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String quartet

A composition for solo string instruments, usually two violins, viola and cello; it is widely regarded as the supreme form of chamber music.

1. Early development.

No immediate precursor for the string quartet can be identified. Four-part writing for strings occurs in pieces titled sonata a quattro or concerto a quattro, in the Italian sinfonia and the French sonate en quatuor and ouverture à quatre, but these works were apparently intended for orchestral performance and may have included keyboard continuo (Alessandro Scarlatti's Sonate a quattro per due violini, violeutta e violoncello senza cembalo, c1715–25, are an isolated exception; with their alternations of ripieno and concerto they resemble the concerto grosso). Closer in spirit and style to the quartet are the south German and Austrian symphonies in four parts, some of which may have been performed without continuo; frequently their style is indistinguishable from one-to-a-part solo ensemble music. With the exception of the accompanied sonata, the quartet was probably the most widely cultivated genre of 'chamber music' between about 1760 and 1800; its history is characterized chiefly by a refinement of what was then called the 'sonata' (as opposed to the 'theatrical' or orchestral) style. In his Musikalisches Lexikon (1802), Koch described this as 'more development and finer nuance'.

Quartets were first cultivated in south Germany, Austria and Bohemia, by Asplmayr, Ordonez, Dittersdorf, Vanhal, Starzer, Gassmann, F.X. Richter, Holzbauer, Camerloher, Christian Cannabich and Joseph Haydn. The usual title for such works was 'divertimento', which at the time designated solo instrumental music in general and was compatible with a variety of scorings, styles and character; not until about 1780 did modern titles such as quartet and quintet become common for 'serious' chamber music in the now standard scoring. This change in terminology does not, however, imply that earlier divertimenti were an independent genre of 'light', occasional music or that their scoring was variable. Anecdotal and stylistic evidence shows that at least from the time of Haydn's op.9 (1769–70) early divertimentos were 'serious' works for a solo ensemble, with a cello playing the bass part (Webster, 1974).

Early quartets vary widely in structure and style: Richter's six quartets op.5 (c1765–7) are in three movements; Haydn's opp.1 and 2 (probably c1757–62) are in five, with minuets in second and fourth place. It is only with Haydn's op.9 (1769–70) that a four-movement scheme was adopted. Textures also vary, from the purely homophonic, often reminiscent of an elaborated trio sonata, to the intensely contrapuntal; polyphony, once thought to have been resurrected by Haydn only in his op.20 (1772), was in fact a fairly regular feature of chamber music during this period (Kirkendale, 1966, 1979). Fugal movements are found in numerous works by Monn, Kraus, Albrechtsberger, Michael Haydn, Wagenseil and Ordonez. Some early quartets, published or disseminated with wind parts, show a close relationship to the symphony; others, such as Haydn's op.1 no.5, represent orchestral works shorn of their additional parts. Nevertheless, Haydn in particular frequently differentiated between a style of writing appropriate to orchestral music and that suited to the quartet. Mozart's earliest quartets, k80 (1770, Lodi) and k155–60 (1772–3, Milan), have little to do with Austrian chamber music traditions, especially as they were practised in conservative Salzburg; they are based on Italian models, Sammartini in particular. The Viennese set k168–73 (1773), on the other hand, is usually said to have been influenced by Haydn's opp.9, 17 and 20; however, fugal finales (k168 and 173), irregular phrase construction and thematic elaboration are common among early 1770s quartets in general (Brown, 1992).

In France the quartet owed its impetus chiefly to the works of Haydn and Boccherini; no French quartet is known to predate the 1766 Chevardière edition of Haydn's op.3 (as Six symphonies ou Quatuors dialogués), and only Antoine Laurent Baudron's Sei quartetti predates Boccherini's op.2, published (as op.1) by Vénié in 1767. Other early French quartets include those of Jean-Baptiste Davaux, François-Joseph Gossec, Joseph Boulogne de Saint-Georges and Pierre Vachon. These works, closer in spirit to the galant Boccherini than to the 'classical' Haydn, are commonly designated quatuors concertants, a title found almost universally on the title-pages of contemporaneous Parisian editions. Thematic material, generally songlike and elegant, is shared among the four instruments, often with solos for each in turn; most are in three movements, with a sonata-style first movement, a binary form, ABA or minuet second movement, and a rondo, set of variations or minuet to conclude. Two-movement quartets, such as Gossec's op.15 (1772) and all but one of Davaux's op.9 (1779), are also common; four-movement quartets, such as Vachon's...
Elsewhere, quartets were cultivated less intensely. With the exception of G.B. Sammartini, whose 21 quartets include works for three violins and basset or for flute, two violins and basset, most Italian composers wrote their works for publication and performance elsewhere, chiefly London; these include Giordani's op.2 (1773), Capuzzi's op.1 (1780), Giardini's op.23 (1782) and a set of six by Bertoni (c1783). The first quartets published in England were C.F. Abel's op.8 (1769); the earliest by a native composer were those of Joseph Gibbs, published in 1778 with a figured bass part, as were quartets by Haydn as late as 1799. Later examples are known by Samuel Wesley, William Shield and John Marsh. Haydn's quartets were especially influential in England: Marsh's quartet of 1795 was written 'in imitation of the Stile of Haydn's Opera Prima'; while Samuel Webbe jr wrote variations on 'Adeste fidelis' 'after the Manner of Haydn's celebrated Hymn to the Emperor' (op.76 no.3). Both Boccherini and Brunetti were based in Madrid; but whereas Brunetti's 44 quartets were composed chiefly for the Spanish court, Boccherini's almost 100 quartets were widely disseminated and influential. Most of them were published in Paris; some late works were composed for Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, himself a cellist, for whom Boccherini worked (by correspondence from Spain) as chamber composer from 1786. The quartets show a variety of influences, possibly the result of his early travels: Boccherini had lived and worked in Vienna and Paris by 1767 as well as in Italy (where he had been a member of one of the earliest professional string quartets, called the Quartetto Toscano, founded Livorno by Nardini, with Cambini and Manfredi), before his move to Madrid in 1768; characterized in particular by a special concern for sonority, his quartets make frequent use of decorative, concertante textures (especially for the cello), tremolando and double stops. Most of his early examples are in three movements; from his op.15 (1772) 'quartetti nos' in two movements predominate, but there are also works in three and four movements.

Cliff Eisen

2. 1780–1800.

