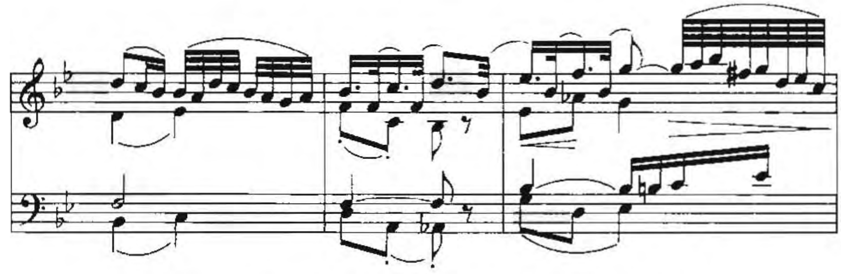
full knowledge of his inheritance, and of what was expected of a quartet in the 1790s – something very different from what was expected in the 1770s, when Mozart began. So although it is risky and anyway unrewarding to speculate about specific influences, even in the case of the A major quartet, no.5, which has often been seen as an answer to Mozart's K464 in the same key, certainly Beethoven felt pressed to produce only his best, and all of his best. Also, unlike Haydn and Mozart, he appears not to have served as a quartet performer, his own instrument, after his arrival in Vienna, being exclusively the piano. Thus the quartet was for him what it has been for most later composers: a medium apart, and richly endowed. It is no wonder, then, that he should have saved for it sonata designs as broadly conceived as that of the B flat quartet, no.6, with its spacious, beautiful lead back out of development into reprise, and with its range of material from accompanied melody to sforzando chords of the kind that appear in all these quartets and have sometimes been criticized as 'orchestral', though in fact Beethoven's use of such effects is too fine and occasional for the orchestra: the bigness is all bigness of substance, not means.

It is evident, too, as much in the make-up of whole works as of single movements. In the first four quartets of op.18 Beethoven places the slow movement second, following Haydn's general practice from op.50 onwards, but he plays with the balance of the quartet by altering the weight of this second movement: first an adagio, then an adagio which incorporates an allegro digression on a little motif, then an andante, then the scherzoso sonata fugue of the C minor quartet. The A major quartet places its andante D major variations third, and in this respect indeed does follow K464. The B flat work goes back to the other pattern, and at last attains the sober pathos of Haydn's quartet adagios not once but twice, first in its E flat second movement, then again at the start of the finale, which Beethoven heads 'La malinconia' and asks to be played 'with the greatest delicacy'. Like the slow movement of the G major quartet, this remarkable movement is a dialogue of adagio and allegro but in an altogether more searching manner, the chromatic 'La malinconia' appearing briefly twice within the main body of the movement as well as at the start, seeming to be both the natural spur and the inevitable consequence of the fast music's racing gaiety.

With this first collection Beethoven had changed the nature of the quartet, quite apart from his response to changes that were becoming almost inevitable, and he had also changed the sound. There are numerous passages where he engages the two violins as partners, but more commonly he associates the second violin with the viola as an alto instrument, as Haydn had done on occasion, notably in the first movements of op.54 no.3 and of the 'Lark'. This, added to Beethoven's antipathy towards virtuosity except in the piano music he was to play himself, makes for a quartet sound weighted in the centre, a centre across which, as in the first movements of the F major and B flat quartets, it may be possible for first violin and cello to exchange ideas in a resurgence of the conversational mode that had gone into the shade in the public quartets Haydn had produced in the 1790s. And that sort of dialogue, like the new formal possibilities that Beethoven begins to investigate here, was to remain and develop beyond all recognition in the quartets he was to write in the 1820s. He had approached the quartet medium only after intensive preparation. He left it, after this first encounter, with every indication that it would be the vessel of his most exploratory thoughts.

