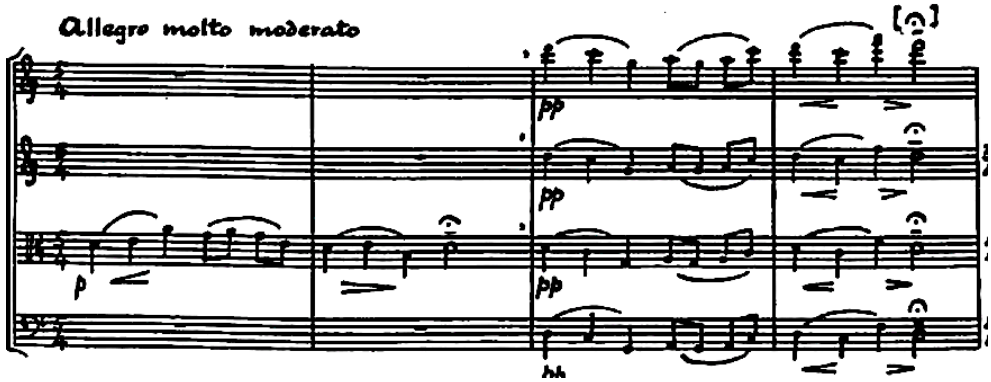
The String Quartet (1927) is an early work, composed under the influence of her new composition teacher and the work's dedicatee, composer Willem Pijper (1894–1947), who encouraged her to set aside the Romantic style in which she had been writing and adopt a more "modern" sound.

Accordingly, this work, while still motivically concentrated in the Classical tradition, bears the stylistic imprint of Impressionism, with the parallel chord streams of Debussy a particularly noticeable feature.

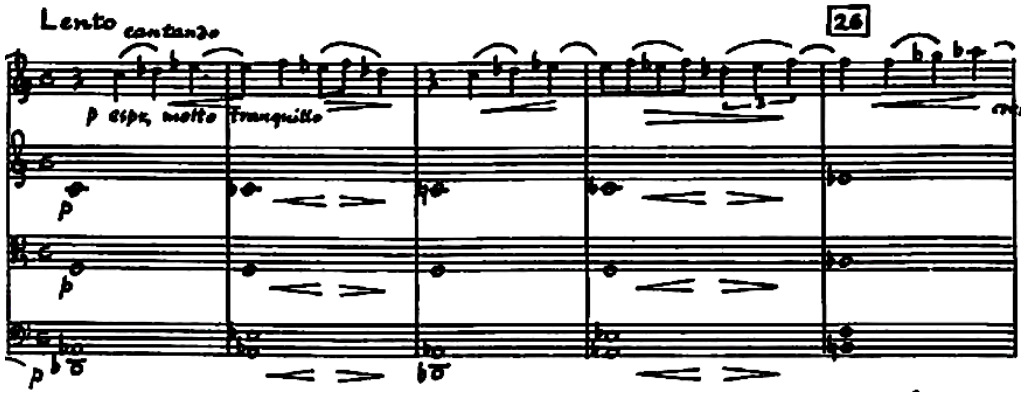
There is also a hint of Ravel in the way the work opens, with a viola solo in a modal-sounding "gapped" melody, as if some far away, exotic place were being summoned up for the listener.



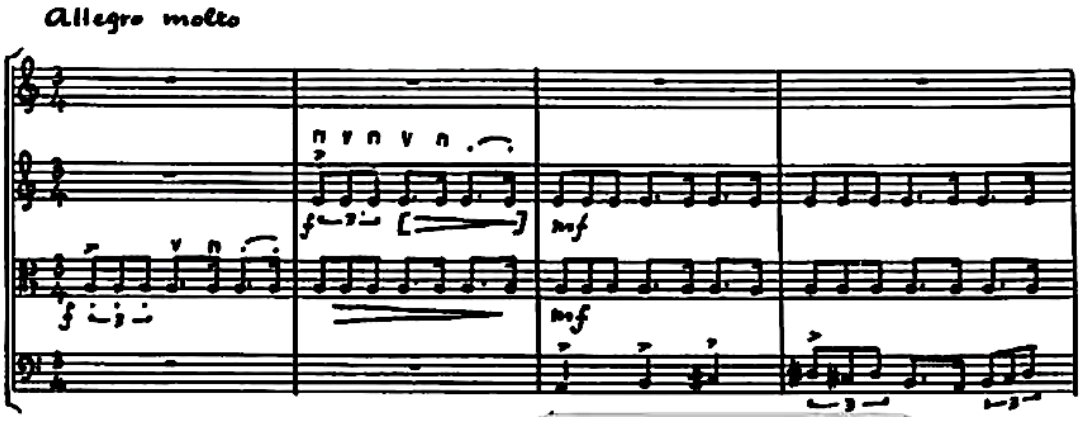
This "call" is then given an eerie "answer" by the full quartet in octaves. The Ravel Quartet in F major (1905) is a clear influence in the movement's "glassy" transparent texture and the many unison doublings in its scoring.

There is much lively discussion of the movement's thematic elements in what follows, but with the haunting reprise of the opening material in the final bars the overall impression is one of austere lyricism and a slightly "distant" emotional stance.

This emotional restraint is evident as well in the *Lento* second movement that features a nostalgic lament, shared between the instruments as the movement proceeds, supported by slowly shifting harmonies.



The *Allegro molto* finale is characterized by relentless rhythmic drive, dominated by the spiffy repeated-note patterns of its brisk opening, that can be heard pulsing through even its slower, more restful sections.



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Henriëtte Bosmans' star gradually faded as other musical trends took over the attention of the European musical world after World War II. But in 1994, recognition began to arrive with the establishment of the Henriëtte Bosmans Prize for new works by young Dutch composers. And then, in 2018, the Concertgebouw Orchestra began to program her works once again, signalling a renewal of interest in this courageous composer, one that continues with this afternoon's performance by the Leonkoro Quartet.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

String Quartet No. 2 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 classmates were gainfully employed in pulling young girls' pigtails and kicking over garbage cans, young Felix, at the age of 11, was writing fugues, eagerly striving to become the most learned teenage composer in Berlin — admittedly not a crowded field. And if his tastes in music 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 performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion at the Singakademie in Berlin in 1829, which Mendelssohn conducted at the age of 20, is credited with initiating the revival of 19th-century interest in Bach's music.

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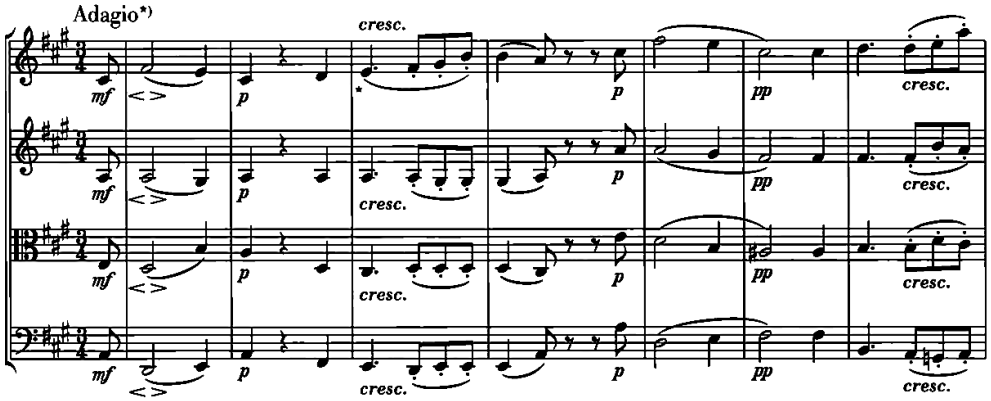
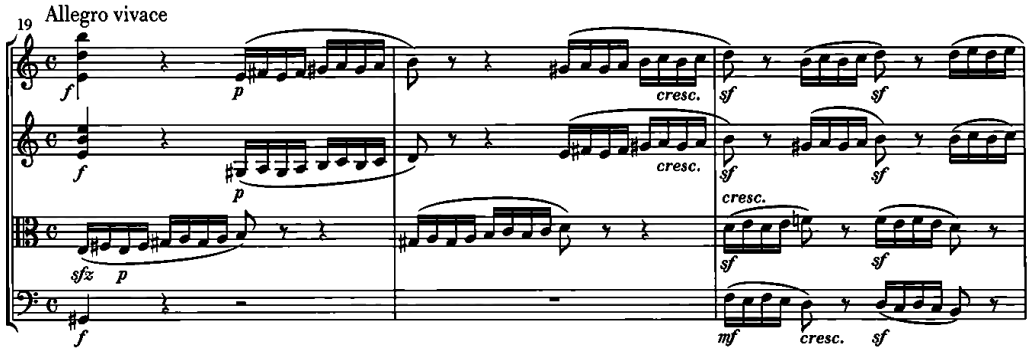
The String Quartet in A minor Op. 13 was composed in 1827 when Mendelssohn was only 17 years of age. Its frequent use of fugal textures attests to the young composer's admiration for Bach, while numerous formal features, especially its cyclical design and recall of themes from earlier movements, point to the influence of Beethoven — the late string quartets and Ninth Symphony in particular.

The first movement opens with an endearing *Adagio* full of short coy phrases



that 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.

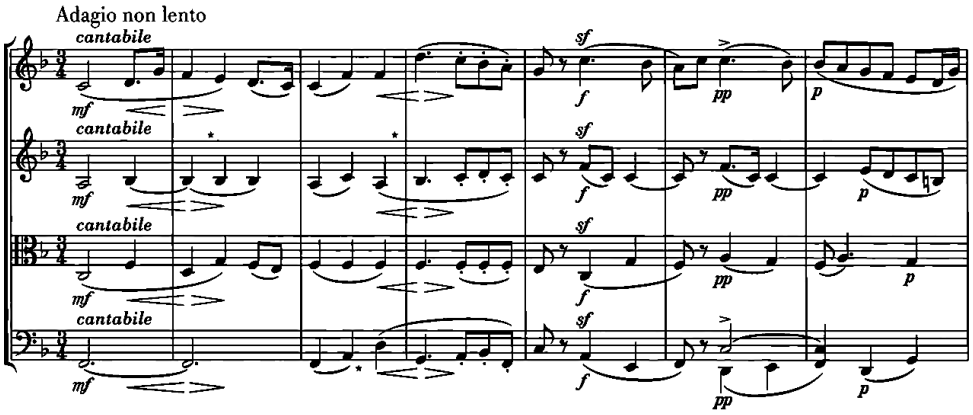
Lyrical repose, however, is in short supply in the remainder of the first movement. The *Allegro vivace* section that follows the introductory *Adagio* is a restless affair, one that offers up two anxious little themes, both set in a minor key.



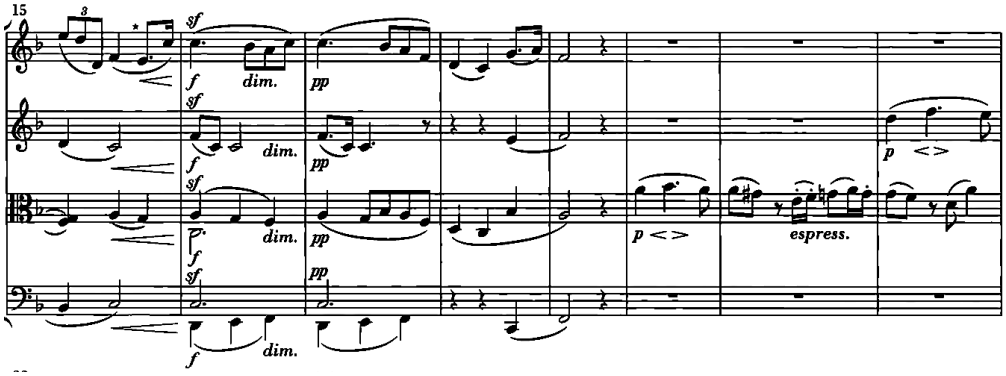
But “anxiety” is a relative term. In Beethoven it summons up the panicky feeling that you’re swimming just slightly ahead of a shark, and one that’s gaining on you. Mendelssohnian anxiety, by contrast, is more like not knowing where you put the car keys.

