

Classical String Quartet

by

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(learning and teaching material for teachers' reference)

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1. History and Context	3
Background	3
Development of String Quartet	3
Important Composers	4
2. Stylistic Features.....	6
General Characteristics	6
First Movement	6
Second Movement	6
Third Movement	7
Fourth Movement	7
3. List of Suggested Works.....	7
Haydn	7
Mozart	7
Beethoven	7
4. Listening Guide and Analysis.....	8
Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4, Movement I	8
Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76 No. 3, Hob. III:77, Movement II	15
Mozart: String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K465, Movement III	19
5. Scores.....	22
6. Reference.....	22

1. History and Context

Background

- String quartet became one of the most championed genres in chamber music in the late 18th century.
- String quartets consist of two violins, one viola and one cello.
- The genre began as “music of friends”—music to be performed for the enjoyment of players, rather than for the public.
- Therefore, string quartets, with players being amateur musicians usually, were often performed in domestic residences like homes, rooms, chambers or any other private places on an ad-hoc basis.
- As string quartets were private in nature, it was not necessary to have an audience for the performance.
- With rising popularity of the genre, it later became a fixture in concerts alongside the emergence of public concerts during the turn of 18th century.

Development of String Quartet

- Many string quartets were commissioned by rich sponsors and music lovers.
- Flourishing in Europe, the genre was further popularised by widely circulated publications of musical scores in Vienna, London and Paris. It is also evident that string quartets were a commercially-viable genre, with the support of a vibrant print market.
- For example, there were about 200 composers who published string quartets in Paris between 1770 and 1800. Composers such as François-Joseph Gossec (1734–1829), Johann Baptist Wanhal (1739–1813), Luigi Boccherini (1745–1805) and Saint-Georges, Joseph Bologne (1745–99) were the most active string quartet composers.
- The popularity of published works of Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) and, later, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91) made the genre rise to its peak in popularity and craftsmanship. Particularly Haydn’s six quartets, published as Opus 33 in 1781, and Mozart’s six quartets, dedicated to Haydn and published in 1785, were quickly established as the model of the string quartets.
- With the creation of 16 string quartets, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) further extended the genre into a quintessential expression of artistic essence and creativity.

Important Composers

Joseph Haydn

- Haydn wrote 68 string quartets, with his first work dated in 1755. It was initially titled *divertimenti a quattro* (“divertimento for four instruments”), and hence a nod to the genre’s nature as private entertainment and its musical character. These first quartets had been written before Haydn commencing his full-time employment in any courts.
- After Haydn’s full-time employment in the courts of Count Morzin (1757–61) or arriving Esterházy family (in 1761). Although he was tasked to create all kinds of music for Prince Esterházy, including chamber music, there was no output of string quartets in the beginning of his tenure at the Esterházy family.
- He first composed a set of string quartets for Prince Esterházy in 1769, though the details of origin on these compositions were not clear. Since then, he steadily created string quartets for the Esterházy family.
- He published Opus 33 in 1781 under his new contract with Esterházy, allowing him to publish his works without seeking his employer’s approval. This set of six string quartets was immensely popular during Haydn’s lifetime.
- The four players in a Haydn string quartet share a somewhat equal voice within the music; that is, “the four parts have comparably important roles in the presentation of the musical material, and take turns, at least to some extent, in leading the discussion.”

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

- While string quartets were not Mozart’s major output in his career, he wrote 23 quartets in three different periods in his career.
- He wrote the early quartets in his adolescent years, of which were mostly created during his touring days in Milan and Vienna.
- Mozart was exposed to Haydn’s string quartets during his visit to Vienna. When Mozart decided to stay in Vienna in 1781, it coincided with Haydn’s publication of Opus 33.
- He dedicated his six quartets, published as Opus 10, to Haydn, which won Haydn’s approval (to the works composed by “a man of great genius”) and received praises for “their mixture of strict and free styles and the treatment of harmony.”

Ludwig van Beethoven

- Beethoven wrote 16 string quartets, with the first set of six string quartets published in 1801 as Opus 18.
- While his early works show influences from Haydn and Mozart, they are distinctly characterised by their structural integrity and articulated drama.
- The central work in his middle period is the Opus 59 “Razumovsky” quartets, which are a set of three quartets. While these quartets have extended the length of any quartets to date with highly dramatised musical elements, these works remain classically structured.
- The six late quartets were all written within 1825–6, soon before Beethoven died. The quartets appeared enigmatic to the contemporary composers and musicians—they followed no conventional structure, ranging from a free form of rhapsodic nature to highly complex fugues in extended length. All these quartets have highly varied emotion and drama.
- With Beethoven’s demonstration of the genre’s intimacy and creative potential in the late quartets, he propelled the genre to be one of the most important music genres in classical music and paved the way for composers in the 19th and 20th century to create a number of pivotal chamber music in the classical repertoire. Important and influential string quartets composers after Beethoven include Franz Schubert (1797–1828, 15 completed quartets), Johannes Brahms (1833–97, three quartets), Béla Bartók (1881–1945, six quartets) and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75, 15 quartets).

