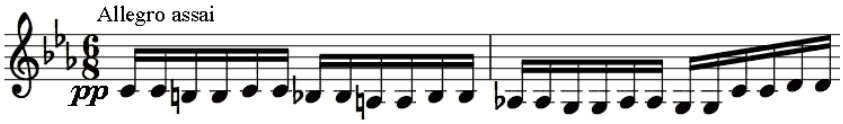
Gildas Quartet with Joanna MacGregor (piano)

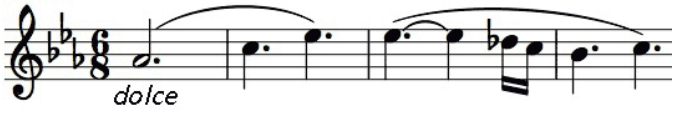
Live-streamed from Brighton Dome 22 Nov 2020

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Quartettsatz in C minor, D.703 (1820)
Allegro assai

At the age of eight, Schubert started to learn the violin from his father; six years later he was composing for the family string quartet: brothers Ignaz and Ferdinand on violin, Franz on viola and his father on cello. However, the eleven or so quartets that Schubert wrote between the ages of 14 and 20 are now, like Mozart's early quartets, rarely played. The exuberant “Trout” piano quintet of 1819 and this *Quartettsatz, a* surviving first movement of a planned C minor quartet, written in 1820, set the scene for the great chamber works of his later years: in 1824 the Octet, the “Rosamunde” and “Death and the Maiden” quartets; in 1826 the G major quartet; in 1827 his two piano trios; and in his last year,1828, the incomparable C major two-cello quintet.

It is not clear why Schubert failed to continue with the *Quartettsatz* quartet beyond its first movement and a sketch of 40 odd bars for an *Andante*. It may be that he was unable to match the power of the first movement to make a hoped-for great leap forward in quartet writing. The movement opens with threatening, semi-tonal creepings (*illustrated*). “The phrase itself has a dramatic intensity which is new in Schubert's chamber music, an intensity which is all the more powerful because it begins quietly” (Jack Westrup). The tension is relaxed by the joyfully open *dolce* second subject in *Ab* major (*illustrated*); it encourages the transformation of the opening phrase into more nostalgic versions of itself, before its final emphatic return.

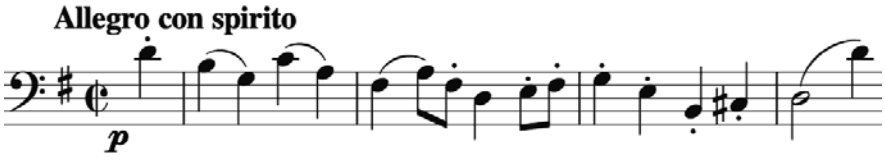




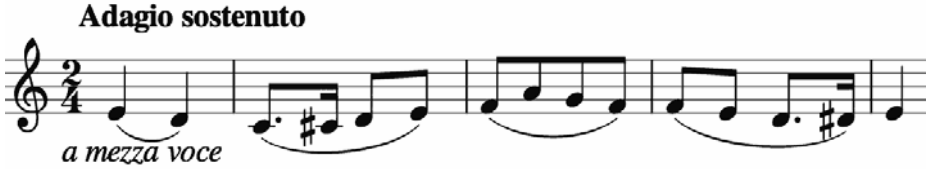
Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in G Op 76 No 1 (1797)
Allegro con spirito
Adagio sostenuto
Menuet: Presto
Finale: Allegro ma non troppo

In 1795 Haydn returned from the last of his spectacularly successful visits to England to the relatively light duties prescribed by the new Esterházy Prince Nikolaus II. Nikolaus had abandoned his father's palace at Esterházy, sacking its extensive musical establishment, and divided his time between Eisenstadt and Vienna. Haydn was kept on, but his main duty was just to write a Mass for the Princess's name day. He was free to accept other commissions. One such came from Count Joseph Erdödy, the Hungarian Court Chancellor. Although his father had employed an orchestra to play in the family's three palaces, on inheriting the title in 1789 Count Joseph responded both to contemporary taste and financial stringency by replacing the orchestra with a string quartet. In 1796 he placed a generous commission with Haydn for six quartets. The resulting Erdödy quartets are a triumph, perhaps the pinnacle of Haydn's long quartet-writing career.

Today's G major quartet opens with a dramatic new gesture: three dense, forte chords calling our attention to the subsequent *piano* single line of the cello's phrase (*illustrated*). The viola answers, completing the theme which is then repeated as a cello/violin duo. Not until bar 17 is the full quartet requisitioned. What follows is a masterpiece of transparent contrapuntal writing.

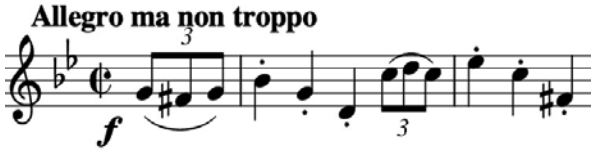


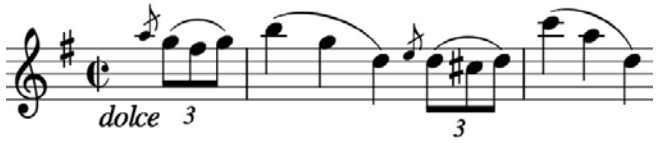
The start of the *Adagio sostenuto* really is *sostenuto,* serenely smoothing our troubles away, the two dotted notes paradoxically increasing the effect (*illustrated*). But then the first violin decorates the theme with running demi-semiquavers which turn into a rapid off-beat riff and the rest of the movement develops the contrast between these two ideas.