The early 1780s were watershed years for the quartet. In 1782 Viotti arrived in Paris, where he introduced the *quatuor brillant*, which largely supplanted the *quatuor concertant*; essentially an accompanied solo, the *quatuor brillant* style, already evident in some works by Sammartini, was characterized by passages of a purely mechanical brilliance and opportunities for concerto-like cadenzas. The influence of the *quatuor brillant* was widespread; even in Vienna during the 1780s and 90s this style was cultivated at times by Paul Wranitzky, Gyrowetz and Krommer (Hickman, 1989).

Haydn's op.33, published the year of Viotti's début in Paris, also marked a new path in quartet composition: described by their composer as written in a 'new and special manner', this probably referred less to clarity of structure and textural balance, already achieved in opp.9, 17 and 20, than to the consistent application of motivic work (*thematische Arbeit*), the reintroduction of a light, popular touch, and the integration of the movements of varying character into a convincing whole. This is most apparent in the finales, which are differentiated from the opening movements by the use of 'simpler texture, more regular phrasing and harmonic rhythm and a greater emphasis on soloistic passages for the various instruments' (Moe, 1975). The quartets are remarkably concise: thematic material is frequently pared to a minimum, accompaniment and melody are often identical, interchangeable or easily transformed from one to the other, and transitional figures and phrases are eliminated almost completely (Rosen, 1971).

Op.33 is also important for its impact on Mozart, who between 1782 and 1785 composed six magnificent quartets; published with a dedication to Haydn, Mozart described them as 'the fruit of long and laborious endeavour'. While similarly characterized by textures conceived as a four-part discourse, Mozart's debt to op.33 lies more in a general approach to quartet style than in specific modellings. The quartets, broader in scale than Haydn's and more heterogeneous, are characterized in particular by their multiplicity of motifs (428), chromaticism (465 and 428) and a fusion of strict and *galant* styles (387 and 464, finales) to intensify both structure and expression, as well as their elaborate, ornamental slow movements (387, 458). The six quartets were widely disseminated and highly influential; Koch described them as best representing 'the concept of a composition with four obbligato principal voices'.

Haydn's later quartets combine the equal-voice texture, elaborate counterpoint and solo display of his earlier quartets with the motivic work and cyclic integration of op.33. Op.50 (1787) was composed for the cello-loving Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia but make few concessions in terms of providing solo passages for that instrument; they are characterized by a broad harmonic palette and an almost single-minded exploitation of thematic transformation, generally avoiding motivically independent, contrasting subjects. The same is true of opp.54–5 (1788) and op.64 (1790), composed for the violinist Johann Tost, which additionally explore virtuoso violin writing (for example in the slow movement of op.54 no.3), including high positions (the 'Lark', op.64 no.5, with its opening melody high on the E string) and concerto-like passage work (op.55 no.1, op.64 no.2); the chromaticism of op.54 no.1 (Allegretto) and op.55 no.3 is reminiscent of Mozart, whose influence has been claimed. Op.64, more intimate in character than opp.54–5, was performed in London during Haydn's first visit there in 1791–2; opp.71 and 74 ('Apponyi', 1793) were composed before the second journey and presumably intended for the coming season's concerts. Perhaps in response to the relative failure in England of the earlier set, and the need to provide music more outspoken in character for public performance,
Haydn's last completed set of quartets, op.76 (composed by mid-1797) were written in Vienna; a high point in Haydn's creative output, and in the history of the genre, they were described by Burney as 'full of invention, fire, good taste and new effects'. Among their novel features are the minor-key finales of no.1 in G major and no.3 in C major and the rapid scherzos that replace minuets in nos.1 and 6. The most remarkable of the set, perhaps, is no.6 in Eb, which atypically begins with a set of variations followed by a fugue; its slow movement, entitled 'Fantasia' has no key signature but is in the distant B major, exploring a wide range of tonalities; and sonata form is withheld for the finale. Only the two quartets op.77 (1799, dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz) and the unfinished op.103 (two movements, by 1803) followed; their publication, in 1802 and 1806 respectively, probably signalled Haydn's inability to sustain creative momentum over the course of a traditional set. Op.77 no.1 is an especially fine work, a model of idiomatic quartet writing; op.77 no.2, with its remarkable, rapt variation-style slow movement, is often regarded as Haydn's supreme quartet.

Other Viennese quartet composers of the 1780s include Dittersdorf, Pleyel, Hoffmeister, Geyrovetz, Vanhal and Wranitzky; many of their works are closer in spirit to the Parisian quatuor concertant than to the 'classical' string quartets of Haydn (Hickman, 1989). Mozart's 'Prussian' quartets (K575, 589 and 590) were clearly thought to be in this style; the title-page of Artaria's first edition (1793) describes them as 'konzertante Quartetten' (the prominent cello parts, presumably written to please Friedrich Wilhelm II, who may have commissioned them, were virtually abandoned, however, after the first two movements of K589, and in any case are balanced by comparable solo writing for the viola and second violin). By the 1790s this style gave way to more theatrical quartets, typically in four movements and characterized by bold, almost orchestral gestures as well as pervasive counterpoint and motivic development. Among the most successful were those of Paul Wranitzky, A.E. Förster and in particular Andreas Romberg, whose op.2 was described in a contemporaneous review: 'Among quartets newly published since the death of the immortal Mozart, it would be impossible to find quartets composed with such care [for the purity of the composition] as these' (AMZ, 12 May 1802).

Cliff Eisen


Beethoven's first set of quartets, op.18 (1798–1800), also belongs to this tradition. Influenced by Haydn and Mozart – Beethoven copied out Haydn's op.20 no.1 in 1793–4 and Mozart's K387 and 464 (the chief influence on op.18 no.5; see Yudkin) about the time he began working on op.18 – the quartets had a difficult genesis; nos.1 and 2 both survive in earlier versions. Expressive contrast is a hallmark of this early set: with its convoluted harmonic scheme, 'La malinconia', the slow introduction to the finale of op.18 no.6, is the most remarkable instance, but most of the slow movements are marked by elaborate textures, complex harmony and intensity of utterance. The quartets were ambiguously received; according to one contemporaneous assessment they 'must be played often and very well, as they are very difficult to perform and not at all popular'.

By 1800, the hegemony of the Viennese 'classical' string quartet was nearly complete; its influence can be seen, for example, in the Hyacinthe Jadin's op.2 no.1 (1796), the slow introduction to which is modelled on Mozart's 'Dissonance' Quartet K465. Jadin's often chromatic quartets, possibly the most important composed in France at the end of the 18th century, foreshadow later developments; they include sets dedicated to Haydn (op.1) and Baillot (op.3). Cambini's last set of quartets (1804), as well as Viotti's, are similarly influenced. Viotti's remarkable Trois quatuors concertants (1817) adopt the four-movement form and seriousness typical of the Viennese quartet, but at the same time represent a fusion of the traditional quatuor concertant and the quatuor brillant: the slow introduction to no.2 includes cadenza-like solos for both the first and second violins and the cello.

While the quatuor concertant was largely absorbed by the classical quartet, quatuors brillants continued to be written, especially by professional violin virtuosos, among them Pierre Baillot, Rodolphe Kreutzer and Viotti's pupil Pierre Rode; in Vienna this style was cultivated by Ignaz Schuppanzigh. The popularity of quatuors brillants was due in no small part to the establishment of professional string quartets, by Baillot in Paris and Schuppanzigh in Vienna, and to the introduction of quartets in public concert programmes. With the exception of London, where public performances had been common since the mid-1770s, quartets in German-speaking Europe and France had been intended chiefly for private performance, 'to serve the private pleasure of the regent or the court', as Koch put it; there is no evidence of public performances of quartets by professional musicians in Paris or Vienna before the 19th century. The quatuor brillant went under a variety of names, many of them indicative of their popular style and origin; Baillot's Airs russes variés op.20 (1810) is typical.

The wide cultivation of classical quartets about 1800 reflected not only their popularity but also their perceived modernity and social worth. According to an anonymous article in the AMZ (16 May 1810, cols.513–25), one of the earliest taxonomies in print to distinguish between the quatuor concertant and quatuor brillant on the one hand and the classical quartet on the other, competency in quartet performance was impossible for 'old, fossilized ripieno players'; what is more, 'It is impossible to hate someone with whom you have once seriously made music; and those who in some winter season have of their own will freely joined together in playing quartets are good friends for the rest of their lives'. Composers of 'true' quartets included Haydn, Mozart (who also wrote string quintets), Andreas and Bernhard Romberg, G.A. Schneider, Hänsel and Beethoven. Possibly the anonymous writer had in mind the first of Beethoven's middle-period works, the three Razumovsky quartets op.59 (1805–6), which...
together with the ‘Harp’ op.74 (1809) and the ‘Quartetto serioso’ op.95 (1810) exhibit many aspects of the deepening of Beethoven’s style inaugurated by the ‘Eroica’ Symphony. Increase of scale is evident first of all in the vast expansion of the first two movements of op.59 no.1 but also in the slow introductions to op.59 no.3 and op.74 and in the five-part structures of the scherzos in op.59 no.2, op.74 and op.95. Counterpoint plays an increasingly important role in these works. The finale of op.59 no.3 is a fuge, and the first movement introduction, with its initial attack on a diminished seventh built over F#, is also more motivated by line than harmony. While op.59 no.3 is often seen as more conventional than the others in this set, a strong case has been made for the traditional character of all three quartets (Webster, 1980). The ‘Harp’, whose nickname derives from the pizzicato effects in the first movement, is in many respects an exploration, not uncommon among Beethoven’s works, of textural possibilities, notably in its luxuriant slow movement; it has the only theme and variations finale among his quartets (unless the Grosse Fuge is so reckoned). Unlike other middle-period quartets, op.95 is distinguished by the radical compression of its musical material, much of which is reduced to a minimum, as in the unison opening and the general avoidance of lengthy transitions.

While quartets were traditionally composed in cycles of three or six, op.74 and 95 are singly conceived works, a pattern that was to prevail throughout the late quartets as well. Commissioned by Prince Nicholas in November 1822, the first of them, op.127, was completed only in February 1825; opp.132 and 130 were composed next, followed by opp.131 and 135 by the end of 1826. Formal variety abounds: opp.127 and 135 are the most traditional, composed in four movements; for opp.130, 131 and 132, however, Beethoven used six-, seven-, and five-movement plans respectively. Sometimes formal schemes are displaced to non-traditional positions within the cycle (the only sonata form movement in op.131 is the finale), or the traditional expressive balance of the various movements is skewed, even by Beethovenian standards (op.130 was originally composed with the Grosse Fuge op.133 as its finale, to be replaced by a lighter, shorter movement). Another overtly fugal movement can be found in op.131; polyphonic density, as in the opening Allegro of op.127, is characteristic of the quartets in general. The variety of key successions is also unprecedented: op.130 has six movements in five different keys and op.131 has seven sections with the key scheme c♯–D–(b)–A–E–g♯–c♯. Throughout the late quartets, textures are juxtaposed in kaleidoscopic succession; this is achieved in part by the displacement of instruments from their normal tessitura, as in the finale of op.132. This is especially common in the numerous variation movements, which are a preoccupation of the quartets and other late works, among them the C minor Piano Sonata op.111 and the Ninth Symphony. The late quartets are remarkable above all for the intense and personal nature of their utterance.

Schubert’s most important contributions to the genre are approximately contemporary with Beethoven’s late quartets. The 11 works completed while he was still in his teens show evidence of struggle and insecurity; the first mature quartet is the uncompleted Quartettzatz of 1820, with its characteristically novel tonal and formal structure. The A minor and D minor (‘Death and the Maiden’) quartets were completed in 1824; the G major followed in 1826. All three exhibit the expanded scale of Beethoven’s quartets, incorporating quasi-orchestral gestures, the G major in particular is notable for its tremolando writing; it is also remarkable for its tonal ambiguity, with the major-minor shifts that characterize its outer movements. The influence of the lied is most obvious in the slow movement of the ‘Death and the Maiden’ quartet (variations on the lied), in the minuet of the A minor (which quotes directly from Die Götter Griechenlands) and in the gait and the bleak atmosphere of the slow movement of the G major, redolent of Winterreise.