2. Stylistic Features

General Characteristics

- A typical string quartet usually contains four movements — a fast first movement, a slow second movement, a dance movement and a fast finale.
- There are examples, however, that deviate from the typical sequence, even for Haydn and Beethoven. For example:
 - In Haydn's early string quartets, the second movement may be a minuet, and the third is a slow movement
 - In Haydn's and Mozart's early string quartets, there are only three movements
 - In Beethoven's late string quartets, the number of movements can range from three to six; they also follow no conventional scheme of structure
- We discuss the movements below as in a typical classical string quartet.

First Movement

- A typical string quartet begins with a fast first movement.
- In most of the cases, it is written in sonata form.
- The first theme and second theme groups are contrasted by, in principle, the use of key.
- When the first theme is major, the secondary theme is in dominant major.
- When the first theme is minor, the secondary theme is in relative major.

Second Movement

- The second movement is usually a slow movement.
- It is usually in a key different from the first movement's tonic. Common examples are subdominant major, dominant major or, in case of minor home key, relative major.

Third Movement

- The third movement is usually a minuet and trio, written in the same key as the first movement.
- A minuet is an Austrian courtly dance in triple metre performed in a moderate tempo.
- The trio is the middle section with a more relaxed character and a thinner texture.
- The structure of the movement is in ternary form.

Fourth Movement

- The fourth movement is usually a finale in a very quick tempo.
- It is usually in the same key as the first movement.
- It is frequently a rondo. However, there are also many examples of it being a sonata form.

3. List of Suggested Works

Haydn

- String Quartet No. 30 in E \flat major, Op. 33/2, Hob. III:38, "The Joke"
- String Quartet No. 61 in D minor, Op. 76/2, Hob. III:76, "Fifths"
- String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76/3, Hob. III:77, "Emperor"

Mozart

- String Quartet No. 15 in D minor, K421/417b
- String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K465, "Dissonance"

Beethoven

- String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18/4
- String Quartet No. 7 in F major, Op. 59/1, "Razumovsky"
- String Quartet No. 14 in C \sharp minor, Op. 131

4. Listening Guide and Analysis

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4, Movement I

Background

- Composed: Between 1798 and 1800 in Vienna
- Dedicated to: Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz (1772–1816)
- Number of Movements: 4

First Movement

- Key: C minor (Tonic)
- Metre: Common Time ($\frac{4}{4}$)
- Tempo: Allegro ma non tanto

Structure

- Form: Sonata form with a coda
- Exposition (bar 1–77)
- First theme: bar 1–13
 - Key: C minor (tonic)
 - Principle melody of the first theme played by first violin, over a quaver-motivated cello.
 - Dynamic contrasts are punctuated by use of accents (*sforzando*).

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: bar 1–13

Allegro ma non tanto

- Second theme: bar 33–41
 - Key: E♭ major (Relative major)
 - Principle melody of the second theme is first heard in the second violin (bar 33–41) and then is followed by a tutti of the first violin, second violin and viola (bar 42–5).
 - There is a distinctive decorative figure played by the first violin.

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: bar 33–43

38

cresc.

p

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

- Development (bar 78-135)

- It begins with a developed version of the first theme in G minor (dominant minor), with a much denser accompaniment made by repeated quaver chords in lower strings.

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: bar 78-85

78

Violin I

fp

Violin II

fp

Viola

fp

Violoncello

fp

82

- Second theme also reprises in development, surprisingly by a very high ranged cello (notice the use of treble clef), played in F major (subdominant major). The distinctive decorative figures from the first violin are also reprised.

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: bar 112-9

The musical score is for Beethoven's String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4, Movement I, bars 112-9. It features four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature changes from C minor to F major (indicated by two flats) at bar 116. The Violoncello part is written in the treble clef, playing a high, decorated line. The other instruments provide accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' (piano) and 'cresc.' (crescendo).

- Beethoven used very distinctive keys in presenting the themes within the development. Although the themes are presented in full with their accompaniments similar to their original, the keys used are far from tonic.

- Recapitulation (bar 136–201)
 - First theme recapitulates in tonic (C minor), with added accompaniment figurations in second violin and viola. The frequent use of accents further dramatises this recapitulating theme.

