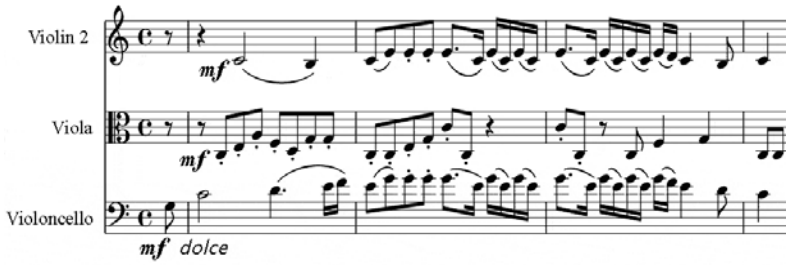
24.10.21 Dome Adelphi Quartet

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet Op. 20 No. 2 in C (1772)

Moderato
Capriccio: Adagio
Menuet: Allegretto
Fuga a quattro soggetti: Allegro

Writing in four parts had been recognised both in theory and practice as the bedrock of string music long before the 1750s when Haydn started to compose string quartets. But four-part string music then had a variety of forms, none of which we would recognise as a 'string quartet' and was predominantly based on a *basso continuo* cello with optional keyboard, or was a light keyboard-less *divertimento*. The 18-year-old Haydn got into writing for a quartet of strings thanks to one Baron Fürnberg, who asked him to write something to be played at his place at Weinzierl in the Wachau valley. The four musicians were the local pastor, his estate manager, Haydn and the cellist brother of the Johann Albrechtsberger who later taught Beethoven composition. The resulting Op 1 & 2 quartets were still, both in name and form, *divertimenti*.

For the next 10 years Haydn wrote no quartets, his energies went into composing for and conducting Prince Nicholas Esterházy's weekly orchestral concerts, and in composing scores and scores of trios for the prince's baryton (a sort of viola da gamba) with viola and cello. But then, in the five years running up to his 40th birthday, in an extraordinary burst of creativity, Haydn invented the string quartet. His baryton trio experience had no doubt given him facility in small ensemble part-writing. He could therefore express new musical ideas in structures that gave equal contrapuntal weight to the four parts. In those five years he wrote three sets of six quartets, Op 9, Op 17 and the crucial Op 20. Op 9 are still in name *divertimenti*, but the form has changed, dropping the second Minuet to give just four movements and expanding the previously lightweight finale with contrapuntal substance. In Op 17 the movements become more thematically united, and the cello enjoys increased freedom. Finally, in Op 20, the cello is fully liberated, and Haydn has found the form for six distinctive masterpieces.

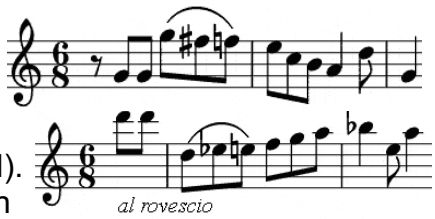


The newly liberated cello opens the C major quartet singing above both the viola's base line and the second violin's close harmony. At the start of the development, the second violin and viola drive a relentless accompaniment while the first violin and cello lead each other astray into remote keys with a motif derived from the opening bar. Then even the viola gets to soar, cello-like with the opening theme. Four truly equal partners.

The equality of the partners is also apparent in the opening of the darkly intense *Adagio*: four bars of unison followed by the cello restating the theme to the accompaniment of the upper strings. Although the first violin subsequently gets most of the decorative passagework, it is frequently joined by the three others to give a rich texture. The viola is given a complex triplet semiquaver accompaniment to the first violin's soaring *cantabile* second theme, then the second violin takes the theme while the first takes over the triplet accompaniment.

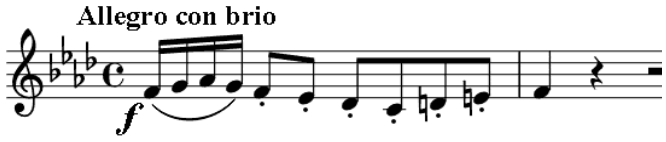
The *Minuet* contrasts the drone of a syncopated and then chromatically drooping bagpipe with the call of a chirpy bird, while in the *Trio* the cello (again) sings out a theme derived from the droop.

The last movement is a contrapuntal tour de force: a four-part fugue with four themes, played *sotto voce* until a *forte* outburst shortly before the end. Just over half-way through Haydn writes *al rovescio* as he inverts the fugal subject. In the autograph edition at the *forte* outburst, Haydn wrote "*Laus. Omnip. Deo. Sic fugit amicus amicum*" (Praise the Lord. Thus one friend flees another friend). Haydn has clearly established his contrapuntal credentials with both this fugue and the last-movement fugues of two other of the Op 20 quartets. But he only writes one more in all of his subsequent 40 or so quartets – his contrapuntal technique is now firmly integrated into his quartet writing.



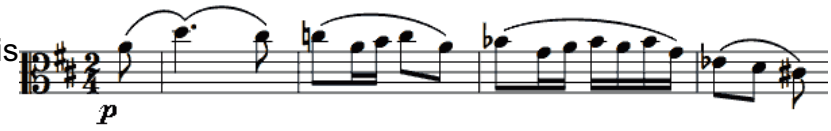
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Quartet in F minor, Op 95 (*Quartett Serioso*) (1810)
Allegro con brio
Allegretto ma non troppo
Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso - Più Allegro
Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato – Allegro

"NB. The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public... Should you wish for some Quartetts for public performance, I would compose them to this purpose occasionally". So wrote Beethoven in 1815 to Sir George Smart, his London promoter, not only anticipating the sophistication of this morning's audience but also safeguarding the quality of performance (the aristocracy hired better players) and trying to insulate himself from uncomprehending rejection. The F minor is a "serious" quartet: "*not a 'pretty' piece, but it is terribly strong - and perhaps rather terrible… Everything unessential falls victim, leaving a residue of extreme concentration, in dangerously high tension*" (Joseph Kerman). The *serioso* quartet is an isolated bridge between the middle quartets (Rasumovsky quartets and Op 74 "Harp") of the 1800s, and the final set of late quartets from 1825. The work experiments with various techniques that will appear in the late quartets and is contemporary with the *Egmont* overture and with Napoleon's 1809 invasion of Vienna.

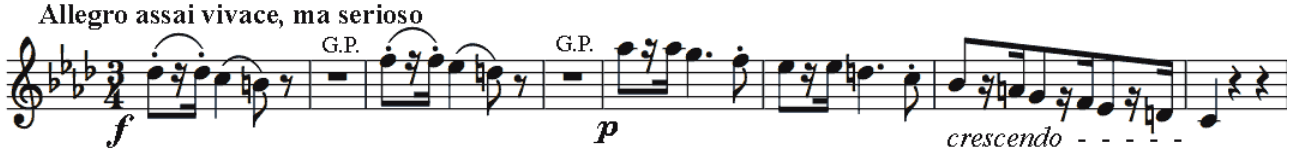


Beethoven challenges the listener from the start with this grim unison outburst and pause, answered by 3-bars of angry, spiky octave leaps in the dominant (C minor). The original outburst is repeated on the cello up a semitone and in the major (a "Neapolitan" modulation). It is answered by a more conciliatory slow theme from the violin, but ominous rapid ascending figures in the cello force us back to the initial outburst. And that is just the first 17 bars: enough to challenge even aristocratic connoisseurs. This brutally condensed, tempestuous movement is all over in less than 5 minutes.

The *Allegretto* inverts the threatening, ascending scales of the first movement to a gentle stepping descent from the cello, introducing a calm theme related to that of the first movement. The viola then introduces a new theme, which is taken up as a fugue.

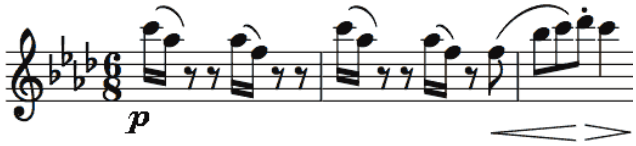


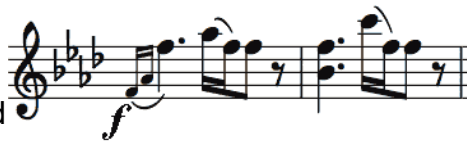
The third movement, based on the *Scherzo* form, starts, like the first, with an abrupt, angry challenge, just one bar and a pause; it is repeated, more demandingly, followed by a descending scale in dotted rhythm on a sinister crescendo.



This angry section is developed and repeated, but then dissolves into a tranquil slow melody from the second violin, caressed by first violin arpeggios, initially in the minor, then the major. The contrast is repeated, but finally anger, at a faster tempo, slams the door on the movement.

All seems well with the world in the expressive slow introduction to the last movement. But this optimism is threatened by the worried agitation of pairs of *piano* semiquavers from the first violin. The threat level ratchets up on subsequent returns of this figure with an increasingly agitated accompaniment, and terrified octave and tenth leaps in the first violin. But then, a more hesitating, *pianissimo*, return of the figure heralds a *forte*, reassuring modification (illustrated *right*). The tempo increases to *Allegro*, the key shifts to the major and the threat is forgotten in a final triumphantly rising scale.





Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952) Fetzen (1999) & Fetzen No 2 (2002) for string quartet

"...he's someone whose unstoppable musical creativity, whose tumult of pieces for orchestras, opera houses, string quartets, for the familiar forms of musical institutions, and for famous soloists such as Anne-Sophie Mutter, makes him one of the most approachable, engaging and profound composers writing music today. I give you Wolfgang Rihm, arguably contemporary music's most prolific composer, with more than 400 works – and counting – to his name." (Tom Service transmitting his admiration for Rihm in *The Guardian* ten years ago.)

Contrary to the iconoclastic and purist avant garde of the 1970's (Stockhausen, Boulez, Nono) Rihm has never been afraid to embrace and incorporate past traditions into his huge and eclectic output.

The first of today's two pieces *Fetzen* (scraps or shreds) was initially a short free-standing piece for string quartet, but over the next five years it gained *Fetzen 2* and then six more similarly short fellows – some including accordion - to make a cycle of eight miniatures.

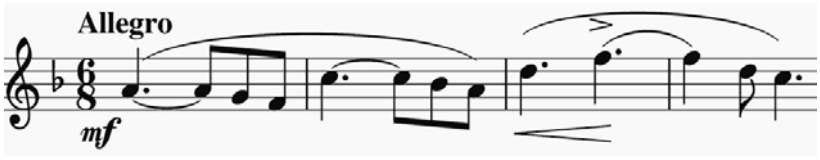
Robert Schumann (1810-1856) String Quartet in A minor Op 41 No 1 (1842)
Andante espressivo — Allegro
Scherzo: Presto

Adagio
Allegro

Coming after his 'Liederjahre' of 1840 and the subsequent 'Symphonic Year' of 1841, 1842 was Schumann's 'Chamber Music Year': three string quartets, a piano quartet and the particularly successful piano quintet. Such creativity may have been due to 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 Clara. They were married on 12 September 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday.

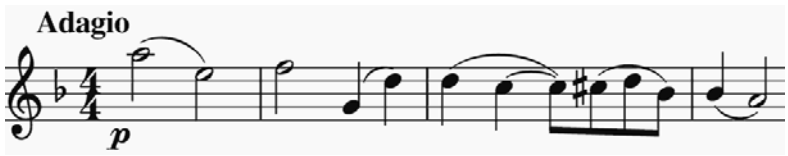
The year 1842, however, did not start well for the Schumanns. Robert accompanied Clara at the start of her concert tour of North Germany, but he tired of being in her shadow, returned home to Leipzig in a state of deep melancholy, and comforted himself with beer, champagne and, unable to compose, contrapuntal exercises. His state of mind was not improved by Clara's father spreading 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, particularly for tonight's quartet, Beethoven, who had died 16 years earlier. 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, who as a teenager had been one of the few to appreciate late Beethoven. Schumann's 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’.



The first movement shows how well Schumann had assimilated the now-established sonata form. The long *Andante* introduction (recalling Beethoven's later quartets) leads to a genial theme (*illustrated*) with a characteristically Schumann off-beat accent (bar 3) trying to throw you. This off-beat phrase is developed later in its own right, when the temptation to mentally shift the bar line becomes stronger. There is a contrasting motif announced by a 'rum-ti-tum' figure that provides contrast for the classically-structured development.

That the *Presto* Mendelssohn-like *Scherzo* comes second promises great things for the subsequent slow movement. It does not disappoint: its opening strongly recalls that of the slow movement of Beethoven's last symphony, with its serene slow melody (*illustrated*) after a 3-bar introduction.



However, this introduction, with its arch-shaped semiquaver phrase on the cello and then the violin, is more than it seems. After the glorious slow theme has been celebrated by the violin and then, aah, the cello!, there is a change of mood and the semiquaver arch now reappears asserting its right to a proper hearing. It takes us on an intense journey through remote keys before calm is restored by the slow theme playing us out against a rhythmically enriched background.

The last movement rollicks along with the same good-natured energy as the last movement of Schumann's Piano Quartet, also composed in 1842, which was played for us in March by the Notos Quartet. Just before the end, late Beethoven reappears in the form of a curious bagpipe-like *Musette* reminiscent of the middle movement of his Op 131.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin