

Ludwig van Beethoven: String Quartet 1, Op. 18, No. 1 (1801)

Beethoven (1770-1827) is known today as a master of the string quartet genre, his late quartets standing as some of the most experimental and cathartic examples of nineteenth-century music. Yet, his earliest forays into this conversational genre championed by Haydn and Mozart were nothing short of masterpieces. His *String Quartet No. 1* (actually the second one he composed), is a prime example of Beethoven's careful writing and his masterful control over the timbres of the string quartet. While the *galant style* string quartets of Mozart came from a culture of virtuosic improvisation and an embodied knowledge of counterpoint, Beethoven's musical process ushered in a Romantic musical culture of introspection and highly structured compositions, with specifications down to the smallest articulation mark decided by the composer when they put pen to paper. In this string quartet, Beethoven takes further Haydn's playful interplay between all four instruments, rarely relegating one to a mere accompanimental role, and giving each instrument a voice of equal authority at different points throughout the work. Standing in the shadows of the groundbreaking musical adventures of the first Viennese School, Beethoven embarked on a new journey of effective experimentation through his string quartets, from his Opus 18 works through the *Grosse Fugue*.

This quartet underwent a major transformation from the early version sent to Beethoven's confidant, Karl Amenda in 1800, and the second version published in 1801 and dedicated to Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz. The original manuscript, known as the *Amenda manuscript*, was only published in the 1960s after being edited by Paul Mies and is only rarely performed, as the second version consists of Beethoven's own edits and revisions. The string quartet is split into four movements in classic form, beginning with a fast movement, then a slow adagio followed by a quick scherzo and bombastic finale.

The first movement, marked *Allegro con brio*, opens in unison across all four instruments, punctuated by solo violin passages leading into the next statement of the primary theme. This opening unison establishes the motivic cell that colors the entirety of this first movement. Insisting on this motif throughout the movement, Beethoven transports it across all four instruments such that no matter what melodic material is presented, this basic motif is always in our mind, an earworm that is always poking through the texture of the quartet. Having established this motif so deeply in our psyche from the opening bars, we cannot help but listen for

it throughout the movement; Beethoven plays with the setup, suspension, and delivery of this motif throughout and keeps us constantly on our toes as we come to predict and even expect the next iteration of the motif. The instruments themselves are constantly tossing this proverbial hot potato around, chuckling at the inside joke before handing it off to the next player in the lineup.

The second movement, *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato*, was apparently conceived of as a musical depiction of the final tragic scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, that fatal moment of misrecognition. The movement begins with a violin solo set over lower strings playing the harmonies in *portato* fashion, giving the whole movement a rhythmic beating not dissimilar to a grief-stricken heart. The cello follows close on the heels of the first violin with its own iteration of the theme, followed by melodic outbursts in both inner strings. Beethoven plays here upon the ways in which the melodic material floats above the accompaniment, which shapes and structures it, creating a texture in which the non-melodic voices are almost more important to the musical trajectory than the melody itself. With a dying gasp, the movement ends, almost as if it still had more left to say. The next notes catapult us into the *scherzo* movement, marked *Allegro molto*. The triple meter *scherzo* movement of his later *Eroica* symphony is highly reminiscent of this quartet's *scherzo* in terms of its texture, the bravura passagework, and the quick tempo. Each instrument is given a chance to shine with its own virtuosity, but the first violin takes center stage.

The final movement, simply marked *Allegro*, is a metrical joke from the very first two bars, instilling a confusion between duple and triple time, exacerbated by the grand pauses between each iteration of this opening motif, itself rendered in a triplet rhythm. Beethoven expertly maneuvers and settles into a duple meter by overlapping the melodic statements between the first violin and viola. What follows is an intense exploration of the thematic material across all four instruments, flitting from the lighthearted primary theme to the somber secondary theme, *cantabile* melodies juxtaposed with the fire of the primary theme. With this quartet, Beethoven established himself as a skilled composer in the already-established genre, and his later Razumovsky quartets would completely transform the norms and expectations of the musical conversation that is a string quartet.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Anton Webern: *Langsamer Satz* (1905)

Anton Webern (1883-1945) was an important member of the Second Viennese School of composers, alongside his teacher Arnold Schoenberg and his peer, Alban Berg. The Second Viennese School pushed the boundaries of composition far beyond even the most experimental Romantic chromaticism and tonal harmony, ushering in yet another era of musical style that would dominate the modern music world for nearly a century. However, Webern's *Langsamer Satz* is anything but atonal, and it lies much closer to the sound world of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* and Webern's own *Im Sommerwind* (1904). Written around the time that Webern explored the Austrian countryside with Wilhelmine Mortl (his future wife), *Langsamer Satz* is so often described as a young Webern in love, his outpouring of neo-Romantic passion for the woman of his dreams, before he embarked on his paradigm-shifting compositional career as a student of Schoenberg. Whatever the "romantic" backstory may be, it is clear that this longest piece composed by Webern is in dialogue with the history of the string quartet genre, and particularly his predecessors, Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

Anton Webern lived a difficult life, experiencing the horrors of both World Wars and finally meeting his end by the rifle of an American soldier outside his own house. His musical career during his life was equally bleak, faced with a series of failures, dissatisfaction with musical institutions, and a lack of general popularity, though he was trained in the arts of composition, conducting, and even musicology. His legacy was only cemented through the work of Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, a musicologist couple who worked hard to present Webern's history and his works to the public in the postwar period as a harbinger of the future. In fact, Webern's *Langsamer Satz* never experienced the privilege of being performed publicly until 1962, when it was premiered posthumously by the University of Washington String Quartet at the first international Webern Festival (spearheaded by the Moldenhauers who had unearthed the manuscript in a dusty attic). It was at this festival that Webern's music was heralded as futuristic, the emblem of modernity, and an essential part of western art music's history.

The piece operates as an extended slow movement, almost as if it were excerpted from a larger-scale full quartet (which may or may not have ever been composed). Marked *Langsam, mit bewegter Ausdruck* ('Slow, with moving expression'), the

Langsamer Satz follows clearly in the footsteps of Beethoven's own string quartets composed a century prior. Webern's insistence on motivic repetition owes much to his predecessor, though its highly chromatic unfolding is clearly Webern's own creation. The piece opens with the first violin playing the first theme over a lush bed, but this melodic material is split up across the instruments and passed to the viola, then the second violin. At this point, the cello refrains from joining in, sticking to its role as a harmonic linchpin for the quartet. Then the texture breaks apart into a trio, with rich contrapuntal dialogue between the second violin and viola, the cello providing the bassline, and the first violin remaining tacet. When it does finally enter, the first violin merely doubles the viola two octaves higher, retaining the three-instrument texture. Unlike Beethoven, who enjoyed (as did Haydn before him) elegant counterpoint across all four voices, Webern instead prefers to keep the texture limited to two or three independent voices and rarely fills it out to a full four-voice texture. The cello plays a surprisingly accompanimental role throughout, until the recapitulation, in which the opening theme and its melancholic gestures are repeated. This time around, it finally opens up to a short cello solo accompanied by *pizzicato* in the upper strings, the relay taken up by the viola immediately after. In the finale of the *Langsamer Satz*, time flows even slower than ever before as the music is stretched to its limits, and Webern fully professes his love for Wilhelmine.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Felix Mendelssohn: *String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80 (1847)*

Electrifying. Hair-raising. Grief-stricken. The opening bars of Mendelssohn's (1809-1847) final published work are without a doubt some of the most visceral moments in the string quartet repertoire. We might hear in this quartet a microcosm of life, containing within it a lifetime's worth of emotions and experiences. Mendelssohn's sixth string quartet, premiered on October 5th, 1847, with Joseph Joachim on first violin, was composed as an homage to Felix

Mendelssohn's beloved sister, musical colleague, and confidante, Fanny Mendelssohn. Fanny had passed away in May of the same year from a cerebral hemorrhage from an apoplectic stroke, a fate which left her younger brother distraught and put him in a depression from which he would not recover. Upon hearing of Fanny's fate, Felix collapsed with a ruptured blood vessel in his brain, and he was not even able to attend her funeral. While convalescing at Interlaken, he wrote to his younger sister, Rebecca: "*I force myself to be industrious in the hope that later on I may feel like working and enjoying it.*" He did indeed force himself to be industrious and composed this last work, but unfortunately Felix was never to recover from the sorrow of bereavement, and he succumbed to a paralytic stroke similar to the ailment that had taken the lives of both his parents and his beloved sister on November 4th, 1847, in Leipzig.

The first movement of the quartet, *Allegro vivace assai*, is unique for its opening gesture, electric sixteenth notes that builds from the lowest to the highest voice. After this jolting introduction, the viola and first violin engage in intense musical dialogue, with the second violin and cello playing second fiddle to them. Mendelssohn often pairs off two voices against two others, especially in transition material, across the entire quartet, and the texture feels just as full as a Beethoven quartet, it retains a lightness of feeling that the dense musical dialogue of earlier string quartets could afford. The transition material itself is very quick, presenting brief interludes of *moto perpetuo* in between the exposition, development, and recapitulation; however, the forward momentum does not disappear in once the themes reappear, but the accompanimental voices drive us ever forward.

The second movement, *Allegro assai*, breaks from tradition in having a slow second movement and the quick *scherzo* third, and instead we are presented with more fast material close upon the heels of the first movement. In triple time, we are presented with a dark *scherzo*, highly reminiscent of his *A Midsummer Night's Dream scherzo* in its effect and intent, but without the *moto perpetuo* texture. Instead, Mendelssohn writes a ponderous Baroque dance, followed by a tragic trio introduced by the lower strings, upon which the violins swirl around each other. The *scherzo* material is repeated, and we move on to the coda which reworks the melodic material of the trio back into the quick tempo of the *scherzo*.

The third movement, *Adagio*, is where Mendelssohn lays bare the grief in his heart. This is a lament and an elegy to Fanny. This heaviest movement of the quartet begins with a cello solo that leads into the first violin's exploration of the

primary theme accompanied by a countermelody in the inner strings, and harmonically underpinned by the cello. Throughout, we hear the voice of Fanny as she is brought momentarily to life and reminds her loved ones that they must not lose hope, for she has but moved on to the next phase of her existence. Felix conjures the voice of his sister in the melody by pouring forth his grief onto paper. The alternation between the primary theme, Fanny's *cantabile* voice, and the secondary theme, a rhythmic motif grounded in human existence gives Mendelssohn material with which to think simultaneously about life on earth and life after, the overall trajectory of every human life.

The finale, marked *Allegro molto*, is Mendelssohn's final statement to the world. Written in a *Sturm und Drang* style, the movement passes between the passionate primary theme and the calm secondary theme, with each statement linked by tremolo passages transferred across the four instruments. Each instrument shines forth with its own virtuosity in this movement, and it is not dominated by any one voice throughout, quite unlike many of Mendelssohn's other works which heavily feature the violin. It is, nonetheless, in the first violin that Mendelssohn makes one final statement to the world in the last few bars, which sings out with the intensity of a man who has lost the person most dear to him in this world.

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