

# The String Quartet

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*with 82 music examples*



THAMES AND HUDSON

## Part One

### Introduction c. 1759-1771

To search for the origins of the string quartet is as vain as to search for the origins of man, and for similar reasons. More than any other sort of music in the western tradition, the string quartet has enjoyed the stability yet also the capacity for constant renewal of a living species. For though the history of the mass may be longer, the history of the symphony no less glorious, only the string quartet is at once a medium and a genre, even a form. And a form or a genre is not defined by a single work, any more than a species can be traced to a single parent. Rather it evolves, and once evolved it provides an image or an ideal for subsequent works. And though, naturally, the image of the string quartet has changed and developed during its history – this will be one underlying theme in what follows – the constant presence as executants of two violinists, a violist and a cellist, four persons to whom all quartets are in the first place addressed, has given the string quartet an identity unknown in any other repertory.

It is the gradual achievement of that identity that makes it hard to determine a particular starting point for the genre, and also the scantiness of the information available to us, again as in palaeoanthropology. One important element of the string quartet, the notion of composing for four voices, goes back at least to Pérotin at the end of the twelfth century and had become the norm by the time of Josquin at the end of the fifteenth. Since the instruments of the violin family were all fully in existence by the time of Monteverdi, one must expect that the occasional australopithecine of the string quartet will be unearthed from this period, and indeed one such, a *sinfonia* by Gregorio Allegri (1582-1652), has sometimes been hailed as originating the genre. However, Allegri's is an isolated use of the medium, and so too is the set of four *Sonate a quattro per due violini, violetta e violoncello senza cembalo* (c.1715-25) by Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725).

Indeed, the 'senza cembalo' of Scarlatti's title tells us why. The whole first half of the eighteenth century resounded to the tones of the harpsichord, and its presence in chamber music was practically universal, to the extent that its absence has to be specially signalled. The standard form of chamber music at this time, the time of Bach, Handel and Telemann as well as Scarlatti, was the trio sonata, most usually for two violins with a 'basso continuo' of harpsichord and a bass instrument, often the cello. Thus the development of the string quartet out of this ensemble entailed not only the addition of a viola but also, and more significantly in many respects, the exclusion of the harpsichord, a revolution so drastic that it took many years to be accomplished. If Scarlatti's sonatas embody a presentiment of the four-part conception that is the essence of the string quartet, then in a conservative centre like London the harpsichord or piano continuo was common in chamber and orchestral music until the end of the century.

However, the decline of the continuo was not a cause but a symptom of the great change in music around the middle of the eighteenth century, a period of more confusion in the art than any before the present. As in our own century, new ways of composing, performing and listening to music were giving rise to new forms: opera buffa, the symphony, and the string quartet. Moreover, these new forms arose in close connection. The symphony grew out of the operatic overture and gained an enormous amount from the quick wit of the new comic mode. It also seems unlikely that in the middle of the eighteenth century there was any clear distinction between orchestral and chamber music. Since the basic orchestral scoring was for two violins, viola and 'basso', it was perfectly possible for a work to be marketed in one publication as a symphony and in another as a quartet, to say nothing of less scrupulous arrangements; and there is no way of being sure with what grace composers accepted this situation.

Another characteristic of a transitional age, again making it difficult to sort out what was going on, is the lack of a standard terminology. In particular, there were no terms for the new kinds of chamber music that were being written; and so in the 1750s musicians invented various titles – *divertimento*, *serenade*, *notturmo*, *cassation* – all suggesting light music to be played out of doors. And though it is perhaps too neat to assume, as some have assumed, that the conditions of outdoor performance dictated the removal of the keyboard continuo (else why did this not happen earlier?), certainly the ancestry of the string quartet, most intimate of musical genres, must include the muzak of the rococo.

Our understanding of the music of the mid-eighteenth century is further complicated by the fact that there were so many local traditions and specialities. Mannheim was the place for spectacular orchestral playing and bold symphonies, Naples for comic opera, London for music in taverns and pleasure gardens. And among composers one need only consider the different interests of the sons of Bach: Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714-88), in northern Germany, cultivated an excited expressiveness in his many keyboard sonatas, while Johann Christian (1732-95), the 'London Bach', pleased his public with elegant orchestral and chamber music, and Wilhelm Friedemann (1710-84), working in Dresden and Halle, probably pleased only himself in mixing his father's gravity with the lighter fashions of the time and with his own eccentricity.