But such a special regard for the quartet was by no means peculiar to Beethoven at this time, when indeed we find the earliest expressions of that reverence the medium has continued to enjoy. Curiously enough, it is Cambini, composer of quartets by the dozen, who provides the most vivid evidence of a new attitude in an article published in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* in 1804. He starts out from the view that 'if music should not stir up or soothe the emotions, then it should at least draw our attention to itself and so divert us from the cares and griefs of our everyday life'. After giving Haydn's symphonies as examples of works that achieve this, he suggests that chamber music is even more likely to do so, since it is heard in smaller halls and played by smaller ensembles. However, 'perfect performance of this sort of music is as difficult as it is rare', for to perform a 'true' quartet – by which Cambini means a quartet 'in dialogue' – requires exhaustive rehearsal both by each player alone and by the quartet as a whole. Cambini then recommends such dedicated quartet playing as the highest form of musical life.

But what were the works that were to justify this new approach to music as an object of contemplation, study and practice? Cambini refers only to the past, when together with Manfredi, Nardini and Boccherini he played Haydn's opp.9, 17 and 20, and contemporary quartets by the last-named of the ensemble. Indeed it is possible that in 1804, with Haydn no longer active and Boccherini on the threshold of death, the string quartet repertory might have been about to freeze, just as the operatic repertory froze in the 1920s, admitting no new works and gradually winnowing the accepted body of masterpieces. Of course this did very nearly happen: still today the quartets



32 Spohr: Quartet in D minor op. 11, second movement

However, this kind of writing is found also in Spohr's other quartets. Nor was it likely to be otherwise, given the decisive changes in musical culture around the turn of the century.

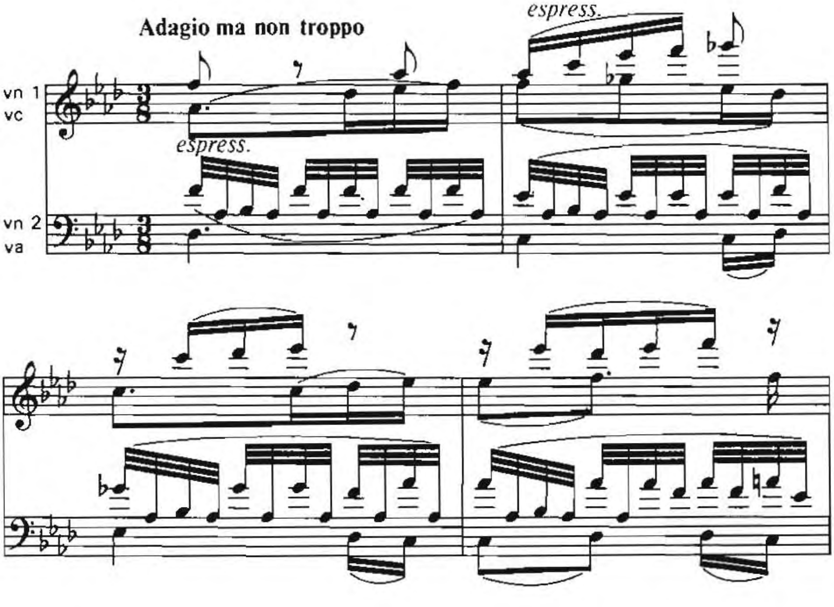
Since string quartets were still being published in parts for performance, one must assume that there continued to be a demand from the amateurs and connoisseurs who fifty years before had been served by early Haydn and Boccherini. But music of the sort just quoted was obviously not written in the first place for the domestic musician. Rather the vogue for quartet concerts had made the genre hardly more than a branch of the concerto, for generally such concerts were not given by regular ensembles (Schuppanzigh's quartet seems to have been rather unusual) but by touring virtuosos who would hire a string trio to accompany them. Alternatively the whole quartet might be obliged to take on the role of concerto soloist, as in Spohr's A minor concerto for string quartet and orchestra (1845) or in his four double quartets, which are effectively concertos for one string quartet accompanied by another.