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.

Fireside coziness arrives in the *Adagio non lento* with its serene and elegiac melody in the first violin, drenched in tearful sigh motives.

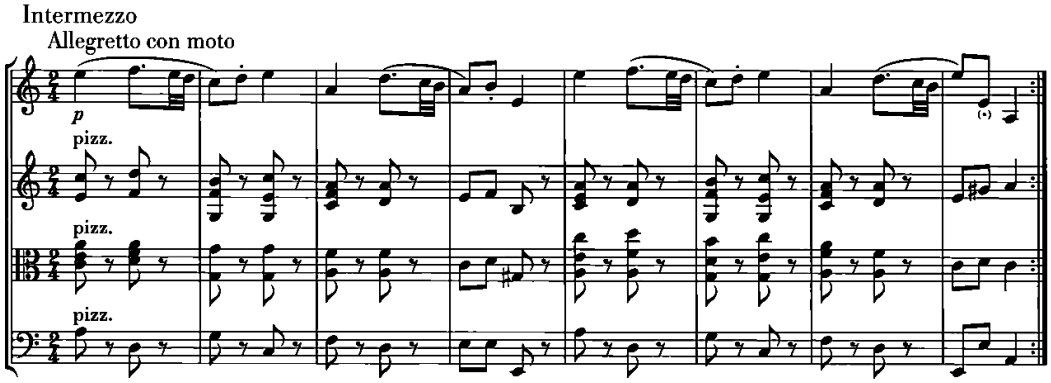


These sigh motives, chromatically inflected, then become the basis for the full-on fugue that follows.

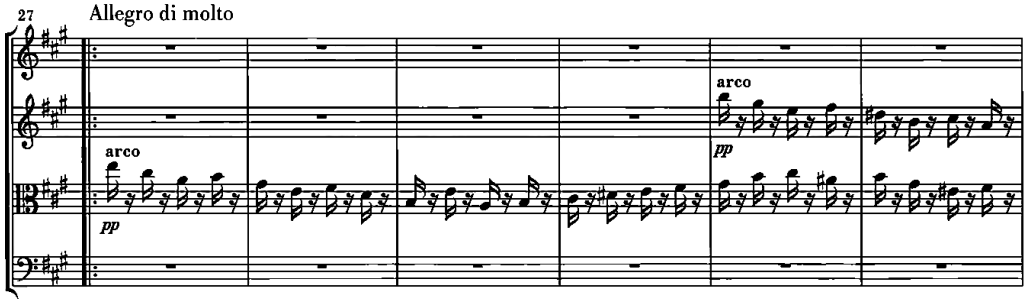


This is an obvious homage to a similar fugue in the second movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet in F minor Op. 95. Clever lad that he is, young Felix even inverts his fugue subject before returning to the poised serenity of the opening.

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.

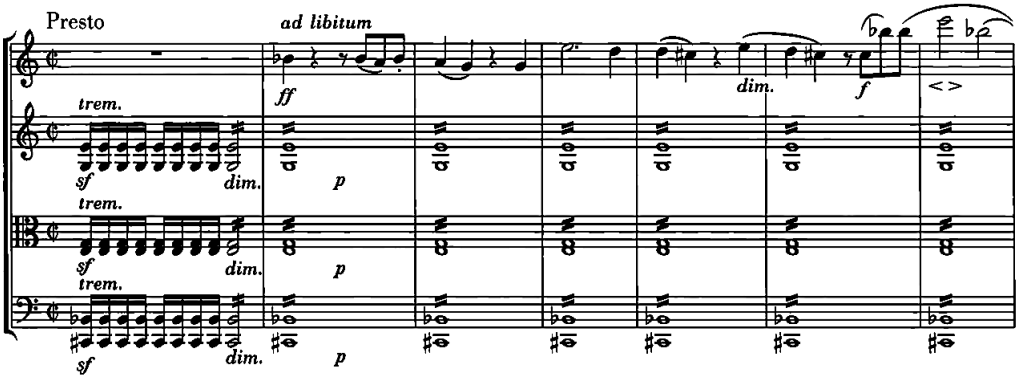


In the *Allegro di molto* trio section, however, Mendelssohn returns to type with a fleet and light-footed romp of detached 16ths lightly peppered with repeated notes.