The outstanding quality of Beethoven’s quartets notwithstanding, his works did not represent the mainstream quartet composition in the 1820s. In Vienna, the standard was set by the violinist Joseph Mayseder, a member of Schuppanzigh’s quartet, and by Peter Händel, who composed approximately 55 quartets; earlier important quartets, from the 1800s, were composed by Paul Wranitzky (op.40, 1803) and Antoine Reicha, whose opp. 48–9, 58 and 93–5 were probably composed in Vienna between 1801 and 1808 (although they were not published until later). More significantly, the impetus for string quartet composition had by that time shifted away from Vienna; it is best represented by the works of the Anglo-French composer Georges Onslow, who composed 35 quartets by 1853, Spohr and Fesca. Classical in form but harmonically forward-looking, with bold modulations and extensive chromatic colouring, Fesca’s quartets were admired by Weber and Rochlitz (but condemned by Féts). The violinist Spohr, a devotee of Mozart, composed 34 quartets between 1805 and 1856; at their best, they successfully synthesize the Classical and Romantic styles in a conversational context characterized by formal balance and motivic working; six of them, including opp.11 (1808) and 83 (1830), are of the quatuor brillant type, as are several potpourris and variations for violin with string trio accompaniment. By 1830, both Berwald (no.1 in G minor, 1818) and Mendelssohn (three, including opp.12 and 13) had begun composing quartets.

Cliff Eisen

4. 1830–70.

That the 19th century was the ‘Age of Beethoven’, at least as far as instrumental music was concerned, was already perceived by contemporaries and is not merely a construct of 20th-century historians. It does not necessarily follow that, in surveying the history of the string quartet after Beethoven, the works of succeeding generations are to be seen merely as attempts either to measure up to Beethoven’s challenge or to sidestep it: this would give the history of the string quartet across the middle of the century the appearance of a panorama of connections and configurations, admittedly enhanced by Mendelssohn and Schumann, but
essentially a superficial picture, with everything falling short of Beethoven banished to the periphery. Further, Beethoven’s middle-period and late quartets had not yet fully registered their effect.

For the composers of the first generation after Beethoven, it was the works of Haydn and Mozart in particular, along with Beethoven’s op.18, that constituted the canon of the genre, with the later addition of Mendelssohn’s three quartets of op.44 (1837–8). These tied in with a ‘classicizing’ approach, taking its lead from the quartet style of Haydn and Mozart with an attempt to conflate the principle of the ‘song without words’ with classical techniques of motivic working. Significantly, no place was found for Mendelssohn’s earlier string quartets, opp.12 (1829) and 13 (1827), which explicitly relate to Beethoven’s late quartets (as well as his opp.74 and 95) in their technical extremity and experimentation, or his op.80 (1847), which marks a withdrawal into subjective introspection notwithstanding its classical formal conception. The Eb quartet of 1823 does not come into consideration because it hardly rates serious comparison with Mendelssohn’s own later quartets, any more than does op.81, the posthumous compilation of quartet movements from various periods of his career, assembled in 1850.

That the string quartets immediately after Beethoven show so few traces of him – indeed show a noticeable distance from him – is one of the most characteristic elements of the genre across the middle years of the century, alongside the increasing technical complexity of detail and the tendency to move towards compositional extremism. Schumann was strangely wary of orientating himself by Beethoven’s example in the three string quartets of his op.41 (1842), considering how hard he strove to do so in his symphonies. He is known to have studied Haydn’s and Mozart’s quartets while composing his own. He in fact sought ways of superseding thematic development and the form it generates and to transfer to the string quartet the poetic, associative language of detail that he developed in his piano music, notably in the ‘character’ variations and the use of the variation to develop nuclear thematic ideas. Brahms’s incursion in the development of the string quartet around 1870 marks a new stage in the genre’s history, even if he didn’t explicitly take up from where Beethoven had left off.

The combined effect of sociological and musical phenomena is illustrated by the spread, from about 1830, of professional quartets and chamber music societies. Examples include the Quatuor Armingaud, founded by Jules Armingaud (1820–1900), the Gewandhaus Quartet (1836–73), the Dresden String Quartet (1840–60), the quartets founded in New York by Theodor Eisfeld (1816–82) and Boston by W.H. Schultz, the Riga String Quartet (founded 1850), the Hellmesberger Quartet (1849–91), the Müller Quartet (1855–73), the Trieste String Quartet (1858–1901), the Florentine String Quartet (1866–80), the Joachim Quartet (1869–1907), the Russian quartet ensembles attached to local branches of the imperial music societies, and the chamber music societies of William Mason (1829–1908) and Theodor Thomas (1835–1905) in New York, the Harvard Musical Association (recital series from 1844), the London Quartet Society (from 1846), and the Società del Quartetto founded in various Italian cities from 1850 onwards.

Hand in hand with these new developments went an increasing professionalization. Although this particular type of music-making had originated in aristocratic music rooms and then entered the middle-class and domestic sphere, the transition to a more public environment did not mean the death of its intimate character. Even after 1830, intimacy remained a defining characteristic of chamber music, and to no branch did that apply more forcibly than the string quartet. This raises the issue of the aesthetic difference between Beethoven’s quartets and those of the following generations. Even in his last quartets, Beethoven wanted discourse and a public hearing, whereas the composers after him wanted nothing of such ‘superficial’ values. The small recital room met the middle-class need for a space appropriate to the intimacy and esoteric nature of chamber music in both acoustics and atmosphere; when Adorno spoke of such a room as ‘the site of a truce between music and society’, he was addressing the element which, alongside the string quartet’s advanced techniques, gives the genre its unique status.

These developments are generally seen to have first manifested themselves in the German-speaking countries. The Leipzig Conservatory, founded by Mendelssohn and his colleagues in 1843, played a role in this through the special attraction it held for composers from America, Great Britain and Scandinavia. One group of composers belonged almost to Beethoven’s time, among whom the most important and productive were Ferdinand Ries, with a total of 25 string quartets, Bernhard Romberg with 11, Carl Reissiger with eight and Louis Spohr, who published 30 string quartets and six quatuors brilliants between 1808 and 1857 (his two last, from 1857, remain unpublished). Spohr’s increasingly extensive work with motivic cells and, in the late quartets, the integration of concertante elements and the masterly handling of formal development are notable features.

