

# History of the String Quartet

*featuring*



## THALEA STRING QUARTET

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# Meet the Thalea String Quartet

“Thalea never failed to deliver a stirring performance” - Calgary Herald

Recently named the Doctoral Fellowship String Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Maryland, the Thalea String Quartet is dedicated to bringing timeless music to audiences from all walks of life. From living rooms to concert stages worldwide, Thalea aims to connect with audiences on a musical, emotional, and personal level, from first-time listeners to string quartet aficionados. Top prize-winners at both the 2018 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition and the 2018 Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competition, Thalea was chosen as the Ernst Stiefel Quartet-in-Residence at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts for the 2019/20 season.

Visit [www.thaleastringquartet.com](http://www.thaleastringquartet.com) to read up on all things Thalea!



## Origins of the string quartet!

The origins of the string quartet begin with the Baroque trio sonata - two solo instruments and continuo section consisting of a bass instrument (such as the cello) and keyboard. By the early 18th century, composers were often adding a third soloist, omitting the keyboard part and letting the cello support the bass line.

First known string quartet - Alessandro Scarlatti's set of six works entitled "Sonata à Quattro per due Violini, Violetta [viola], e Violoncello senza Cembalo" (Sonata for four instruments: two violins, viola, and cello without harpsichord).

### Prototypes?

- Gregorio Allegri (1582–1652) composed a four-part sonata for string ensemble that is considered an important prototype string quartet.
- Another possible prototype or source could be the widespread practice of playing works written for string orchestra with just four players, covering the bass part with cello.

# Joseph Haydn

The string quartet rose to prominence with the work of Joseph Haydn, although his discovery of the quartet form appears to have arisen essentially by accident!

When he was a young composer around 18 (1755-1757), he worked for Baron Carl von Joseph Edler von F rnberg who wanted to hear some music. The available players happened to be two violinists, a violist, and a cellist, and Haydn received such general approval that he continued to work further in this form.

Haydn took up the genre again in 1769-1772 with the 18 quartets of Ops. 9, 17, and 20. These are written in a form that became established as standard both for Haydn and for other composers, namely four movements, consisting of a fast movement, a slow movement, a minuet and trio and a fast finale.



**Haydn listening to a string quartet**

## LISTENING

**Pick one of Haydn's early string quartets (Ops. 9, 17, or 20). Listen online, CBC radio, or from a CD.**

Which quartet did you choose? \_\_\_\_\_

What are the roles of the instruments? Who is carrying the melody, harmony, bass line, etc.). \_\_\_\_\_

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# Classical Era

The string quartet genre, and form, was established by the classical era and many composers were inspired by Haydn to explore this new medium.

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

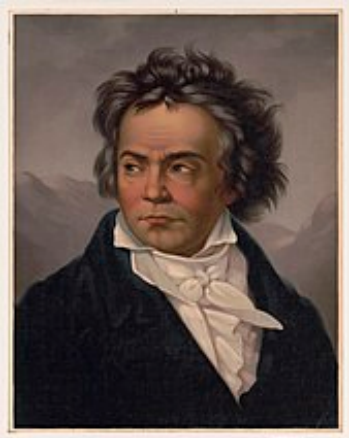


Mozart's music, like Haydn's, stands as an archetype of the Classical style. In his short life, he composed 23 string quartets. The six "Haydn" Quartets were written in Vienna during the years 1782 to 1785, and during this time, Haydn and Mozart had become friends, and sometimes played quartets together in Mozart's apartment, with Mozart playing the viola, and Haydn playing violin. During his last decade, Mozart frequently exploited chromatic harmony, seen in his String Quartet in C major, K. 465 (1785), whose introduction abounds in chromatic suspensions, giving rise to the work's nickname, the "Dissonance" quartet.

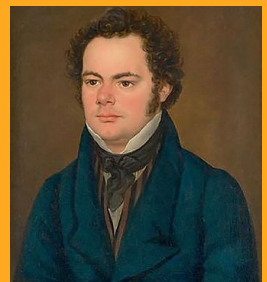
## Ludwig van Beethoven

If Haydn is today called the 'father' of the String Quartet, and Mozart took the form to new heights, then Beethoven – characteristically – took hold of it and completely transformed it. His quartets are in three "periods" – early, middle, and late.

- The early set produced six separate quartets; stunning, displaying a whole panoply of emotions.
- Forming the bulk of the Middle Quartets are the three Razumovskys – “[The Razumovskys are] long and difficult ... profound and excellently wrought but not easily intelligible – except perhaps for the third, whose originality, melody and harmonic power will surely win over every educated music lover.” The other two of the Middle Quartets are nicknamed, respectively, the Harp and the Serioso.
- Late- The ultimate in Quartet writing and in Beethoven. Aware that his life was running out, his deafness total, drained physically and emotionally, his health alternating between bad and worse he wrote five masterpieces. In sheer scale, length, and complexity they stand alone and countless books have been written about them.



