

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

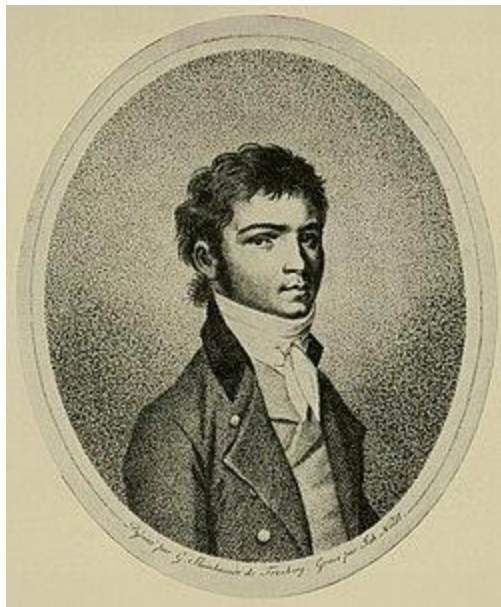
Beethoven (1770-1827) is known today as a master of the string quartet genre, his late quartets standing as some of the most experimental and cathartic examples of nineteenth-century music. Yet, his earliest forays into this conversational genre championed by Haydn and Mozart were nothing short of masterpieces. 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 Haydn's playful interplay between all four instruments further, rarely relegating one to a mere accompanimental role, and giving each instrument a voice of equal authority at different points throughout the work. Building on the groundbreaking musical adventures of the first Viennese School, Beethoven embarked on a new journey of affective 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 even the second version published in 1801 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 abruptly, almost as if it still had something 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.



Beethoven, age 29

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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



Anton Webern in 1912

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Caroline Shaw: *Entr'acte* (2011)

From the composer: *Entr'acte* was written in 2011 after hearing the Brentano Quartet play Haydn's Op. 77 No. 2 — with their spare and soulful shift to the D-flat major trio in the minuet. It is structured like a minuet and trio, riffing on that classical form but taking it a little further. I love the way some music (like the minuets of Op. 77) suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolor transition.

Caroline Shaw's (b. 1982) *Entr'acte* is no mere looking glass, but a kaleidoscope of colors. Skipping the usual grandiose opening gestures, *Entr'acte* begins *in medias res*, dropping us right into the middle of the first phrase. The clipped theme is then repeated again and again, and as our attention turns away from the expectation of harmonic development, we begin to listen to the timbre of the notes. As we are lulled into the groove, a handful of notes start to grow out from the texture, blossoming into what is almost a melodic line before settling back into the timbral portrait the quartet has been painting.

Shaw's composition is a rich display of the quartet's timbral colors and is in essence a painting of sound. As we peer through the looking glass, adjusting the focus left and right to see the painting more clearly, the sonic purity of the quartet's timbre shifts. First it morphs into an electronically warped recording, which slowly gives way to static, and finally we focus in on a clear rendition of the theme in the form of a *pizzicato* chorale. Through timbre, harmony, and extended techniques, Shaw has managed to replicate the very experience of tuning a radio, adjusting the dial until the music comes into sharp focus, the same theme carrying through it all.

The second half of the piece continues to develop this same theme, and it is only now we realize that *Entr'acte* is, in fact, a theme and variations. As the second violin and viola take up the role of a ticking clock with unpitched left-hand strumming, the cello and violin play a game of *Simon Says*, the cello attempting to copy the violin's line exactly while working to minimize the obvious timbral and structural differences between the two instruments. *Entr'acte* hinges on its embrace of both the academic exploration of sound and the pleasures of mimetic play made possible by the ensemble. Each of the variations explores a different facet of the string quartet's timbral palette, drawing us ever further into the work's kaleidoscope of colors, the same notes endlessly refracted.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Caroline Shaw in 2020

Source: Wikimedia Commons

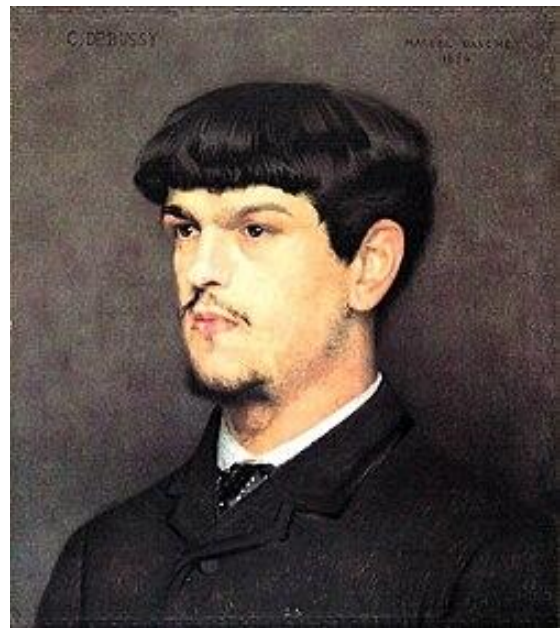
Claude Debussy: *String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10* (1893)

L'effet produit, sans une dissonance, sans une fioriture, même adorable, qui distrait — voilà ce que je cherche. -Stéphane Mallarmé in a letter to Henri Cazalis, January 1864

‘The effect produced – without a single dissonance nor any ornamentation, no matter how adorable, which distracts – that is precisely what I am looking for.’

Timbral experimentation is not just a contemporary fixation; Claude Debussy’s (1862-1918) musical legacy is built on his exploration of different sound worlds in order to produce effects never before imagined with European instruments. Though the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris is often credited with inspiring Debussy’s mature style, he was already an iconoclastic composer in his early thirties when he composed his first—and only—string quartet in 1893. In this work, it seems Debussy was in search of a distinctly “French” sound, though his inspirations for this nationalistic project came from across the globe.

Since his youth, Debussy was entangled within the social circles of the avant-garde Symbolist poets. His first serious piano teacher, Mme. Mauté de Fleurville, was the mother-in-law of the acclaimed *symboliste*, Paul Verlaine, whose artistic vision helped Debussy break free from the yoke of his mentors at the Paris Conservatory. In the *String Quartet*, Debussy leads us, through the exploration of new soundworlds, to experience the effects the work produces in our psyches. The key for Symbolist artists, as Stéphane Mallarmé succinctly summarized, was to capture the “effect produced” by the thing, not the thing itself, and to let the perceiver arrive at that effect themselves, rather than bogging the music down in narrative. Debussy, as evidenced by his penchant for Symbolist lyrics, certainly counted himself among their ranks.



A young Debussy

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Debussy’s *String Quartet in G Minor* is built on a motto theme that appears throughout all the movements tying them together with shared musical material rather than an overarching sonata form structure. We hear this motto theme in the opening bars of the first movement, *Animé et très décidé*, but it never disappears or plays second fiddle to the second theme. Instead it finds itself fractured throughout the movement into a thousand brilliant pieces which are then pieced back together and re-“circulated” (to use the composer’s own words). Debussy was not the first or only composer of this period to venture beyond the structures of sonata-allegro form; similar approaches to a recurring musical phrase can be found in Wagner’s *leitmotif*, Berlioz’s *idée fixe*, and Franck’s

idée mère. Yet for each of these composers, the repetition of musical material *produced* a distinct effect, as Mallarmé would put it. The *leitmotif* called to mind the presence of various characters on stage; the *idée fixe* became a sort of earworm that anchored the work's psychological layering; the *idée mère* was the seed from which the whole quartet bloomed. For Debussy, the motto theme was less an ideology than a pragmatic move, for it gave the work continuity even as he led us further astray than ever before from the expectations of the genre.

The second movement, *Assez vif et bien rythmé*, with its quasi-*sempre pizzicato* texture inspired the second movement of Maurice Ravel's *String Quartet in F Major* (1902–3). Indeed, Debussy loved the younger composer's homage so much that he wrote to him, « Au nom des Dieux de la musique et au mien propre, ne touchez pas une seule note de votre quatuor » ('In the name of the Gods of music and my own, do not fiddle with a single note of your quartet')! This movement is where Debussy pushes the sound world of the quartet the furthest, the powerful strumming of the strings and the relentless ostinato almost evoking the virtuosity of a Chinese *pipa* or even an Indian *veena*. While we may not know if Debussy actually had heard these instruments before, it is well documented that he was intrigued by the sound of the Javanese *gamelan* he heard in the 1889 Exposition Universelle. One senses, in this movement, the young composer's desire to travel the world through the sound of his music.

In the *Andantino*, marked *doucement expressif*, Debussy takes us on a folkloric journey. The haunting voice of the solo second violin transports us into a realm far removed from the academic mode of exploring sound we have been inhabiting. He employs the same opening move with the solo flute in his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, composed the following year and which remains one of his most enduring works. Unlike the other movements, the motto theme is nearly invisible in this slow movement, appearing only at the end and with a modification in the cello line, such that we might experience it anew and with fresh ears. Critics were quick to denounce the major themes of this movement as being too heavily inspired by Russian folk song—and so it may have been—but that does not make it any less French. When the quartet starts to trade in the rhapsodic theme introduced by the solo viola, it nonetheless retains Debussy's ethereal approach to harmonies. The juxtaposition of Russian folklore and *avant-garde* French harmony is but a musical rendition of Symbolist ideals; the two come together to let us, the audience, imagine a whole new world.

The final movement begins *Très modéré*, basking in the glory of the *Andantino* that precedes it, but the cello soon leads the way, *En animant peu à peu*, to the frenetic heart of the movement: *Très mouvementé et avec passion*. In the same way, Debussy's whole quartet has traveled the world, picking up on the way German Romanticism, Russian folklore, Asian timbres, and a distinctly French approach to syncretism tying it all together. The quartet does not read as an "Imaginary Museum" of poached ideas (*c.f.* Lydia Goehr), but rather as a work of Parisian art which succeeds in putting these disparate influences into conversation, all in the medium of French style. Here, at last, the motto theme receives the heroic treatment it has long deserved. As the boundaries of Common Practice—and its uncommonly wide influence—come increasingly into focus, I leave

you with an invitation to simply enjoy the music, as Debussy himself once urged, exasperated with his teacher's adulation of the German Romantics: « Il n'y a pas de théorie : il suffit d'entendre. Le plaisir est la règle » ('There is no such thing as theory; it suffices to just listen. Pleasure is the only rule').

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

- I. Animé et très décidé (G minor – D minor – G minor)
- II. Assez vif et bien rythmé (G major – E♭ major – G major)
- III. Andantino, doucement expressif (D♭ major – C♯ minor – D♭ major)
- IV. Très modéré – En animant peu à peu – Très mouvementé et avec passion (D♭ major – G minor – C major – G major)