Dmitri Shostakovich composed his eighth quartet in the summer of 1960 during a visit to Dresden. One of the most beloved of his works, this quartet's highly emotional content has been the subject of much speculation. Doubtlessly, the self-referential D-S-C-H motif and quotations from his other works prove that this piece is largely autobiographical. Additionally, Shostakovich suggested that this work was his own epitaph and dedicated it to the victims of fascism and war.\(^1\) While necessary to contextualize his works in the political landscape of Soviet Russia, the subjectivity of music and the necessary ambiguity of existence under despotic rule make it difficult to align his works with political agendas. Further, attempts to claim his works posthumously for such prospects cloud Shostakovich’s lived experience rather than focus on the anguish and depression he portrayed in the piece.\(^2\)

The quartet opens with the D-S-C-H motif treated canonically and then explores themes from his first and fifth symphonies. The second movement explodes dramatically with a reiteration of the theme from the first symphony before quoting from his second piano trio. The third movement takes the theme and turns it into a sinister waltz before a quotation of his first cello concerto. The fourth movement is in the uneasy key of C# minor and takes from the song “Tormented by Grievous Bondage” and the Opera “Lady Macbeth” then leading to the final movement which returns to the fugal treatment of the biographical motif.\(^3\)

Maurice Ravel completed his duo sonata for Violin and Cello in 1922. Dedicated to his friend Claude Debussy who had died 4 years prior (leaving Ravel as the leading French composer of his time), the slow third movement portrays the lament for his colleague’s death. This piece centers on the duality between minor and major thirds and sevenths and a revocation of formalized harmony. Ravel wrote,


“The music is stripped to the bone. Harmonic charm is renounced, and there is an increasing return of emphasis on the melody.” The opening angular line in the violin shows the interaction between the major and minor modes and returns later in many guises. The second movement focuses on the contrast between bowed and plucked notes as well as the major/minor duality. The raucous fourth movement combines all of these factors as well as the Hungarian virtuosity and dissonance of counterparts Bartók and Kodály into a strenuously polyphonic conclusion. The cyclical compositional methods employed by Ravel as well as the limited motivic material showed his affinity for Debussy’s concept of “economy of means” which was also favored by other post-war composers who emphasized thematic development.

Written at the end of his career, Brahms’s second string quintet is far less often recorded than the other beloved string sextets or quintets for clarinet and piano. This work may perhaps be more rigorously developed than the earlier chamber works but is still overflowing with vitality. The unique sonority of the added viola emphasizes the humanity of the work and mellows the overall sound of the group.

Composed in the Summer of 1890 while on vacation at Ischl, this quintet supposedly originated as one of the symphonies he had been working on but never completed. Its themes recall German humor, Slavonic melancholy, and Italian temperament. Peppered with charming waltzes and Hungarian bravado, this work garnered glowing praise from his colleagues. Joachim encapsulates his profound reaction to this work, “I am enormously struck by its boldness, strength, and the novelty of its harmony.”