

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809): String Quartet in F Major, Op. 74, No. 2 (1793)

Franz Joseph Haydn is often referred to as the "Father of the String Quartet." Over the course of his life, he composed sixty-eight quartets, through which he established the form's structural and musical hallmarks while displaying an astonishing elegance, lyricism and immense skill in fusing the profound with the light-hearted. Ever since Haydn laid the foundation, the string quartet has become one of the primary vehicles for composers to hone and display their craft.

In 1793, when Haydn returned home to Vienna after a hugely successful visit to London, he wrote a set of six string quartets, and Count Anton Apponyi, a relative of Haydn's patrons at the Imperial Court, paid 100 ducats for the privilege of having them publicly dedicated in his name. The set was broken up into two groups of three and sold to separate publishers, thus becoming the Op. 71 and Op. 74 quartets.

Each of these Op. 74 quartets possesses an almost orchestral scope, with frequent modulations, dynamic variations and virtuosic writing reminiscent of Haydn's 'London' symphonies from the same period. The quartet in F Major is particularly inventive, with its riot of trills in the opening movement, gracious andante, humorous gestures in the menuetto, and extensive interplay of voices in the jovial finale.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945): String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor (1915-1917)

In the years before World War I, Bartók traveled the countryside in Hungary and surrounding areas collecting and cataloging folk songs, and even recording them. For a while, the war got in the way of his efforts, but after he had been excused from military service for health reasons, the government found another way to utilize his talents, sending him and fellow composer Zoltán Kodály into army camps to collect folk songs from soldiers. This immersion in folk music led Bartók to develop his own particular flavor of avant-garde, distinctly different from other contemporary movements like Impressionism (Debussy, Ravel), Expressionism (Schoenberg, Webern) and Neoclassicism (Prokofiev, Stravinsky). Bartók, like a one-man microcosm of music history, studied and incorporated a broad array of cultural traditions into his own compositional voice.

The String Quartet No. 2, begun in 1915 and completed two years later, is one of Bartók's breakthrough works. Among works of its time, this piece is unusually structured, beginning and ending with slow movements that surround a fast middle movement. The first movement is basically set in a traditional sonata form, but evolves with depth and skill; the first nineteen measures contain the entirety of the motivic material. Serious Bartókians will tell you that the melodic material in the second movement owes much to the Arabic music the composer studied on a trip to North Africa, but with a

Hungarian accent. The brooding, intense last movement is rhythmically hypnotic, with melody and movement and silence intertwined, leaving listeners entranced.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918): String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10 (1893)

Before Schoenberg, Stravinsky, or Bartók, Debussy was the first major composer to radically break from the Austro-Germanic thinking — with its rigors of tonality, form, and development — that had dominated European music since Haydn's time. According to composer/conductor/writer Pierre Boulez, Debussy freed chamber music from "rigid structure, frozen rhetoric and rigid aesthetics." Debussy's fresh approach to tonality evoked impressions of color, sensation, and emotion, and utilized a light-handed variation technique that carried thematic material through subtle ongoing transformations.

Debussy was 31 when the Quartet in G Minor premiered in 1893, an early taste of his distinctive musical language (which would appear fully formed the following year with his quietly revolutionary *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*). Outwardly, the piece follows the four-movement mold of a traditional string quartet. But within this unremarkable template, the music sounds completely new, taking a kaleidoscopic approach to musical material rather than depending on modulation to create harmonic tension and release. Debussy expanded the sound of the string quartet with a variety of novel textures and tonal effects including unconventional chords, scales, progressions, and key changes. Through swift tempo changes and cross-rhythms, dazzling ornamentation, and the unique shimmering tones typical of his music, Debussy's only string quartet is a truly marvelous construction.