Thus the abundant music that survives from the 1740s, 1750s and 1760s presents a bewildering diversity of styles and media, all at least potentially influencing each other, to the extent that it is quite impossible to trace a single line of descent for a genre as central as the string quartet, or indeed the symphony. Nor are the documents much help. Perhaps the earliest dated reference to string quartet playing comes from the autobiography of Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739-99), where he mentions that in the winter of 1756-7: 'We went to work on six new quartets by Richter; Schweitzer played the cello, I and my older brother the first and second violins, and my younger brother the viola.' If this reminiscence is accurate, then Franz Xaver Richter (1709-89), one of the leading composers attached to the Mannheim court, must count as the author of the first works known to have been played as string quartets. And if Dittersdorf is alluding to the set of quartets by Richter published in London in 1768, or to another group of divertimentos not printed until two centuries later, then Richter was to some degree already looking forward to the future of the new medium. As can be seen in the following quotation from the 'development' section in the first movement of the Divertimento in B flat, the four parts share the melodic interest on almost equal terms, exhibiting an interplay that only became, and remained, a hallmark of quartet style in the 1770s, though hardly then in such an elaborately baroque style as this:

**Allegretto**

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet, specifically the first two staves (Violin 1 and Violin 2). The tempo is marked 'Allegretto'. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The first staff is labeled 'va' and the second 'vn2'. The music features a complex interplay of melodic lines with triplets and sixteenth-note patterns.

1 Franz Xaver Richter: *Divertimento in Bb, first movement*

However, Dittersdorf dictated his memoirs towards the end of his life, and one may reasonably doubt how reliable his dates are when he is looking back three or four decades.

Even if we were to accept Dittersdorf at his word, and accept too that he is talking about works from among those of Richter that survive, there would still be a lot of uncertainty in the early evolution of the string quartet. It is time, therefore, to introduce the creation myth, and with it a name not mentioned here so far, that of Joseph Haydn (1732-1809). Until the present century nobody doubted that Haydn was the father of the string quartet, and that single-handedly he invented the form out of his boundless imagination. Indeed, it is still possible that it was so, for though we now know that the circumstances were right for the emergence of the quartet, there is no definite evidence that any existed before Haydn's op.1. What is less acceptable is the charming notion that Haydn's first quartets came about because of a chance occurrence, as was suggested by Haydn's early biographer Georg August Griesinger at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

A Baron Fürnberg had an estate in Weinzierl, several stages from Vienna; and from time to time he invited his parish priest, his estates' manager, Haydn and Albrechtsberger (a brother of the well-known contrapuntist, who played the violoncello) in order to have a little music. Fürnberg asked Haydn to write something that could be played by these four friends of the Art. Haydn, who was then eighteen years old, accepted the proposal, and so originated his first Quartet, which, immediately upon its appearance,

received such uncommon applause as to encourage him to continue in this genre.

The main problem with this story is that Haydn at eighteen was still barely competent as a composer, whereas his early quartets are decidedly more than correct. Also, there is other evidence to suggest that Haydn's association with Fürnberg, with whom there is every reason to connect the first quartets, took place later in the 1750s. Probably Haydn composed the ten early quartets between around 1757 and 1762. Almost at once they began to circulate in manuscript copies among the great houses and monasteries, then major centres of secular as well as sacred music: at this period there were no music presses in Vienna, and so music was commonly disseminated in manuscripts produced by professional copyists. Music publication in the middle of the eighteenth century was centred in Paris, the biggest city in the world and hectically commercial in the years before the Revolution, and it was there that in 1764 there appeared the first edition of any of Haydn's music, when Louis-Balthasar de la Chevardière brought out *Six simphonies ou quatuors dialogués pour deux violons, alto viola & basse obligés. composés par Mr. Hayden*, under which typically untrustworthy title he assembled the first four quartets of Haydn's op. 1 and two flute quartets by another Mannheim musician, Carl Joseph Toeschi (1731-88). Chevardière's second edition of 1768-9 was no better. The Toeschi pieces were indeed dropped and replaced by genuine Haydn, but one of the new works was an orchestral symphony deprived of its oboes and horns and insinuated here into Haydn's quartet oeuvre, where it remained for nearly two centuries. For when, in 1801, Haydn's pupil Ignace Pleyel (1757-1831) came to set his master's quartets in order, it was unfortunately this much reprinted Chevardière collection that he regarded as authentic, and gave the dignity of 'op. 1'.