Now for the *Menuet*; well, no. Haydn had previously played with the '*Menuet*' movements in his Op 33 quartets labelling them *Scherzo* and giving them *Allegretto* or *Allegro* tempi. Beethoven had meanwhile adopted *Scherzi* with varieties of *Allegro* in his Op 1 Piano Trios; but now Haydn retaliates with a *Menuet* that is marked *Presto* and is completely un-danceable. It contrasts with a jokey retro Ländler-like trio.

And finally, yet another Haydn first. It is not unusual for a piece that is predominantly in the minor to have its last movement in the major, providing a joyful liberation from the worries of the minor and applause to match. But Haydn, the indefatigable experimentalist, paradoxically does the reverse in order to get an enhanced effect. The last movement of this G major quartet starts in G minor, with a tense, angry theme (*illustrated*), all the more so in contrast with the serenity and fun that has passed. The tension builds, until three-quarters of the way through the movement there is a moment of unique catharsis. We go into the major (*illustrated*). Hans Keller asks rhetorically : "Is it the first time in the history of composition that a work's... utterly unexpected culmination ensues at this late stage in the development of its structure...?".





Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) Piano Quintet in G minor Op 57 (1940)
Prelude. Lento
Fugue. Adagio
Scherzo. Allegretto
Intermezzo. Lento
Finale. Allegretto

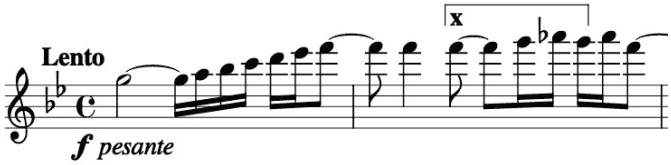
Eighty years ago tomorrow on 23 November 1940, the Beethoven Quartet were joined at the Moscow Conservatory by the 34-year old Shostakovich for the first performance of his Piano Quintet. Impressed by his first string quartet, they had asked him to write a quintet that they could play with him. This quintet was not only a great popular success, but also won the official approval, artistic prestige and 100,000 roubles of the inaugural Stalin

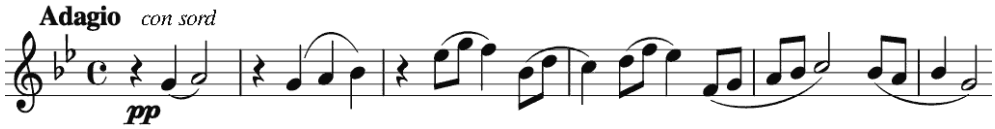
Prize. Shostakovich donated the prize money to Muscovites impoverished by the effects of the 1941 German invasion.

Although Shostakovich had previously exhorted his fellow composers to compose more chamber music, his own output had been pretty sparse: a teenage piano trio (1923), a cello sonata (1934) and the first quartet (1938). By contrast he had written 6 symphonies and numerous film scores, ballets and operas. The opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District had unleashed the opprobrium of Stalin himself in 1936 during the Great Terror, but by 1940 his reputation had been restored - the popular acclaim of the 5th Symphony leading in 1937 to a teaching appointment at the Leningrad Conservatory. Perhaps encouraged by the success of the Piano Quintet, the 1940s saw a burgeoning of Shostakovich's chamber compositions: the 2nd piano trio (1944) and the 2nd, 3rd and 4th string quartets (1944, 1946, 1949).

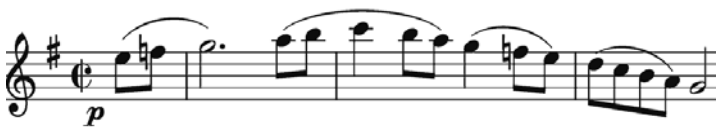
Although the piano quintet's continued popularity is in part due to its harmonic and melodic accessibility, its style also has Shostakovich's engagingly distinctive blend of tragedy and satire that ties you to an emotional roller-coaster. One view of this style relates it to his admiration for Mahler. Shostakovich had been introduced to Mahler's symphonies by a polymath friend, Ivan Sollertinsky. Sollertinsky's description of Mahler has also been applied to Shostakovich: '*Dostoyevsky narrated in the language of Charlie Chaplin*'. Much has been written on the political nuances of the piano quintet, but what may well strike you is the beauty and the sheer emotional range and power of the work.

The five movements of the quintet all have classically familiar titles reflecting its structural as well as its harmonic and melodic accessibility. The piano opens the *Prelude* boldly (*illustrated*) with a *forte* chord unambiguously in the home key of G minor followed by a boldly ascending scale of G minor, which doesn't quite make it. It pauses on F against an F major chord which sinks to F minor against a three-note motif (under x), consisting of the first three notes of the minor scale. This motif recurs throughout the work, as in the subject of the second movement's fugue (*illustrated*). The fugue, which is the longest movement, builds from this fetal beginning to a huge climax that brings back the forceful Prelude and then sinks back into the fugal subject.





The *Fugue's* intensity is spectacularly released by the manic rambunctiousness of the *Scherzo.* It exploits another aspect of the work's opening - the ascending scale. Here scales cavort about the page in crazy contrary motion. What could follow all this? A pause for thought in the form of an initially gentle *Intermezzo*: the scales slow to a gentle walking pizzicato bass supporting a simple melodic line. Inevitably the intensity increases to a substantial climax, and then dies away into the piano's simple *Allegretto* theme for the *Finale*. It gets transformed into this unashamedly positive C major, scale-based melody (*illustrated*). Tension does reappear, but then the clouds magically lift again and Shostakovich draws things abruptly to a happy ending before they have a chance to get worse.



Programme notes by Chris Darwin