In the circle of Mendelssohn and Schumann, and among those immediately following them, a generation of composers produced some outstanding works. The most significant include Robert Volkmann, whose string quartets (one early, unpublished work and six others, 1846–61) enjoyed great popularity until the early 20th century, and J.J. Raff (five quartets, 1855–67). Four quartets survive by Norbert Burgmüller (opp.4, 7, 9 and 14, of which only the last was published, in 1844) but they are almost completely forgotten. That is also true of the one by Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn (in Eb, 1834; published 1888), which explores new ways of formal development, eschewing a sonata-form first movement. Hermann Hirschbach owed the attention he received early in his career above all to his 13 string quartets, especially for their radically ‘poetic’ musical language. Julius Schaper’s Preisquartett (published 1841) is out of the ordinary and was well received by Schumann. Hans von Bülow’s only quartet (before 1850, unpublished) and Anton Bruckner’s 1862 quartet were explicitly composed for study. Although many of them remain unpublished, the string quartets of the following meet all the demands of the genre: J.J. Abert (op.25, published 1864), Ignaz Assmayr (at least three works, c1850–51), Ferdinand Böhme (at least five, c1850–60), Max Bruch (three, 1851–60), Karl Goldmark (op.8, 1860), Karl G.P. Grädener (at least three, published 1861), Johann Heberck (at least three, c1858–60), Friedrich Kiel (op.53, 1868), the three Franz brothers (at least six, 1843–50), Ignaz (at least seven) and Vincenz Lachner (at least three, published 1856–75), Bernhard Molique (eight, published 1841–54), Carl Reinecke (six, 1843–90), J.C.F. Schneider (at least ten) and August Walter (three, 1845). There are also quartets by H.G. Goetz, Ferdinand Hiller, Joseph Mayseder, Otto Nicolai, Benedikt Randhartinger,
In France the production of string quartets followed largely in the tradition of Viennese Classicism, as illustrated by the works of Napoléon-Henri Reber, A.P.F. Boëly and J.-B.-C. Dancla. Dancla founded a quartet ensemble in 1838 and composed no fewer than 14 string quartets between 1840 and 1900. Georges Onslow took a different path, gaining recognition well beyond France with his 36 quartets printed between 1810 and 1840 (Breitkopf & Härtel began publishing a ‘complete edition’ in score and parts in 1830). The early ones seem akin to exercises in style, but the later display a wealth of formal and harmonic invention. Édouard Lalo composed one remarkable quartet (op.19, 1859, revised 1880 as op.45). As founder-member and viola of the Quatuor Armingaud, which was dedicated to the German tradition, Lalo knew the works of the Viennese Classical school as well as those of Mendelssohn and Schumann. In his own quartet, this familiarity is demonstrated above all by the first movement, reminiscent of Haydn and Mozart, but the second shows the influence of Mendelssohn’s ‘song-without-words’ style. Despite the relatively large number of string quartets composed in France, no distinctively French string quartet tradition developed until 1870; the influence of the Viennese Classical masters and Mendelssohn remained dominant. An _ars gallica_, independent of the Germano-Austrian tradition, had to wait the time of César Franck and his circle, beginning around 1870.

Italy provides an interesting example of the failure of any native quartet tradition to develop, despite the foundation of many societies devoted to chamber music and the string quartet and even despite the composition of a respectable body of work. Such composers as Ferdinando Giorgetti (three string quartets, 1851–6), Giovanni Pacini (six, 1858–65) and Antonio Bazzini (five, 1864–92) orientates themselves by the tradition of Viennese Classicism and Mendelssohn. Verdi’s String Quartet in E minor (1877) did not change the situation. Things were similar in the Netherlands, where the leading composer of string quartets was J.J.H. Verhulst.

England, especially perhaps in the 50 examples composed by John Lodge Ellerton between the 1840s and the 1860s, bears witness to Mendelssohn’s influence and to an affinity for a musical language at once academic and Romantic. The situation was little different in the USA, where string quartets were composed by Léopold Meignen, W.H. Fry, Charles C. Perkins, Frederic Ritter, George F. Bristow and J. Knowles Paine, but were neglected in public musical life by comparison with the symphony.

The countries of northern Europe gave chamber music a warm reception while only exceptionally paying attention to their own indigenous production. Friedrich Kuhlau in Denmark composed a significant string quartet (op.122, 1831) in which he amalgamated stylistic elements characteristic of Beethoven with elements of the _quatuor brillant_. He was followed in the genre by J.P.E. Hartmann (five works), P.A. Heise (six, 1852–7), C.F.E. Horneman (two, 1859 and 1861) and – the outstanding figure in this group – Niels Gade. Gade published only his op.63 (1888), however, not his quartets in F minor (1851) and E minor (no definitive version, 1877). Development in Norway was influenced by the Leipzig Conservatory, whose most prominent Norwegian alumni were Christian Sinding, Johann Svendsen and Edvard Grieg – although Svendsen was the only one to compose a wholly classicist string quartet in this period (op.1, 1865). The picture in Sweden is more varied, although most of the quartets by A.F. Lindblad (seven), Ludvig Norman (six) and Franz Berwald (three, 1818–49) remained unpublished. Berwald’s early string quartets show a tendency towards irregular proportions, which he deliberately sought, presumably in an attempt to detach himself from the Viennese model, taking his lead instead from the _quatuor brillant_. After his year in Vienna the tendency became more radical, and shaking off the Viennese norm became a cause for Berwald, as the idiosyncratic formal conception of his E-flat work (1849) demonstrates. But the radicalism and modernity of Berwald’s late quartets had no influence, as they were hardly ever performed and long remained unpublished (the E-flat quartet appeared only in 1885, the A-flat – also 1849 – not until 1903).

It is noticeable that the Germano-Austrian tradition was adapted in varying degrees in almost all European countries. In Russia, folk music played an important role, as Glinka’s chamber music demonstrates. His two quartets (D, 1824; F, 1830) are in the classical mould, however, to such an extent that they make an anachronistic impression in places. Anton Rubinstein’s ten quartets (1852–80) are a contribution to set alongside Glinka’s. His early quartets (op.17, 1852–3) are in the manner of Mendelssohn. A more independent treatment of form and the influence of Russian folk music assert themselves in the middle and later works (op.47, 1856; op.90, 1871; op.106, 1880). The genre’s norms are still essentially intact in Rubinstein’s quartets, despite the pull of national musical influences, as his conception of them all in cycles of two or three implies. Nikolay Afanas’yev was as prolific as Rubinstein, with 12 quartets, including ‘Volga’ in A minor and a ‘Hebrew Quartet’. The two most important Czech composers of string quartets in this period were Václav Veit and Antonín Dvořák. Smetana’s two quartets, though influenced by Veit and Dvořák, were late works, composed after 1870. Given the political circumstances of the time, development in the Czech lands of the Habsburg monarchy, as in the Balkan provinces, was strongly influenced by Vienna. Veit published four string quartets between 1836 and 1840. A distinctively Czech quartet tradition evolved in several stages, not emerging fully until Dvořák’s substantial contribution: his 14 string quartets (1862–95) are central to his output. His first quartet (op.2, 1862) shows him coming to terms with cyclic structures, under Mendelssohn’s influence. It was followed by three without opus numbers (B-flat, 1869; D, 1869–70; E minor, 1870), which show the influence of Liszt and Wagner. They are exceeded in their experimental radicalism by scarcely anything else Dvořák ever wrote, and might be said to threaten to dissolve traditional form and ‘classical’ quartet writing from within. That Dvořák thought of destroying these three works is understandable, given his retreat halfway back towards tradition in op.9 (1873), although Wagnerian influence is still apparent. His op.12 (1873) was probably left unfinished because it was superseded by op.16 (1874), in which Dvořák returned wholeheartedly to classical formal principles and clear thematic structures, which he combined with melodic features of Czech folk music. His later quartets (op.80, 1876; op.34, 1877–8; op.51, 1878–9; op.61, 1881) conform to the same model and intensify the input of national stylistic elements, but preserve...
the differentiations in texture and technique proper to chamber music. The influences of Schubert and Brahms can hardly be dismissed. Op.96 (1893), composed in the USA, probably owes its popularity in the present-day concert repertory to Dvořák’s intentional simplicity and reining in of musical demands, such that he seems to have looked to Haydn as his model. The last two quartets (op.105 and 106, 1895), a pair, especially with respect to style, are characterized by the subtle treatment of the medium, late Romantic elements in the harmonic and thematic development and an introspective musical language.

Antonio Baldassarre

5. 1870–1900.

Some impetus for the quartets of the 1870s and 80s must have come from performing ensembles that now began to proliferate.

Dvořák wrote his É Quartet (1878–9) for the Quartetto Fiorentino, a German-Italian group, and his C major (1881) for Joseph Hellmesberger’s ensemble, which had been active since 1849; while Brahms’s quartets were badgered out of him by Joseph Joachim, who also led a quartet. Perhaps by now, too, the historical distance of the classical core quartet repertory was no longer a problem but a solution, for nostalgia and respect for the past were part of the tone of the time. Beethoven’s late quartets at last began to be admired (not least by Wagner), regularly played and eventually taken as models. But still the four-movement pattern was the norm, and Brahms’s first two quartets, forming his op.51 (1873), look back most intently to Beethoven’s op.59 as well as to Schubert, Mendelssohn and Haydn, whose op.20 quartets he owned in autograph manuscript.

One difficulty with the quartet for Brahms and other composers of this period was that four parts seemed too few. Brahms published two string sextets and a piano quintet before his first quartets, and later turned to the quintet with added viola or clarinet. But constraint could be helpful. It pushed him to exploit multiple-stopping in the inner parts, especially in op.51 no.1, and enhanced the sense of striving in both these minor-mode works. Brahms’s retirement from quartet writing, after the formally more adventurous op.67 (1876), may have been due to the medium’s inconvenience, but could also have been prompted by the emergence of a more natural quartet composer, Dvořák, whose quartets (discussed in §3 above) tend to look back and forth between the Viennese tradition and folk music (notably in the most popular of them, op.96 in F, composed in the USA and using pentatonic themes).

Other quartets with local colour include Grieg’s (1877–8). The rival claims of central high culture and nationalism were also felt in Russia, not least by Tchaikovsky, who published three independent quartets in the 1870s. Borodin’s two abundantly tuneful quartets of 1874–81 suggest an easy facility (like Dvořák, he was a string player) and avoidance of the aesthetic high ground, a relaxation essayed elsewhere, in two somewhat later botanical sets – Dvořák’s Cypressae (1887) and Puccini’s Crisantemi (1890) — and in Wolf’s Italian Serenade (1887). Lighter pieces were also written by several composers in Russia for the Friday recitals organized in St Petersburg from 1891 onwards by Belyayev; among his beneficiaries was Sergey Taneyev, author of six quartets (1890–1905) that nobly and elegantly espouse an idealized classicism.

Other composers were at last starting to embrace late Beethoven – even Borodin, who included in his no.1 a theme from Beethoven’s op.130. Wolf responded more deeply to late Beethoven in his huge D minor Quartet (1878–84), where the response is inseparable from an autobiographical urgency. In Smetana’s two quartets the autobiography is explicit, especially in no.1 (1876), subtitled ‘From my Life’. Raff – a more lightweight composer, and perhaps the last to publish a set of three quartets, his op.192 of 1874 – also wrote to a programme in the middle member of this set, ‘Die schöne Müllerin’, where the story is told in six movements, while his op.192 no.1 is in the form of a Bach suite. Generally, though, the prestige of its classics kept the quartet from venturing far into programme music or alternative forms.

In Paris, Beethoven’s last quartets were being revived by the Maurin and Armingaud quartets, both active from the mid-1850s; Lalo played second violin and viola with the Armingaud, and completed the revision of his single quartet in 1880. Members of Franck’s circle began to cultivate the quartet, including de Castillon, Lekeu, Chausson and Franck himself, whose grandly voiced D minor Quartet (1889) made a great impression. Even Debussy was enthralled, and even he felt he had to keep to four-movement form (uniquely for him), though in his G minor Quartet of 1893 he undercut the monumentality of Franckian cyclic thematic recurrence by means of shorter ideas, more fluid relationships among them, flexibility of tempo and far more textural variety, which in turn had its effect on Ravel’s Quartet (1903).

The development of quartet playing and quartet composition in France, Russia, Italy and Bohemia was paralleled in England, where Stanford wrote the first three of his eight quartets in the 1890s, and the USA, where Dvořák’s presence may have helped alleviate the strong German influence felt by such composers as Chadwick (five quartets, 1878–98). Ives based his no.1 (1896) on American hymn tunes.

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6. 1900–14.

http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.aucklandlibraries.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/40899?q=string+quartet&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firs…
With Mahler and Strauss working in very distant fields, Reger became the central figure in the Austro-German quartet tradition, his influence unavoidable for Schoenberg and Bartók. His no.1, in G minor (1900), has highly chromatic outer movements, fast and driven, checked only by intensive counterpoint (the finale is a double fugue), though the middle movements are more in the nature of genre pieces, the scherzo having a combination of weight and wit equally typical of the composer. His no.3, in D minor (1903–4), has first and slow movements that each play for about 20 minutes. Schoenberg reacted to this expansion of scale, and perhaps also to the same quartet’s cyclic form, in his own D minor Quartet (1905), an immense single movement in which scherzo and Adagio emerge from within continuous development. Zemlinsky followed this procedure in his no.2 of 1914. Like Reger, Schoenberg pursued the quartet as a polyphonic instrument; unlike Reger, he introduced effects – harmonics, pizzicato, sul ponticello – that can be expressive or ironic. A very different D minor, more Dorian, contributes to the aloofness of Sibelius’s only quartet, subtitled ‘Voces intimae’ (1909). Meanwhile, Bartók had gone forward from Reger to folk music in his no.1 (1908), which begins with a slow, chromatic, meandering fugue and ends with a dance.

The leading quartet of the moment in Budapest was headed by Jenő Hubay, who was no friend of Bartók’s music, and so a new one was formed by Imre Waldbauer, then only 17, to give Bartók’s no.1 and Kodály’s their premières. They also introduced Bartók’s next three quartets, and gave their last concert, in 1946, for the Hungarian première of his last, no.6. Older quartets of the period included the Bohemian (later Czech) Quartet, which played between 1892 and 1933, and in which Josef Suk was second violin, and the Viennese quartet led by Arnold Rosé, also founded in 1892. These two respectively gave the first performances of Dvořák’s last two quartets; the Rosé also introduced quartets by Reger and Schoenberg (nos.1 and 2).

Schoenberg’s no.2 (1907–8) was the site of his break with tonality, but hardly less radical was its introduction of a soprano to sing poems by Stefan George in the last two movements. As a union of four equal voices, the quartet is greatly compromised when it has to accompany, rather than play along with: an added viola or cello, or even a clarinet or piano, is far less disruptive. Accordingly, Schoenberg’s invention of the ‘soprano quintet’ was little copied. Webern did not publish his quartet song of 1913; Berg kept the presence of a Baudelaire/George text in the finale of his Lyric Suite a secret and probably did not intend it to be sung. Other works with voice are sporadic, and range from Barber’s Dover Beach (1931) to Ferneyhough’s no.4 (1989–90).

Much more influential, of course, was the extension of harmonic resources in Schoenberg’s no.2. In a sense, the addition of the sung poems was a conventionalizing gesture, for it enabled Schoenberg to retain four-movement form – in which respect this work is much more orthodox than his no.1 had been. Without tonal harmony, and without words to supply a frame, traditional musical form disintegrated. The first quartets of Berg and Webern (1909–10) are sets of two and five shortish movements respectively. The end of the line was Webern’s Six Bagatelles (1913), each occupying just a page in score and over in less than a minute. These works of Berg and Webern also go on from Schoenberg in their use of pizzicato, col legno, sul ponticello, sul tasto and harmonics. By the time of Webern’s Bagatelles, ‘normal’ sounds are a rarity.

Stravinsky’s Three Pieces (1914) are even more alien within the quartet context: a mechanism of ostinatos and drones; a clownsry with brusque gestures and, at one point, the second violinist and violist holding their instruments like guitars; and finally a homophonic chant. Stravinsky went on to write more quartet music – the Concertino (1920), the introduction to the graveyard scene in The Rake’s Progress (1951), a strand in In memoriam Dylan Thomas (1954) and the Double Canon in memory of Raoul Dufy (1959) – but not a quartet, still less a cycle of quartets: continuity with the tradition was broken.

It was also broken in Ives’s case. About 1905, he began a quartet in several disparate movements, some including other instruments: double bass (which, surely unknown to Ives, the teenage Reger had brought into the finale of a quartet), flute and piano. ‘In short’, as he wrote, ‘this quartet was not a quartet at all – perhaps because of the fact that the Kneisel Quartet played so exquisitely “nice” that I lost some respect for those four instruments’. But he abandoned this idea, and in 1911–13 went another way to ‘have some fun with making those men fiddlers get up and do something like men’ in his no.2, where the instruments are characters in debate and argument (the second violin being the custodian of tradition) who finally, in wide, complex chords, ‘walk up the mountain-side to view the firmament’.

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In the work of other composers, the tradition was remade, at least partly because postwar conditions favoured smaller genres and more orderly surfaces. Bartók, whose five later quartets are the outstanding works of this period, moved from the exacerbated Romanticism of his first two quartets into a style where vividly expressive elements become building-blocks in structures of closely made mirror patterns and symmetries in nos.4 and 5 (1928, 1934), and finally reached a new Romantic style in no.6 (1939). His order was not the old one. His sonata forms are often concealed, and the larger form is established by overarching palindromes (nos.4 and 5) or variations (no.6), while continuity is created at a very local level by intensive imitative textures. These are rarely conversational. The quartet is less an ensemble of four individuals than a unit, and its resources are increased by string effects and textures Bartók heard from village fiddlers, encountered in Schoenberg and Berg or dreamed up himself.

Apart from the Hungarian Quartet, led by Waldbauer, ensembles of this period promoting new repertory included the Flonzaley of Switzerland (1902–28: Stravinsky’s Three Pieces and Concertino), the Pro Arte of Belgium (1913–40 with original members:...
Roussel’s Quartet, Honegger’s nos.2 and 3, Martinů’s Concerto), the Amar of Germany (in which Hindemith played the viola) and above all the Kolisch of Vienna (1922–39), who gave the first performances of Bartók’s last two quartets, Schoenberg’s last two (1927 and 1936) and his String Quartet Concerto (1933, after Handel), Berg’s Lyric Suite (1925–6) and Webern’s op.28 (1937–8). All these groups except the Amar moved to the USA, and the Kolisch owed their record of premières partly to the beneficence of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who established a fund for chamber music at the Library of Congress.

Berg’s Lyric Suite follows a private programme relating to the great love affair of his later years, and to that end uses quotation (notably from Tristan und Isolde), an estranged but nonetheless passionate Romantic voice and great delicacy of scoring. This use of the quartet as a confessional medium was matched from a very different stylistic perspective by Janáček in his two quartets of the same decade, subtitled ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’ (with reference to Tolstoy’s novella advocating extra-marital love) and ‘Intimate Letters’. Works such as Berg’s and Janáček’s were not in any practical sense confidential: they were technically beyond the scope of the amateur quartet, which was anyway by this point in retreat. Indeed, the great quartets since at least the time of Brahms and Dvořák had been written for professional ensembles and for concert performance. But still the quartet retained its aura of privacy, and indeed, for many composers, of primacy among genres.