Haydn op. 1

In the meantime, Johann Julius Hummel, no relation of the composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel, had published in Amsterdam in 1765 the first real sextet of Haydn quartets, including the five genuine quartets of op. 1 (nos. 1-4 and 6) and one more, omitted by Pleyel and now known as 'op. 0'. Hummel, however, was no more conscientious than Chevardière or any other music publisher of the day, or perhaps no more careful. In 1765-6 he issued another batch of Haydn quartets, of which two, the third and fifth, were in fact composed as sextets with horns, and again this set was incorporated into the canon of Haydn's quartets by Pleyel, as op. 2. There is, therefore, no authority for regarding opp. 1 and 2 as sets, nor necessarily for assuming that op. 2 is later than op. 1, as a whole. Instrumental works in the

## *Exposition 1772-1799*

Anyone who takes an interest in contemporary music in the late twentieth century can only contemplate with awe the prospect before his predecessor of two centuries. A person born in, say, 1747, could reasonably expect to live through the whole creative lives of Haydn and Mozart, and if he survived to the age of eighty, then he would also witness as they appeared the last works of Beethoven and Schubert. However, this is not to take account of the conditions of musical communication obtaining at the time. Quite apart from the fact that most of Schubert's music was not publicly available until long after his death, opportunities to hear orchestral and operatic masterpieces were rare, and of course limited to a small proportion of the population. Today recordings and broadcasts make it possible for almost anyone, at least in the developed world, to acquire a familiarity with Mozart's piano concertos or Haydn's symphonies that would have been unimaginable in the eighteenth century. And this raises another difference between our world and theirs: then one could hear very little but contemporary music, whereas now the balance is quite reversed. We need less density of greatness from our composers.

But if the great orchestral, choral and dramatic works of the eighteenth century were only marginally available to their contemporaries, there was one arena of relatively free musical intercourse: the string quartet. Boccherini had dedicated his first set of quartets to 'veri dilettanti e conoscitori di musica', and though this was a stock phrase of the time, it does draw attention to the nature of the public to whom string quartets were addressed around 1770. In the first place there were the 'dilettanti', the amateur performers, and it has become a truism to say that string quartets are written for those who play them. But, as Boccherini recognized, quartets can be appreciated also by observers, by connoisseurs. This was a new audience, and its arrival helps to explain the development at this time of the two important

new musical media: the string quartet and the piano. For whereas the great princely families, like the Esterházy, could afford to maintain an orchestra and even an opera house, the new bourgeoisie needed music on a more modest scale. The harpsichord had never been a satisfactory instrument to listen to by itself – it is surely significant that the one work written for a listener rather than a player, Bach's Goldberg Variations, was designed as a soporific – and so the piano was invented as an instrument that could suitably function in the middle-class drawing room. And at the same time the string quartet came into being, together with, from the mid-1760s onwards, an increasing flood of publications for it. Anyone who had access to the salons of the well-to-do, or who could take a part in a quartet, was thus placed in contact with much of the greatest artistic thought of his time.

*Haydn op. 20*

Appropriately enough, the real dawning of the string quartet begins with the Haydn set nicknamed the 'Sun', and so known because the title-page of the second edition incorporated a sun motif. If his earlier collections had included individual works worth hearing more than once – op.2 no.4, the paired quartets of opp.9 and 17 in minor keys, the astonishing op.17 no.1 – this new set, op.20, is an entire volume of deeply fascinating works, and in modern times it has come to hold a place in the repertory unknown to Haydn's earlier quartets. Yet op.20 was written only a year after op.17, in 1772, and, what is even more extraordinary, strikes off in quite a different direction.

The development in Haydn's quartet writing from op.9 to op.17 would seem to suggest that his next set would be more integrated, more subtle, more teasing in form, less anxiously dramatic. But op.20 is none of these things. It positively exults in contrast and variety. There is little of that proximity to the violin concerto which had been such a feature of the two preceding sets (the slow movement of no.6 in A major brings the closest recall of the earlier manner), but otherwise all possibilities of texture are vigorously exploited. In formal terms, op.20 marks a retrenchment in such matters of deception as the false reprise, and where this does occur, in the first movements of the E flat quartet no.1 and the D major no.4, its effect is not at all humorous but rather to urge on a development that has ended too quickly. And indeed continuity of development is very much a feature of the sonata movements, particularly the opening sonata movements, of this set. The one structural innovation from op.17 (specifically no.6) that Haydn does pursue here is the continuing of the development within the recapitulation, and he also moves much more freely into other keys, even in expositions. Most powerfully, there is an unusual preponderance of the minor mode in op.20. Two of the quartets make