Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Piano Quartet in E♭ Op 47 (1842)
Sostenuto assai — Allegro ma non troppo
Scherzo. Molto vivace
Andante cantabile
Finale. Vivace

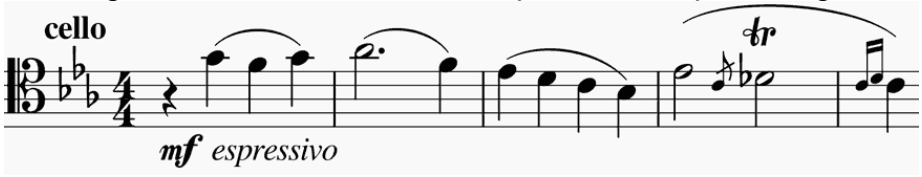
Coming after his 'Liederjahre' of 1840 and the subsequent 'Symphonic Year' of 1841, 1842 was Schumann's 'Chamber Music Year': three string quartets, the particularly successful piano quintet and today's piano quartet. Such creativity may have been initiated by Schumann at last winning, in July 1840, the protracted legal case in which his ex-teacher Friedrich Wieck, attempted to forbid him from marrying Wieck's daughter, the piano virtuoso Clara. They were married on 12 September 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday.

1842, however, did not start well for the Schumanns. Robert accompanied Clara at the start of her concert tour of North Germany, but he tired of being in her shadow, returned home to Leipzig in a state of deep melancholy, and comforted himself with beer, champagne and, unable to compose, contrapuntal exercises. Clara's father spread an unfounded and malicious rumour that the Schumanns had separated.

However, in April Clara returned and Robert started a two-month study of the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. During June he wrote the first two of his own three quartets, the third following in July. He dedicated them to his Leipzig friend and colleague Felix Mendelssohn. The three quartets were first performed on September 13, for Clara's birthday. She thought them 'new and, at the same time, lucid, finely worked and always in quartet idiom' - a comment reflecting Schumann the critic's own view that the ‘proper’ quartet style should avoid ‘symphonic furore’ and aim rather for a conversational tone in which ‘everyone has something to say’.

After an August visit to Bohemia (where the Schumanns called on Metternich), the Piano Quintet followed in mid-October and today's Piano Quartet in November. Both pieces, according to *Grove*, show a tension between symphonic and traditionally chamber writing as 'chamber music came to occupy an intermediary position between private entertainment and public display'. Although the Quintet is played more often than the Quartet, the latter is in many ways the better piece.

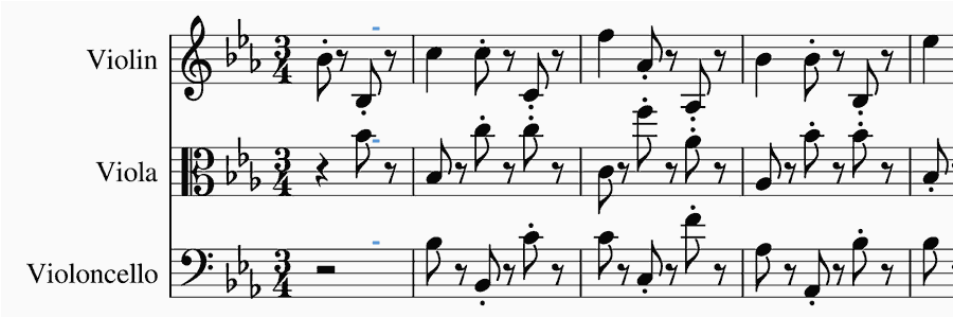
Schumann, admirer of Beethoven that he was, works his way towards the main theme of the first movement. The brief opening *sostenuto* introduces and explores its first four notes. Then, in the *Allegro,* the strings shorten these notes and speed them up drawing an approving comment in running quavers from the piano. Finally, the cello discovers what they have all been looking for and gives us the exuberant theme (illustrated). The exuberance, helped by the running quavers, continues throughout the movement albeit interrupted twice by the return of the *sostenuto* passage.



The *Scherzo* alternates with two contrasting *Trios*. The theme of the lightly scampering, Mendelssohn-like *Scherzo* is related to the running quavers of the first movement. The first *Trio* is based on a gently descending scale, while the second *Trio* slows the action even more with bar-long syncopated chords interrupted by scampering.

The cello again gets to introduce the theme in the *Andante*, but in a characteristically Schumann way, as if you had just opened the door into a room where the movement had already started. The cello gets 16 glorious bars to itself before the violin takes over and the cello answers canonically after a 2-bar delay. There is a subdued interlude in the remote key of G♭followed by the viola finally getting to play the theme, accompanied by a genially playful passage on the violin. During this the cello is silent to allow its C-string to be tuned down a tone to B♭so that the cello can end the movement with a long, low, *pianissimo* B♭ octave. Above this drone, like the *Sostenuto* opening of the first movement, the end of the *Andante* anticipates in slow motion the three chords that start the last movement.