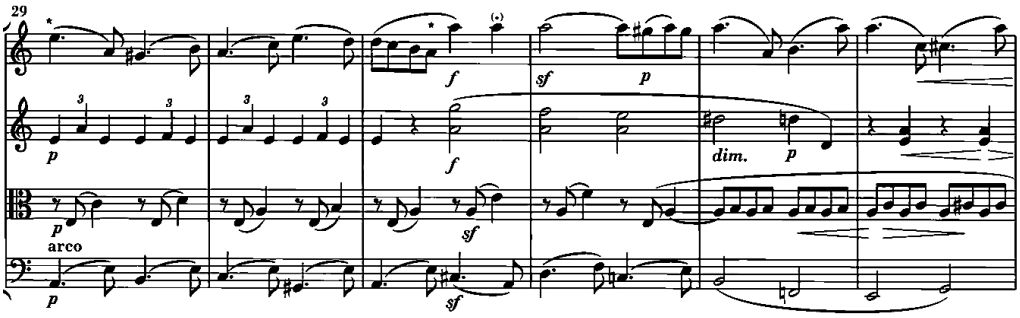
And who could resist combining these two contrasting sections in the movement's final bars? Certainly not Mendelssohn.

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



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 then emerges in the first violin



is also similar in mood 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* with which it opened, framing the quartet's inner drama as a gently fading memory.

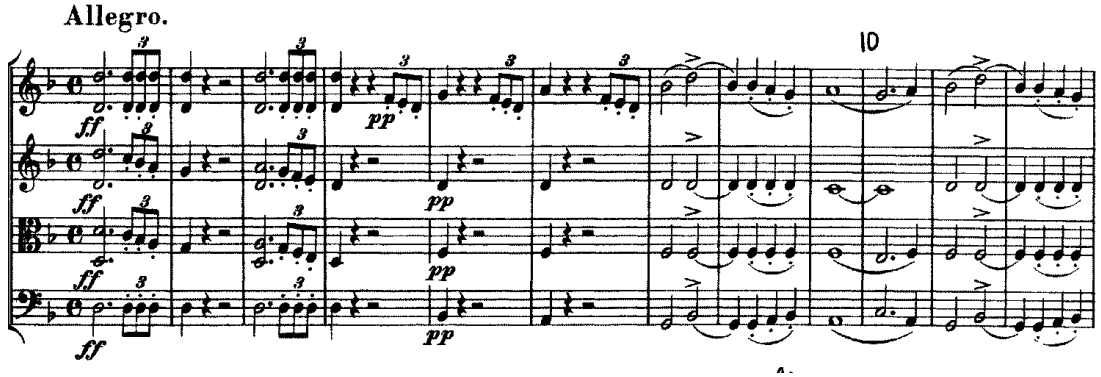
FRANZ SCHUBERT

String Quartet in D minor D. 810 ("Death and the Maiden")

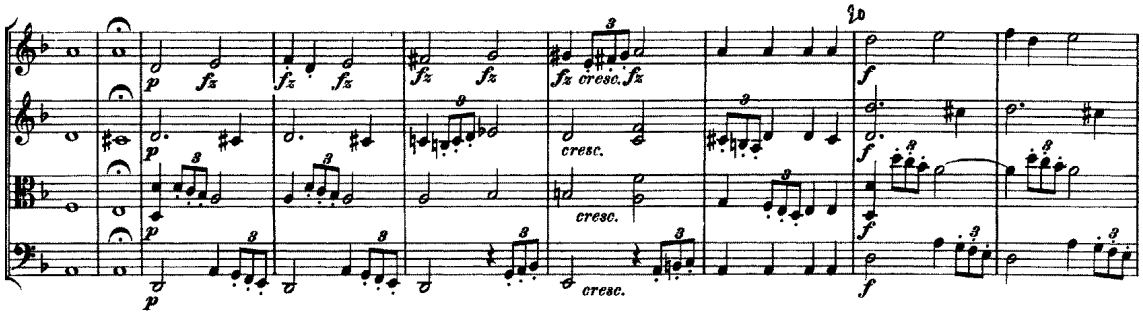
Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" string quartet is a sombre work, with all four of its movements set in a minor key. It takes its name from the composer's lied *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (1817) that provides the theme for the quartet's slow movement, a set of variations. The poem's depiction of Death coming to claim a young life may well have had personal resonance for the 27-year-old Schubert, since in 1824, when this quartet was written, symptoms of the disease that would end his life four years later had already begun to appear.

Despite the despairing backstory, or perhaps because of it, the first movement of this quartet is unusually muscular in its scoring, thick with double-stop accompaniment patterns and punchy triple- and quadruple-stop chords at important cadences.

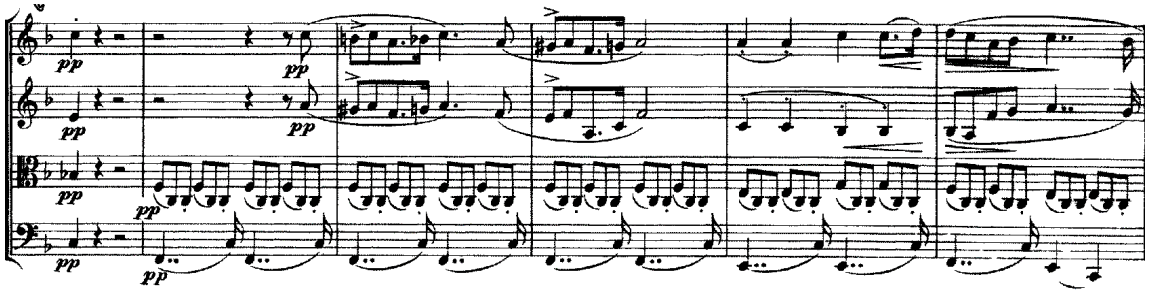
This orchestral quality is evident from the startling salvo of string sound that opens the work, comparable in its dramatic abruptness to the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.



This fanfare-like call to attention announces the serious tone of the movement while at the same time introducing the descending triplet figure that will be the principal motive of its first theme, presented immediately following.



The other important motive dominating the movement arrives in the work's second theme: a small grouping of notes ending in a lilting dotted rhythm, lovingly offered up in thirds, Viennese-style.



Schubert's treatment of these two motives in this movement displays his more "relaxed" notion of the structural principles underlying classical sonata form.

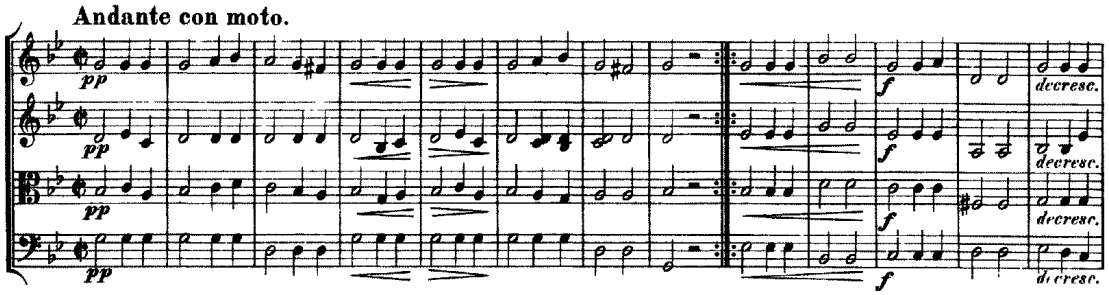
While composers in the era of Mozart and Haydn considered their key choices and modulation patterns to be the harmonic pillars and load-bearing walls of a sonata-form movement's musical architecture, Schubert, by contrast, was more interested in interior decorating than structural engineering.

Rejecting the sonata form's traditional concentration on just two tonal centres — the home key presented at the outset and its alternate, presented in the second theme — he preferred to spin his tonal colour wheel more freely so as to choose just the right tonal accent for this little motive here, and the right tonal shade to paint that broad thematic space there.

While not ignoring the form's three-part division into exposition, development and recapitulation, Schubert lets this pattern out at the seams to create a more vibrant palette of harmonic possibilities. The tonal drama that interests him happens at a moment-by-moment pace, riding forward on waves of harmonic colour.

The triplets that appear so portentous as the movement opens suddenly become a daisy-sniffing, walk-in-the-park hummable tune when cast in different tonal colours. And the lilting dotted-rhythm motive, so gracious at its first appearance, becomes worrisome when constantly repeated in the minor mode.

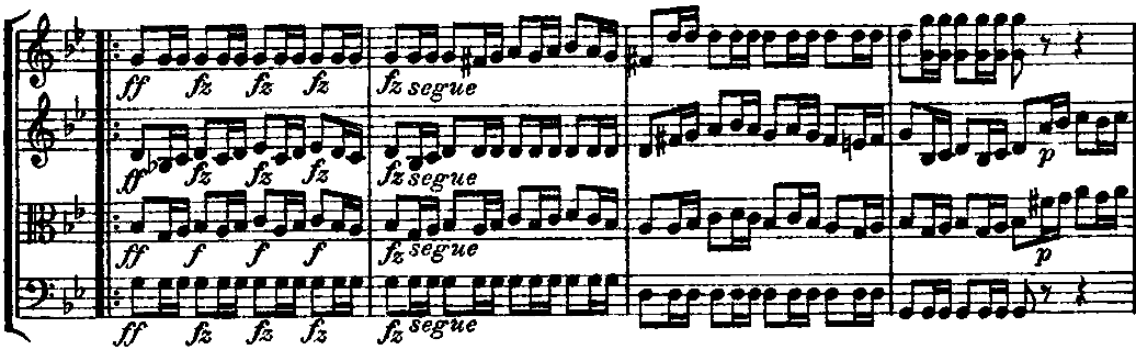
Schubert's treatment of his musical material in the following *Andante con moto* slow movement is much more regular and formally proportioned. The theme for this movement's set of variations is in two parts, each repeated.



The first is a direct quotation of the piano introduction to the *Death and the Maiden* lied, with its plodding funeral-march rhythm and mournful repetition of melody notes evoking the sorrow that death brings.

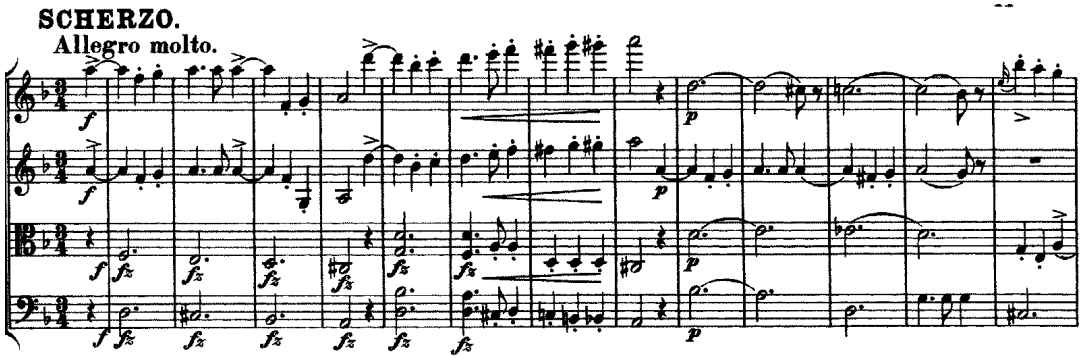
The second part maintains the processional rhythm but is more hopeful, ending in the major mode to reflect the lied text's depiction of death as the Great Comforter. Most of the variations decorate the theme with an elegant application of melodic embroidery in the first violin.

But the third variation breaks this pattern

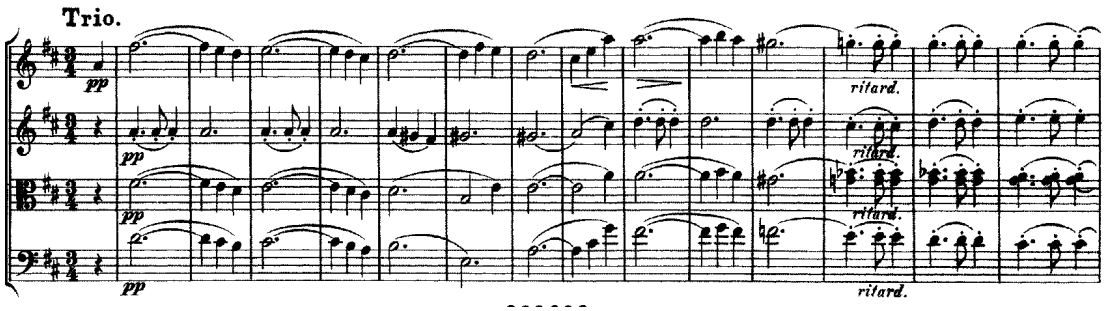


with its frightening acceleration of the theme's processional rhythm, a pacing that some have compared to the galloping of Death's horse.

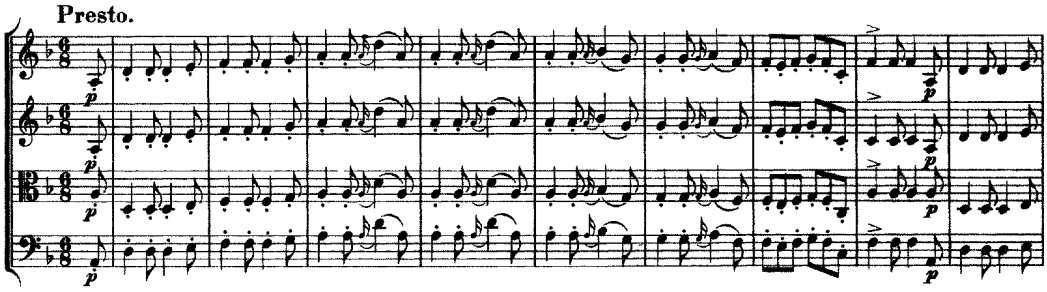
The *Allegro molto* scherzo is of a rough Beethovenian stamp, predicated on the play of small repeated motives, frequent syncopations and sudden contrasts between piano and forte.



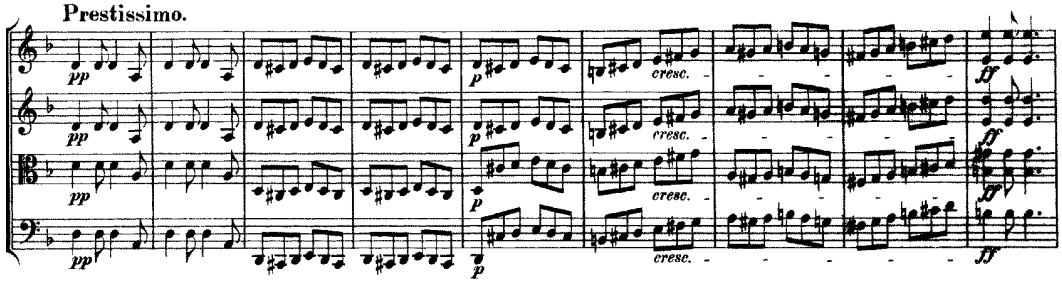
Its Trio middle section is a gently swaying Ländler that counts as one of the few moments of sustained lyrical repose in this quartet.



The rondo finale, marked ***Presto***, is a kaleidoscope of seemingly contradictory emotional states.



Alternating between the driving vehemence of its tarantella refrain in the minor mode and the almost celebratory spirit of its major-mode episodes, this movement is tied together by its boundless energy alone, an energy that seems to transcend major-minor distinctions.



Witness its whirlwind coda, marked ***Prestissimo***, that clearly signals an intention to end the work in the major mode only to switch back to the minor for its last hurrah, yet with no loss of breathless exuberance.

Donald Gíslason 2026