

Josef Haydn (1732 – 1809) String Quartet Op 64 No 6 in E flat major (1790)

Allegro

Andante

Menuet & Trio: Allegretto

Finale: Presto

This quartet is the last of Haydn's 12 "Tost" quartets. From 1783 to 1788 the Hungarian Johann Tost was principal second violin in the Esterházy orchestra of which Haydn was music director. When Tost left Esterházy in 1788 to freelance in Paris, Haydn entrusted 6 quartets to him with a view to finding a publisher. Tost was successful, and they were published in Paris in two sets of three as Op 54 and 55. A later set of six, Op 64, were written in 1790, the year that Haydn first visited London. Around this time Tost returned from Paris, married the housekeeper at Esterházy (of whom Haydn was also fond) and used her money to set up a successful cloth business in Vienna. There in 1791 he also found a publisher for this Op 64 set, which are gratefully dedicated to him. Tost continued to play the violin and commission chamber works, whose performances in aristocratic homes provided an entrée for his cloth business; incidentally he is possibly the dedicatee ("*composto per un amatore ongarese*") of the last two of Mozart's string quintets.

The *Allegro* is one of Haydn's mono-thematic movements, based on the quiet, thoughtful opening. As the music develops, the parts twine around each other, until after a general pause the theme appears in spiky syncopation tossed between the instruments.



The *Andante* is a tantrum sandwich. At the start, all is well with the world: "*the melodic lines serenely curving and intersecting in tender dissonances*" (Rosemary Hughes). Suddenly the first violin tosses his toys out of the pram for 15 bars



of B-flat minor tantrum. But serenity returns, as if nothing had happened.



Haydn's original Trio for the third movement ends with the first violin stepping up to a rare top Eb, but later editions include an additional easier version. The finale is an energetic romp, playing rhythmic tricks typical of Haydn. He repeatedly and unpredictably stops the music, eventually restarting it at half speed before racing to the end.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Quartet in F minor, Op 95 (*Quartett Serioso*) (1810)

Allegro con brio

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso - Più Allegro

Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato – Allegro

"NB. The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public... Should you wish for some Quartetts for public performance, I would compose them to this purpose occasionally". So wrote Beethoven in 1815 to Sir George Smart, his London promoter, not only anticipating the sophistication of this morning's audience but also safeguarding the quality of performance (the aristocracy hired better players) and trying to insulate himself from uncomprehending rejection. The F minor is a "serious" quartet: "*not a 'pretty' piece, but it is terribly strong - and perhaps rather terrible...*"

Everything unessential falls victim, leaving a residue of extreme concentration, in dangerously high tension” (Joseph Kerman). The *serioso* quartet is an isolated bridge between the middle quartets (Op 59 Rasumovsky quartets and Op 74 “Harp”) of the 1800s, and the final set of late quartets from 1825. The work experiments with various techniques that will appear in the late quartets and is contemporary with the *Egmont* overture and with Napoleon's 1809 invasion of Vienna.

Beethoven challenges the listener from the start with this grim unison outburst and pause, answered by 3-bars of angry, spiky octave leaps in the dominant (C minor). The original outburst is repeated on the cello up a semitone and in the major (a “Neapolitan” modulation). It is answered by a more conciliatory slow theme from the violin, but ominous rapid ascending figures in the cello force us back to the initial outburst. And that is just the first 17 bars: enough to challenge even aristocratic connoisseurs. This brutally condensed, tempestuous movement is all over in less than 5 minutes.



The *Allegretto* inverts the threatening, ascending scales of the first movement to a gentle stepping descent from the cello, introducing a calm theme related to that of the first movement. The viola then introduces a new theme, which is taken up as a fugue.



The third movement, based on the *Scherzo* form, starts, like the first, with an abrupt, angry challenge, just one bar and a pause; it is repeated, more demanding, followed by a



descending scale in dotted rhythm on a sinister crescendo. This angry section is developed and repeated, but then dissolves into a tranquil slow melody from the second violin, caressed by first violin arpeggios, initially in the minor, then the major. The contrast is repeated, but finally anger, at a faster tempo, slams the door on the movement.

All seems well with the world in the expressive slow introduction to the last movement. But this optimism is threatened by the worried agitation of pairs of *piano* semiquavers from the first violin. The threat level ratchets up on subsequent returns of this figure with an increasingly agitated accompaniment, and terrified octave and tenth leaps in the first violin. But then, a more hesitating, *pianissimo*, return of the figure heralds a *forte*, reassuring modification (illustrated right). The tempo increases to *Allegro*, the key shifts to the major and the threat is forgotten in a final triumphantly rising scale.



Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) String Quartet in C major, Op 61 (1881)

Allegro

Poco adagio et molto cantabile

Allegro vivo

Finale. Vivace

This work was commissioned by the Hellmesberger Quartet, a group that had been formed in Vienna in 1849 and which was the first permanent String Quartet named after its leader. In October 1881, Dvořák was working on a new opera, *Dimitrij*, when he read in the newspaper that the Hellmesberger Quartet was proposing to perform his new string quartet in December in Vienna's Ringtheater. He was thus forced to interrupt work on the opera, in order to begin to compose the quartet. He finished it in time (10th November), but on December 8th, just a week before the intended performance, the Ringtheater burned down in a catastrophic fire that killed over 600 people. The tragedy led to legislation on safety curtains and outward-opening doors, and also to Dvořák's quartet receiving its first performance by a different group in Bonn.

Dvořák's previous quartet, Op 51 in Eb, had been commissioned in 1879 by Jean Becker of the Florence-based Florentine Quartet. They specifically asked for a "Slavonic Quartet". Dvořák had just sprung to fame thanks to a helping hand from Brahms who had recommended Dvořák to his own publisher Simrock. Simrock in turn suggested that he write a set of *Slavonic Dances* analogous to Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*. These *Slavonic Dances* were a tremendous success and brought Dvořák immediate acclaim. His slavonic style owed much to Smetana and from studying collections of folk music. Its characteristics include: the absence of an upbeat in the melody (mirroring Czech word-stress), pentatonic phrasing, the sharpened fourth in the minor and strongly syncopated traditional dance rhythms.

The Hellmesberger Quartet, by contrast, had made no such Slavonic request (perhaps as an insurance against the growing anti-Czech political feelings in Vienna at that time) and today's quartet (Op 61) is built in a more classical mould. Its composition marks the start of a new phase in Dvořák's style. The writing, though subtly detailed and retaining some Czech character, is more dramatic, with rapid, strong contrasts of dynamics and expression, large melodic leaps and forceful rhythms. Dvořák had written to Joseph Hellmesberger in response to the commission: "*Rest assured I will work on my new quartet with the utmost élan, deploying all my art and knowledge, only to be able to give you a composition well done and accomplished, and certainly the good Lord will also inspire me with some melodies.*" All the movements do indeed demonstrate Dvořák's natural melodic gift.

The amiable theme that the first violin announces at the start of the first movement is later extensively developed in a classical style. Listen out particularly for the rising triplet and dotted figure (**)



occurring again and again. The initial raw material for the second movement seems nothing special, but Dvořák spins wonders from the inter-twining of the two violins. The rising triplet and dotted figure (**) from the first movement provides the main theme for Scherzo, and a modified version of the first bar and a half of the example (*) the material for its substantial Trio section. The last movement's simple theme is elaborated with daunting pyrotechnics for the first violin, which no doubt Joseph Hellmesberger relished - after all his programmes did have the heading: "*Hellmesberger Quartet, with the assistance of ... [names of the three other players]*"!

Programme notes by Chris Darwin