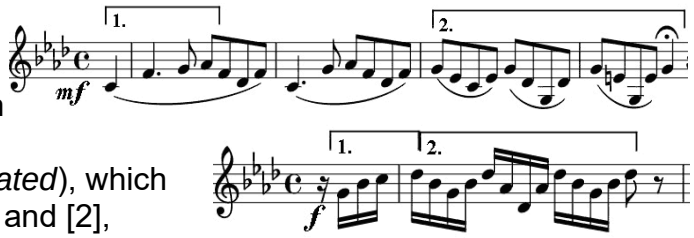
After an opening flourish of these three chords rounded off by descending semiquavers, the viola expands these semiquavers into a fugal theme. These busy scales are contrasted with, on the one hand, a creeping, semitone-spaced rising and falling chromatic scale and on the other with a wonderfully skippy canonic variant of the movement's opening chords which leaps within and between the instruments (illustrated) . The whole movement is packed with ideas and energy and it gallops to a heroic end with a final version of those three opening chords.



Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Quintet Op.34 in F minor (1864)
Allegro non troppo
Andante, un poco Adagio
Scherzo: Allegro
Finale: Poco sostenuto—Allegro non troppo

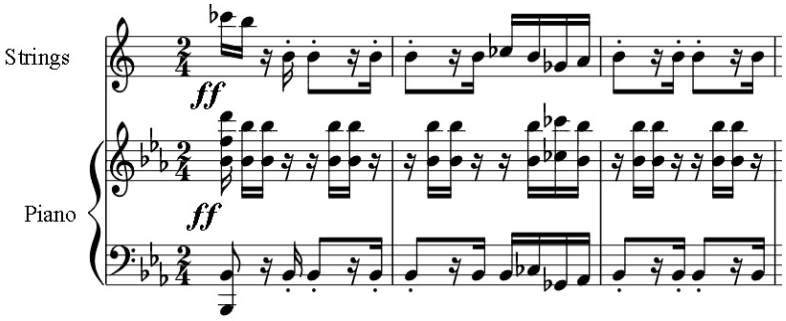
Brahms' only piano quintet has an interesting history. The year 1861 was the start of Brahms' 'first maturity' in chamber music; he produced his first string sextet (Op 18) and his first two piano quartets (Op 25 and 26). The next year, following Schubert whom he deeply admired, he wrote a quintet for two violins, viola and two cellos. His close friends, pianist and composer Clara Schumann and violinist Joseph Joachim, were asked for their comments. They were concerned about the choice of instruments. After a private performance, Brahms, discouraged, rewrote the quintet as a sonata for two pianos (rather than the one-piano 4-hand arrangements that he habitually made) and, as with much of his early chamber music, destroyed the original. The 2-piano version was successfully performed in a number of concerts, but Clara and her fellow pianist Hermann Levi suggested alternative scorings to Brahms, who decided on a piano quintet, which he finished in October 1864. The 2-piano version was published 6 years after the piano quintet as Op 34*bis*. There have been a number of creative reconstructions of the destroyed 2-cello original (recently by Anssi Karttunen, the Finnish cellist, and also by Antony Gray, the Australian pianist), but the piano quintet version remains the most frequently performed. As you listen to the work you might like to wonder how it might have sounded with an extra cello and no piano.

The first movement illustrates Brahms' ability to make simple materials change and grow. Ivor Keys in his BBC Music Guide *Brahms Chamber Music* shows how the first bars lay out the material with which Brahms will work. The pregnant pause in bar 4 (*illustrated*) is followed by an outburst of energetic semiquavers (*illustrated*), which take their shape from the notes under [1] and [2], together with a falling semitone assertion by the violins (which will figure prominently in the *Scherzo*). The semiquavers become the accompaniment and the falling semitone seeds a new theme, which the viola then adopts in a changed form. And so on. In Keys' words "*no extended instrumental composition can ever be convincing if it doesn't possess the coherence that comes from integrity*."



The slow movement is altogether more straight-forward: generally four bar phrases, simply harmonised forming an ABA structure. The opening mood is gentle, like the *Romanza* of Brahms' later first string quartet. The middle section brightens from A♭ into a bell-like E major and leads back to a more lusciously scored reprise of the first part.

The Scherzo is a different beast altogether. The ominous mood set by the *pizzicato* beat on the cello and the threatening dotted rhythm in the strings are abruptly dispelled by a triumphant march. These moods abruptly alternate with the dotted rhythm which is transformed into the manic 'hammer and tongs' passage (*illustrated*) - we really *do* need the piano for this bit! On its reprise a sinister downward D♭-C semitone is incessantly hammered out. This falling semitone is reminiscent not only of the first movement, but also of the end of Schubert's 2-cello quintet. All this breathless drama is contrasted with the most optimistic of Trios.



The falling semitone at the end of the *Scherzo* metamorphoses into a rising one in the searching, slow introduction to the *Finale*. The contrasting episodes of the *Finale* itself appear to be searching for cohesion, so that when the brakes are at last released on a coda of unusually sustained energy, the audience is swept along to an ending that is designed to bring the house down and them to their feet.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin