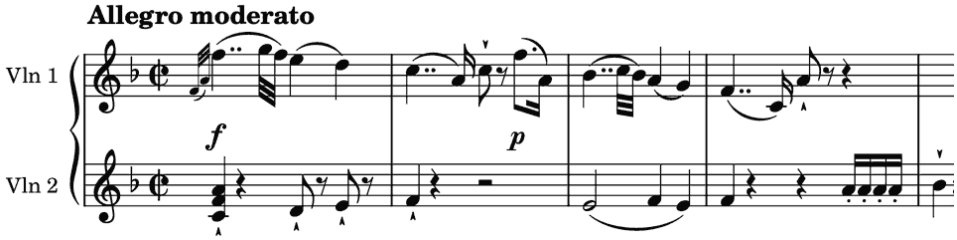
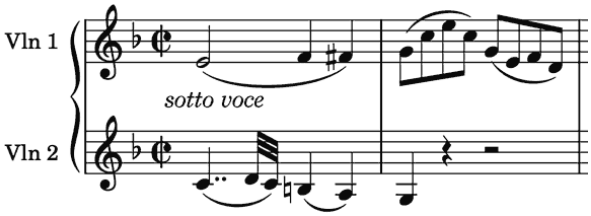
23rd January 2022 – Maxwell Quartet – Programme Notes By Chris Darwin

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in F, Op 77 no 2 (1799)
Allegro moderato
Menuet & Trio: Presto
Andante
Finale: Vivace assai

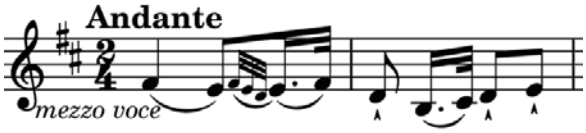
Prince Razumowsky's sister-in-law Lulu had this to say of Josef, the 7th Prince Lobkowitz: *"This Prince was as kindhearted as a child and the most foolish music enthusiast. He played music from dusk to dawn and spent a fortune on musicians. Innumerable musicians gathered in his house, whom he treated regally."* Pity we don't get many like that these days. We have Lobkowitz to thank for commissioning six string quartets from Haydn. However, the ageing Haydn, pre-occupied with writing *The Seasons,* completed only two of the six. These two Op 77 quartets are a worthy climax to Haydn's quartet writing. The first is triumphantly in the tradition of 'first violin' quartets, whereas the second has in Rosemary Hughes' words: 'that pure, linear string-quartet writing in which each instrument brings its strand of melody, clear and distinct, to the texture of the whole'.



The opening of today's quartet demonstrates Haydn's renowned thematic economy. The first violin has the theme while the second violin accompanies with a simple rising figure (*illustrated*). After 30-odd bars the second theme appears in the first violin, as a version of what the second violin had previously played, while the second accompanies with a version of the first's opening theme (*illustrated*) .



Nominally a *Menuet*, the *Presto* second movement is a scherzoid romp sandwiching a gravely tender *Trio*. The opening derives much of its energy from three-beat bars trying to accommodate a tune that wants to be in two. The *pianissimo Trio* is in the unconventional key of B-flat minor and unusually has a coda. This coda sounds as if the *Menuet* is returning (albeit *pianissimo* and in D-flat major) but turns out to be a witty excursion on the way back to the *Menuet's* home key of F major.



Delaying the slow movement until after the *Menuet* is a sign that we are in for something special. The cello sets out on its D-major *Andante* walk accompanying just the first violin in a theme (*illustrated*) that is a close relative of the start of the first movement. The other two members of the quartet then join them for a magical harmonisation. Variations on this theme follow: second violin gets the theme, with viola doing the walking, and then after a pregnant chord, the cello gets the theme while the first violin takes off on an extended cadenza that after a dramatic climax brings us back to a *pianissimo* final appearance of the theme.

Haydn now has a problem – the *Andante* ended firmly in D (with a prominent F-sharp), which is not a good precursor to the last movement's chirpy tune in F. He solves it simply by serving us a palate-cleansing F-major chord. We are now ready for the upcoming

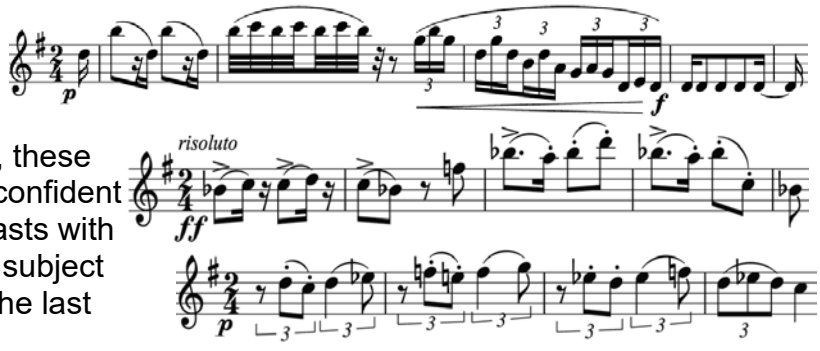
Polonaise-style Finale, so off we go dancing (monothematically of course) to the end of Haydn's last completed quartet.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) String Quartet in G, Op 106 (B 192) (1895)
Allegro moderato
Adagio ma non troppo
Molto vivace
Finale: Andante sostenuto; Allegro con fuoco

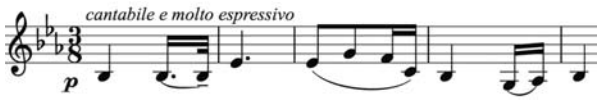
Dvořák, a professional viola player, was a prolific composer of chamber music throughout his life. But between his eleventh quartet in 1881 and his twelfth quartet (the well-known 'American') there is a twelve-year gap. This was the time when his international reputation grew thanks mainly to appreciative British audiences. Their admiration gave him the freedom to develop his own musical style. The interest of the Novellos in publishing his music also gave him welcome leverage to secure increased fees from his long-standing publisher Simrock – he had six children to maintain. In August 1885 he paid a brief visit to Brighton, staying for a couple of days with the Novellos at 7 Victoria Mansions. He was enchanted by the bathers (public, English, female, lovely), the boats (countless, large and small) and the band (playing Scottish folk-songs); he wrote home *"everything is enchantingly lovely so that nobody who has seen it can ever forget it."*

His visits to England were interrupted by Mrs Jeanette Thurber's invitation to be artistic director of her new *National Conservatory of Music in America* based in New York. Her aim, to which Dvořák was sympathetic, was to develop a national American style of art music. Dvořák immersed himself in spirituals and plantation songs from the South, and transcriptions of Amerindian melodies. During his stay in America, Dvořák returned to quartet writing with what was to be his best-known quartet, the *American,* something "melodious and simple".

Today's G major quartet, his thirteenth, was written at the end of 1895 soon after his return home from America. It is more complex than the melodic simplicity of the *American*. The raw material, presented at the beginning, is rhythmic and episodic rather than melodic, with each of the first four bars containing a different motif (*illustrated*); however, these motifs are soon transformed into a confident *risoluto* theme (*illustrated*). It contrasts with a more tender triplet-based second subject (*illustrated*), which will reappear in the last movement.



The *Adagio* has a dark, melancholy, slavic theme, introduced *cantabile* by the violin (*illustrated*). It is repeated throughout the movement in a variety of different moods and keys. Dvořák's good cheer returns in the S*cherzo*. In the first of its two trios the violin echoes a gentle theme from the viola.



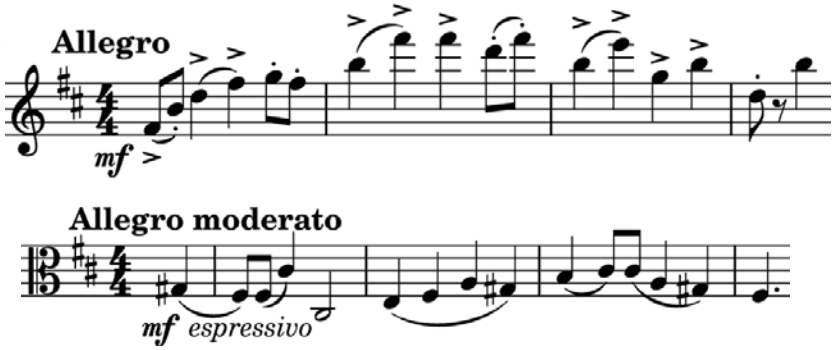
A brief *Andante* introduces the theme of the final *Allegro con fuoco*. The *Andante* returns to introduce the middle section, which is a meditation on the second subject of the first movement. Other elements from that movement also contribute including the tumbling

triplets of the opening third bar. The movement's main *Allegro* theme returns and after some characteristically sliding key-changes we romp to the finish.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) Quartet No 1 Op 50 (1930)
Allegro
Andante molto - Vivace
Andante

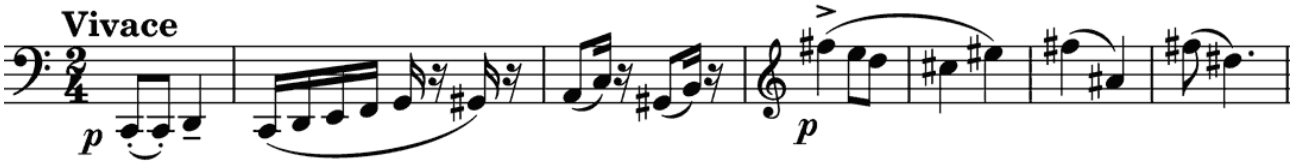
The only surviving child of an affluent and cultured Ukrainian family, Prokofiev played the piano and composed from an early age - by 10 he was well into his second opera (a sort of Robinson Crusoe tale)! During the following two summers, the young composer Glière taught Sergei at home and continued by correspondence in the winter. Glazunov encouraged the 12-year-old's parents to send him to the St Petersburg Conservatory. He emerged seven years later an accomplished pianist, but his compositions were more influenced by the St Petersburg 'Evenings of Contemporary Music' where his inherent modernist tendencies met a sympathetic reception. The public at the premier of his second piano concerto in 1913 were less sympathetic; many walked out with the prevailing view being: 'To hell with this futuristic music! The cats on the roof make better music!'. Soon after, he travelled to London and met Diaghilev, who commissioned the ballet 'Chout' (The Buffoon). Its subsequent premier in Paris in 1921 was attended both by Stravinsky who called it "the single piece of modern music [he could] listen to with pleasure",and Ravel for whom it was "a work of genius". Meanwhile Prokofiev had left Russia, and after an extended concert tour of the US settled in Paris.

Prokofiev only wrote two string quartets and little other chamber music. In 1924 he wrote a quintet for oboe, clarinet, violin, viola and double bass. It is an arrangement of his ballet, *Trapèze*, commissioned by an itinerant ballet troupe with 5-man band. However today's first string quartet is quite a different creature. It was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation for the Washington Library of Congress' collection of manuscripts by famous composers. The work is more classical in style than his recent expressionist operas – a change perhaps partly reflecting his conversion to Christian Science. In preparation, for the first quartet he made an intensive study of Beethoven's quartets, 'chiefly in railway carriages on my way from one concert to another…'.



His study of Beethoven certainly gives this first quartet its confident classically contrapuntal craftsmanship, and perhaps those trains inspired the powerful propulsion of its opening (*illustrated*). This drive is soon contrasted with a slower gently restful theme from the viola (*illustrated*). The movement introduces us to more enjoyably contrasting melodies which are developed with wit and charm, and without the hard sardonic edge of some of Prokofiev's earlier work.

The second movement starts as an *Andante molto* which soon reveals itself as but an introduction to a substantial *Vivace* scherzo with a similar rhythmic impetus to the first movement. Its initial impatience on the cello is interrupted with a confidently calming reply from the violin (*illustrated*). The scherzo sandwiches a gentler trio section.



The third movement is the emotional heart of the piece, its opening sigh setting the tone. Some have commented that it reflects how Prokofiev missed his Russian homeland; he returned in 1932. Fellow composer Nikolai Miaskovsky wrote of the quartet: "…The composition is completely free of effects, something quite surprising for Prokofiev… There is true profundity in the sweeping melodic line and intensity of the finale. This movement strikes deep…"

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