## Franz Schubert



Like Mozart, Schubert's uncommon gifts for music were evident from an early age. Schubert had a natural instinct for melody and song, notable in everything he wrote, especially his String Quartet No.14 in D minor. Named "Death and the Maiden", It's impossible to listen to all four movements of the quartet without an awareness of death's shadow stalking Schubert and emerging in the most funereal passages.

# String Quartet “Classical” Form

Quartets written in the classical period usually have four movements with a large-scale structure similar to that of a symphony:

**1st movement: Sonata form, Allegro, in the tonic key**

**2nd movement: Slow, in the subdominant key**

**3rd movement: Minuet and Trio, in the tonic key**

**4th movement: Rondo form or Sonata rondo form, in the tonic key**

Substantial modifications to the typical structure were already achieved in Beethoven’s later quartets, and despite some notable examples to the contrary, composers writing in the twentieth century increasingly abandoned this structure.

## LISTENING & WRITING

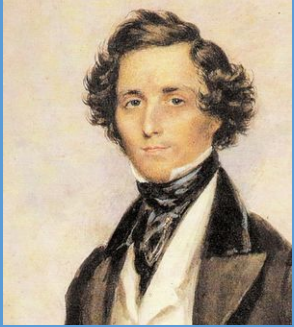
**Pick one of the string quartets mentioned above. Listen online, CBC radio, or from a CD.**

On a separate piece of paper, compare and contrast what you listened to (please make sure to list the composer and work) to the early Haydn quartet picked earlier.

Things to think about: how has the string quartet genre changed from its early beginnings? What the new roles of the instruments, the prominence of harmony and melody, and texture of the music?

# Romantic Era

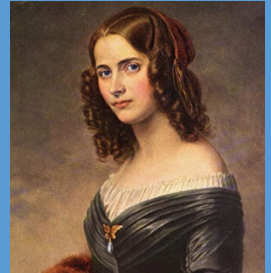
A slight slackening in the pace of quartet composition occurred in the 19th century. Composers often wrote only one quartet, perhaps to show that they could fully command this hallowed genre.



## Felix Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn was a child prodigy. He was already composing great music when he was a teenager. With Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47) a return to Classical ideals of form is seen, coupled, however, with Romantic enthusiasm. Of his about 24 chamber-music works, eight represent the composer at his best; these include five string quartets. Bonus: Watch [Thalea's recording of Mendelssohn's String Quartet in F minor, op. 80, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt. on Youtube](#)

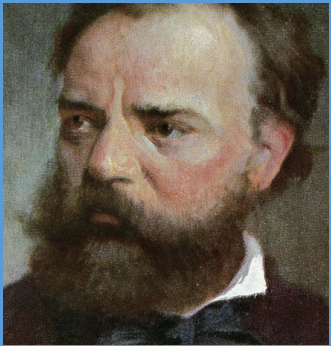
## Fanny Mendelssohn



Early on, Fanny helped Felix with structuring some of his pieces. Later, Felix was supportive of his sister but, like their father, discouraged her from actually publishing her music. Fanny wrote a String Quartet in E-flat major in 1834, and is noted for its imagination, freedom and sensitivity, as well as not always being easy to play!

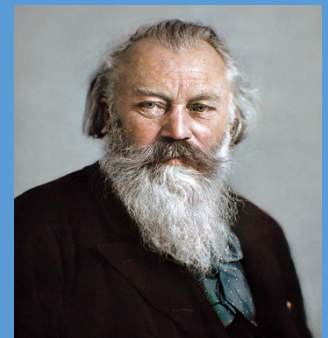
## Antonín Dvořák

The work of Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) represents a combination of the finest Romantic writing with a decidedly nationalistic flavour. Of about 30 works of chamber music, he wrote 14 string quartets. One of the string quartets, the American, Opus 96, purports to express Dvořák's impressions of American music.



## Johannes Brahms

It was Johannes Brahms (1833–97), who dominated the Romantic period. All of Brahms's 24 chamber-music works are highly successful; rich sonorities, thick textures, and rhythmic complexity are present everywhere, and the forms are those of the Classical period, somewhat modified in the light of Brahms's temperament and expressive requirements.



# 20<sup>th</sup> Century

With the onset of the Modern era of classical music, the quartet returned to full popularity among composers, and played a key role in the development of Arnold Schoenberg, Béla Bartók, and Dmitri Shostakovich especially. After WWII, some composers questioned the relevance of the string quartet and avoided writing them, but since the 1960s, many composers have shown a renewed interest.



## William Grant Still

William Grant Still was an American composer of nearly 200 works, including his famous Afro-American Symphony (1930), which was, until 1950, the most widely performed symphony composed by an American. Still was the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra, the first to have a symphony (his 1st Symphony) performed by a leading orchestra, the first to have an opera performed by a major opera company, and the first to have an opera performed on national television.

## LISTENING

Watch Thalea's recording of [Still's Lyric Quartette: I. The Sentimental One on Youtube](#), or listen to the media files from the Debut Atlantic website, from CBC radio, or from a CD. Close your eyes and listen actively with your imagination.

**Describe quantitative characteristics of the music (was it loud? soft? fast? slow?).**

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**Compare and contrast this piece with the other two quartets your listened to, and using these works as a reference, how has the string quartet evolved?**

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