It was against the background of such a trivialization of the medium that Beethoven was, in his 'Razumovsky' quartets and their successors, insisting that the string quartet was still the appropriate medium for the most challenging musical thinking. And though nowadays his works stand virtually alone in the repertory to represent the first two decades of the nineteenth century, at the time they stood in the face of a flood of fripperies. No doubt it was to distinguish himself from what the quartet had become that he called his F minor work op.95 (1810) 'quartetto serioso', though this has had the unfortunate effect of suggesting that its immediate predecessor, op.74 in E flat (1809), does not have to be taken so seriously.

Beethoven opp. 74, 95

In fact the ostentatious seriousness of op.95 is implicit in op.74, and the two works together inhabit a quartet style quite different from that of the 'Razumovsky' triptych. They are distinctly shorter, returning to

Haydn dimensions, and they take a further step, quite against the spirit of the times, in making the quartet a convening of different equals. In the first movement of op.74 this makes possible an exhilarating display of wholly new textures: not just the pizzicato arpeggios which have given the quartet its nickname of the 'Harp', but also bowed scales and arpeggios running from one instrument to another and occasionally filling the whole space. And in the adagio that follows attention is often drawn to the fact that four individuals are involved, with quite separate things to say even if harmonically they are happy to concur:



33 Beethoven: Quartet in E♭ op.74, second movement

The scherzo is once more in ABABA form, with the A sections in C minor and the B in C major, and as in op.59 no.3 it leads directly into the finale, a perfectly well behaved (though again texturally diverse) allegretto set of variations in E flat.

The shock of this, coming after the hard-driven presto scherzo, is almost as great as that of the blithe turn from F minor into F major towards the end of the finale of op.95. But, to be sure, the later quartet is formally, harmonically and emotionally much more troubled and searching than the 'Harp'. As in the F major 'Razumovsky' the first movement dispenses with an exposition repeat, but its scale is very much more compact, and can be so because the basic material is so briefly and brusquely stated: a flurry around the tonic that is present or implied in most bars of the movement, and which, repeated at the end, makes it clear that none of the problems have yet been solved. An inward adagio after this would seem glib, and so Beethoven provides instead an exploratory allegretto joined to another rough-rhythmed ABABA scherzo. There is then, for the first time in the work, a real slow tempo for the Larghetto espressivo, but this lasts for only seven bars before hastening into the Allegretto agitato of the finale.

These two quartets might be construed as a homage to Haydn, who had died shortly before Beethoven began work on op.74. The key of E flat, common in Beethoven but not used by him before in a quartet, was the one that Haydn had favoured above all others in his quartets, and there was also a precedent in Haydn for a profound A flat slow movement in an E flat quartet: Haydn had done that in op.20 no.1, a work which Beethoven had copied out in the middle 1790s. F minor, too, was a key honoured in quartets by Haydn. But if any tribute was intended, it takes place entirely on Beethoven's terms. The individualizing of the four instruments is his, and so too is the combining of the four movements, which in the F minor quartet is carried to a new pitch of musical and psychological intensity. It is not by chance that the finale reinterprets many of the fundamental motifs and harmonic pulls of the first movement, becoming another tense allegro which can only be brought to an end by a sudden switch into something completely different. And since Beethoven's immediate experience of quartet playing was provided by Schuppanzigh, not Spohr, he could feel some confidence that care and consideration would go into solving the interpretative problem he thus created.

It would require a prose as contrapuntally replete as Beethoven's opp.74 and 95 to give an adequate description of string quartet composition around 1810. While Beethoven was removing himself from history – continuing a historical development, certainly, but treating the medium with a seriousness accorded by none of his contemporaries – Spohr was writing his concerto quartets and the amateur was being served by the similarly abundant publications of Georges Onslow (1784-1853), a well born Auvergnois whose father was the exiled son of an English earl, and who was stimulated to embark on a musical career precisely because of his friendship with a group of amateurs interested in chamber music. There was also the boy Franz Schubert (1797-1828), whose family might well have provided Onslow with custom had they not included one who could himself supplement the household repertory of Haydn and Mozart.