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: mm. 136–48

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a string quartet. The first system, measures 136-141, features four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is C minor (three flats). The first theme is recapitulated in the tonic. Dynamics include *fp* (fortissimo piano) and *sf* (sforzando). The second system, measures 142-148, continues the piece with a *cresc.* (crescendo) leading to a *ff* (fortissimo) section. The accompaniment in the second violin and viola is more complex, featuring frequent accents and a dense texture. The Violoncello part consists of a steady eighth-note pattern.

- Second theme recapitulates not in tonic but in dominant major (C major), which is considered highly unusual at Beethoven's time of writing this quartet. The usual treatment for the second theme in recapitulation is to return to tonic.
 - When the first movement is in major key (which is much more common in classical era), the second theme is transposed from dominant major to tonic major in the recapitulation. Unlike major key, however, the originally major second theme will have to be written in minor key when the home key is in minor, which changes drastically the character of the second theme in recapitulation.
 - Therefore this is Beethoven's first early experiment on how the second theme should recapitulate. There would come more examples in this off-the-book fashion (example: *Appassionata Sonata*), or when in major key, the second theme recapitulates not in home key (example *Waldstein Sonata*).

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: bar 158–65

The musical score is presented in four staves, corresponding to Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is C minor (three flats). The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers bars 158 to 161, and the second system covers bars 162 to 165. In the first system, Violin I and II play a melodic line starting with a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a half note B4. Violin II has a *p* dynamic marking. The Viola and Violoncello play a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. In the second system, Violin I and II play a melodic line starting with a half note C5, followed by a quarter note D5, and then a half note E5. Violin II has a *p* dynamic marking. The Viola and Violoncello play a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accidentals, and dynamics like *p* and *cresc.*

- Coda (bar 202–219)
 - The coda picks up from where the recapitulation ends (bar 194–202) in a very similar fashion of ending the exposition in bar 70–77.
 - The coda brings the music from C major (tonic major) back to C minor.

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: bar 194–201

Violin I: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Violin II: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Viola: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Violoncello: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18 No. 4. Movement I: bar 70–77

Violin I: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Violin II: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Viola: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Violoncello: *pp* *f* *pp* *f*

Stylistic Characteristics

- High dynamic contrast
- Sophisticated instructions on how the music should be articulated
- Frequent use of multiple stops in making accented chords
- All these features create an unusual tension with music
- All four players have equal share of thematic materials

Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76 No. 3, Hob. III:77, Movement II

Background

- Composed: 1797 or 1798
- Dedicated to: Count Joseph Georg von Erdődy (1754–1824)
- Nickname: *Kaiser*, (“Emperor”), because of the anthem in the second movement he wrote to Holy Roman Emperor Francis II (1768–1835).
- Number of Movements: 4

Second Movement

- Key: G major (dominant major)
- Metre: Alla Breve ($\frac{2}{2}$)
- Tempo: Poco adagio

Structure

- Form: Theme and Variations
- Theme (bar 1–20)
 - Anthem with the theme on the first violin.
 - The anthem contains two phrases—an antecedent (question) and a consequent (answer), with same length respectively. Both the antecedent and consequent repeat itself in its entirety.
 - It is based on *Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser* (“God Save Francis the Emperor”), a song composed by Haydn in 1797 for Holy Roman Emperor Francis II.
 - It later became the national anthem of Germany.

Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76 No. 3, Hob. III:77. Movement II: bar 1–8

Poco adagio; cantabile

Violin I
p dolce

Violin II
p dolce

Viola
p dolce

Violoncello
p dolce

- Variation I (bar 20–40)

- The theme is played in its entirety on second violin, in original register.
- First violin, in its higher register, plays a decorated theme with semiquavers.
- Viola and cello are silent (*tacet*).

Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76 No. 3, Hob. III:77. Movement II: bar 20–24

Var. I

Violin I
sempre piano

Violin II

- Variation II (bar 40–60)

- The theme is played in its entirety on cello, one octave lower than the original.
- The style of accompaniment is similar to the theme, although the first violin is characterised by its syncopated rhythm.

Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76 No. 3, Hob. III:77. Movement II: bar 40–44

Var. II

Violin I
p

Violin II
p

Viola
p

Violoncello
p

- Variation III (bar 60–80)

- The theme is played in its entirety on viola, in original register.
- It maintained a thinner accompaniment with occasional rests from different parts. The accompanying melody is characterised by syncopation.
- Unlike the theme and the first two variations, when the first phrase is exactly repeated after first appearance, the repeated phrase has a slightly modified accompaniment in shifting the register of accompaniment figures.

Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76 No. 3, Hob. III:77. Movement II: bar 60–68
Var. III

The musical score for Variation III (bars 60–68) is presented for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C). The Viola part plays the main theme, while the other instruments provide accompaniment. Dynamics include piano (p) and fortissimo (f). The score shows the first phrase of the variation, which is repeated after a short rest.

- Variation IV (bar 80–104)

- The theme is played in its entirety on first violin.
- It is written in an anthem style with different harmonisation. Most notably, many secondary dominants are used in making the harmonic changes distinct (see example that compares the original theme and reharmonised variation).
- Movement ends colourfully with a cadence decorated by a fully diminished seventh chord.

Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76 No. 3, Hob. III:77. Movement II: bar 1–4, 80–4

Violin I
p dolce

Violin II
p dolce

Viola
p dolce

Violoncello
p dolce

G: I V⁶ I V I V⁷ I IV vii⁷/V V

80
p

vi V⁶/V I⁶ V V⁷/vi vi ii vii⁶ I ii⁶/vii⁷/V V

Stylistic Characteristics

- The movement is generally quiet.
- Although the main theme is often repeated, Haydn showed efforts in making surprising changes to the repeats.
- Each player has a prominent section that plays the theme in its entirety, so as to give substantial features to each player in the string quartet.

Mozart: String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K465, Movement III

Background

- Composed: Completed in 1785
- Dedicated to: Joseph Haydn
- Nickname: “Dissonance”, because of the ambiguous tonality in the introduction to the first movement.
- Number of Movements: 4

Third Movement

- Key: C major (tonic)
- Metre: Simple triple ($\frac{3}{4}$)
- Tempo: Allegro

Structure

- Form: Minuet and trio
- Minuet (bar 1–63)
 - The minuet in itself is in binary form, marked by traditional repeats.
 - Key: C major
 - Section A (bar 1–20)
 - A generally quiet section that is punctured by occasional tutti of all four instrument and accents (*sforzando*).
 - Less chromatic than the famous introduction, which earned the name *Dissonance Quartet*. The minuet also features chromatic appoggiaturas that decorate the melody.
 - High degree of interactions between players, as in the echoing entrances from first violin to cello from bar 8 to bar 11.
 - Typical binary form. Section A begins in tonic key and ends in dominant, which repeats the entire Section A as appropriate.

Mozart: String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K465. Movement III: bar 1–10
Allegro

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

p *f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *p* *f*

○ Section B (bar 20–63)

- Stylistically similar to Section A, with tutti and echoing phrases that push the music forward.
- Minuet theme reappears in first violin of bar 39, compounded with echoing phrases from all other three instruments.
- Typical binary form Section B that begins in dominant and ends in tonic, which repeats the entire Section B as appropriate.

Mozart: String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K465. Movement III: bar 37–45

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

f *f* *f* *f* *f* *f* *f* *f* *f*

- Trio (bar 1–40)
 - The trio in itself is in binary form, marked by traditional repeats.
 - Key: C minor (tonic minor)
 - Compared to the minuet, the trio is harmonically less adventurous and texturally simpler.
 - Section A (bar 1–16)
 - Main theme in first violin, accompanied by repeated chords in second violin and viola.
 - Typical in binary form, Section A that begins in tonic key and ends in relative major, which repeats the entire Section A as appropriate.

Mozart: String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K465. Movement III: Trio bar 1–8

The musical score shows the first eight bars of the Trio section. Violin I has a melodic line with dynamics *p*, *f*, *f*, and *p*. Violin II and Viola play repeated chords with dynamics *f*, *p*, *f*, and *p*. Violoncello plays a simple accompaniment with dynamics *p*, *f*, *p*, and *f*.

- Section B (bar 16–40)
 - Stylistically similar to Section A, with first violin still dominates the melody.
 - Some melodic exchanges happen between the first and second violin, and the cello plays a more prominent role in supporting the main theme.
 - Typical in binary form, Section B bridges the relative major beginning with an ending in tonic, where the entire Section B is repeated as appropriate.
 - After playing Trio, repeat the Minuet section as instructed (*Menuetto da capo*).

Stylistic Characteristics

- A traditionally styled and structured minuet with courtly style.
- Mozart established contrasts between minuet and trio by means of harmony and texture.

5. Scores

These versions are recommended for study of the three quartets in this reference kit.

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18/4

Beethoven Werke, Abteilung VI, Band 3 [VI/3]. Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1962. Plate HN 4191.

Haydn: String Quartet No. 62 in C major, Op. 76/3, Hob. III:77

11 Late String Quartets, Opp. 74, 76, 77. New York: Dover Publications, 1979.

Mozart: String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K465

Neue Mozart-Ausgabe, Serie VIII, Werkgruppe 20. Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1962. Plate BA 4530.

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