Certainly that was so for Schoenberg, who returned to the quartet once he had proved his serial method could support big structures. Nos.3 and 4 are in the usual four movements, but differ in texture and harmonic reach, no.4 being altogether richer. At the opposite pole, Webern’s op.28 quartet weaves a tight canonic skein of sounds through each of its three movements, with an extreme reduction in the intervals and rhythmic values that can appear. Its transparency fascinated later quartet composers as different as Cage and Kurtág.

More immediately influential were the quartets of Bartók and Berg, which seem to have been accepted almost at once into the repertory. Composers impressed by them included Bridge (nos.3 and 4, 1926 and 1937) and Crawford Seeger, whose quartet of 1931 is a remarkably vital exercise in algorithmic forms and new sonorities.

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8. 1940–75.

Bartók’s and Berg’s quartets, together sometimes with Schoenberg’s and Webern’s, helped stimulate the immense and various output of quartets that began in the 1940s, demanded by a greater number of performing ensembles at work internationally. Shostakovitch wrote more quartets than any other front-rank composer during this period; Milhaud, Villa-Lobos, Hába, Holmboe, Maconchy and Simpson were other multiple quartettists of the time, and as these names suggest there was a sense, at least in Europe, of the quartet as a bastion of tradition at a time of unrest – unrest represented by the single quartets of, for example, Boulez (Livre pour quatuor, 1948–9) or Xenakis (ST/4, 1962), both full of fearsomely complex textures and untraditional sounds. So great were its technical problems that Boulez’s Livre was only performed piecemeal, and for a long time the composer withdrew it from performance, feeling that the genre belonged to the past. In 1968 he began an arrangement for string orchestra, Livre pour cordes, to rescue the music.

But unrest is intimated too by Shostakovitch’s 15 quartets, all but one of which were written for the Beethoven Quartet of the Soviet Union. Material may seem too banal for the purpose of a quartet, forms too short (the C major Quartet of 1935, no.1, is all over within 15 minutes), textures too bare (the second movement of this piece opens with a ten-bar viola solo) and contrasts too extreme between the trite and the soul-searching. Shostakovitch evidently adhered to the view of the medium as intimate: his no.8 (1960) is explicitly autobiographical, being filled with self-quotations and marked by his musical cipher of his name. He may even have felt the quartet as a refuge from the kind of scrutiny any larger work motivated, especially during Stalin’s later years, which is when he began writing quartets regularly. But his expressive manner is always ironic.

In the USA – perhaps because the quartet there was an esoteric medium, removed from the public world of symphony concerts, but also because American musicians did not share European reservations about tradition – notable quartet cycles were begun by some of the most radical composers, including Carter and Babbitt. Indeed, Carter effectively became a radical in his no.1 (1950–51), where he treated each member of the ensemble as a distinct musical character defined not only by intervallic preferences but by speed of utterance, with a system of metric modulation devised to make possible diverse tempos at the same time. Babbitt’s no.1 is unpublished; his no.2 (1954) is a lucid and playful introduction to hearing serial patterning.

Other American composers who wrote notable quartets during this period include Cage (Quartet in Four Parts, 1949–50, which takes further Webern’s limitation of notes and durations), Perle, Feldman, Wolpe and Ben Weber, all of whose works were played and recorded by a number of quartets specializing in contemporary works (the Juilliard, the Composers and the New Music). The arrival of similar specialist quartets in western Europe, such as the LaSalle in Germany or the Parrenin in Paris, prompted a similar florescence there from the late 1960s onwards, but often from a sceptical position. Ligeti’s no.2 (1968; his no.1 had been written in Hungary under Bartók’s influence 14 years earlier) expresses its scepticism in the unstable sounds of harmonics, in playfulness and in ostinato machinery. But Kagel’s Quartet (1965–7) goes to the ultimate point in deconstructing the genre. Near the start, for instance, the cellist is placed as normal while the violist walks across the hall playing and the two violinists are heard from offstage. What the musicians play is similarly heterodox. Not only are strange techniques employed – bowing with notched pieces of wood,
drumming the strings with the fingers, attempting to play with a thick leather glove on the left hand—but sometimes the instruments are prepared, in the sense of Cage’s prepared piano, with objects placed between strings.

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The widespread outbreak of quartet composing since 1975 has, like other postmodernist phenomena, multiple causes. Composers arrived for whom the partisan conflicts of the 1950s, between an avant garde and a body of traditionalists, were history; Abrahamsen and Rihm might be cited here. At the same time, the joining of eastern central Europe into the Western musical commonwealth brought international attention to composers who had been obliged and able to use conventional means in unconventional ways – composers such as Kurtág, Schnittke and Gubaydulina. Performers, too, played a crucial role. Many new quartets of the period, while concentrating on the literature from Haydn to Bartók, also took contemporary pieces into their repertories: Rihm’s no.4, for instance, was played by the Alban Berg and Emerson Quartets. Meanwhile, two other quartets – the Kronos of San Francisco, founded in 1973, and the Arditti of London, who began playing the next year – devoted themselves indefatigably to new works, which they toured internationally and recorded.

These two ensembles had dissimilar interests. The Kronos found their centres in American minimalism (Reich, Young, Riley, Glass, Adams) and in composers close to traditional musical cultures, whether African (Volans) or European (Górecki), Jewish (Golijov) or Chinese (Tan). They were also involved in the first performances of several late Feldman pieces, including his String Quartet II (1983), which plays for five hours without interruption. For the Arditti, the emphasis was on high modernism, diversely represented by, for example, Carter, Birgitwistle, Ferneyhough, Xenakis, Dusapin, Lachenmann and Cage. Such was their technical command that Boulez released his Livre to them and both Nancarrow and Scelsi wrote works for them some while after having abandoned the genre. The groups were different, too, in performance style. The Kronos customarily played with amplification: they had come into existence to play Crumb’s Black Angels for amplified quartet (1971). They also featured dramatic lighting and special costume, whereas the Arditti tended to look like any other quartet – except when playing Stockhausen’s Helikopter (1993), in which the players are remotely linked to each other and to their audience while performing from inside separate helicopters.

In a less physical sense, as well, the quartet in the late 20th century remained an elevated medium. The quartets of such dissimilar figures as Glass and Ferneyhough, or Kurtág and Reich, or Nono and Dutilleux, are among those composers’ finest works, and may be judged, too, worthy of the company they keep as quartets.

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