Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)  

String Quartet No.75 in G, Op.76 No.1  
Allegro con Spirito  
Adagio sostenuto  
Menuetto (Presto)  
Allegro ma non troppo  

Count Joseph Erdödy (1754-1824) was the Hungarian Court Chancellor who had inherited his title on the death of his father, Count Johann Nepomuk Erdödy, in 1789. On acceding to the title, Joseph disbanded the orchestra, retaining just four players; two violinists, a viola player and a cellist. This quartet was not only obliged to perform to the Count at his home, but to travel with him and perform widely wherever they went; they became quite a regular feature on the Viennese musical landscape. Joseph Erdödy's situation was typical of the changes undergoing Austro-Hungarian aristocratic families at the time, where it was financially prudent to cut down on the size of the musical staff, and fashionable to reduce it to the refined and self-contained core of a string quartet. This explains the enormous and sudden rise in demand for, and popularity of, string quartets. In 1796 Count Joseph Erdödy commissioned Haydn to compose six quartets for his musicians. It was a generous commission – 100 ducats – but written into it was the conduction that nobody else should have access to the music for two years, after which Haydn was free to have them published and earn a fee from that. The group of six which constitutes what we now describe as the Op.76 group, was actually published in two volumes each with different opus numbers (75 and 76) by Artaria in Vienna in 1799, and in a single volume (as Op.76) by Clementi in London the same year.

In many ways this group of quartets is also Haydn's crowning achieving in the genre, something which was first identified by Frederik Silverstolpe, a Swedish Diplomat, in a letter dated 14th June 1797; “A few days ago I went to see Haydn again, who now lives right next to me. On this occasion, he played to me, on the piano, violin quartets which a certain Count Erdödy has ordered from him and which may be printed only after a certain number of years. These are more than masterly and full of new thoughts. While he played he let me sit beside him and see how he divided the various parts of the score.” Chopin later spoke of the Quartets as possessing “the perfection we admire”, while in more recent times the Haydn scholar Rosemary Hughes gushed; “Here is the melodic gift that was his from the outset, but with all its characteristics intensified. Here his sense of key relationships, always vivid and dramatic, is used with a profounder awareness of their underlying mystery. In the truest and most literal sense, these quartets both humanly and on the plane of sheer musical thought, are songs of experience".
The 1st movement of the first Op.76 quartet (originally published as Op.75) opens with three assertive chords from the whole quartet before the cello sets off with a dancing theme, later joined by the viola and with the violins eventually adding their voices. Here is Haydn at his most cheerful and jovial, but while the mood remains cheerful, the music actually fluctuates between the carefree dancing spirit of the cello theme and a more complex contrapuntal style. The net result is a movement of extraordinary richness and variety.

An intimate, musing quality informs the 2nd movement which, with its “slow progressions, syncopations and rich harmonisations” has been likened to Beethoven’s late quartets. The opening hymn-like theme reminds us that in the third of the Op.76 quartets, Haydn introduced the famous “Emperor’s Hymn”. One of the more endearing passages in the movement comes in a disarming dialogue between cello and first violin.

The perky, nimble Menuetto with its abrupt dynamic changes and pauses, which forms the 3rd movement is by no stretch of the imagination a true minuet, but really a scherzo in all but name. It is countered by a deliberately clumsy and lopsided Trio.

The minor-key opening of the 4th movement comes as a huge surprise, and after a while it seems as if Haydn himself is puzzled by this, for it seems to lose its way before switching into the major mode and skipping away energetically, not to say manically. But we have not said goodbye to the minor, and the movement periodically totters back into the minor tavern before taking its final and generous draughts in the major one.
Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

String Quartet No.2 in E flat, Op.26
Allegro
Intermezzo (Allegro con moto)
Larghetto (Lento)
Finale (Tempo di Valse)

Timing – 25:00

Born in Brno and brought up in Vienna, Erich Korngold was the son of an eminent Austrian music critic. When he was just five he had shown such precocious musical gifts that his father’s famous colleague, Eduard Hanslick, described him as “The Little Mozart”. Puccini said of him; “That boy’s talent is so great he could easily give us half and still have enough left for himself”. He was 10 when he played his own full-scale cantata Gold to Gustav Mahler, who immediately declared the boy a genius, and at the age of 11 he composed a Piano Trio and a Piano Sonata, which so impressed the great pianist Artur Schnabel that he championed both works across Europe. In 1910 the 13-year-old’s ballet score, Der Schneemann, created a sensation when it was presented at the Vienna Court Opera, and on hearing Korngold’s Sinfonietta (composed at the ripe old age of 14), Richard Strauss declared; “My first reactions on learning that this is the work of an adolescent boy are of fear and awe. It really is amazing”. His third opera, Die Tote Stadt, written in 1920 was probably his greatest single success, and even when he was well past the age when he could realistically be described as a “prodigy”, Korngold was still attracting superlatives from those who heard his music. In 1928 a poll amongst readers of the Neue Wiener Tagblatt voted him one of the two greatest living composers (the other being Schoenberg), and in that same year came the première of his fourth opera, Das Wunder der Heliane.

However, in the following decade Korngold’s fortunes began to take a downward turn for reasons other than musical. Vienna’s place at the heart of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire had diminished, and with it the kind of musical environment in which Korngold had so clearly flourished. On top of that, the rise of Hitler’s Nazi Party and the institutionalised anti-Semitism which was flooding through Austrian society, was beginning to affect Korngold. The German-based publishing house of Schott, which, in the words of Christian Heindl, “had hitherto almost torn the composer’s every new work out of his hands”, was rejecting his music. When Korngold submitted his 2nd String Quartet to Schott’s in October 1933, he received this response from the head of the company; “I would advise you, in your own interests, against publishing the string quartet. Like all chamber music, the string quartet can only be money-losing business, as there are absolutely no more amateurs to buy chamber music and the whole of Germany is not available for public performances at the moment”. (At that stage the German government had imposed a ban on performances of music by Jewish composers.)
The 2nd String Quartet was premiered in Vienna by the Rosé Quartet on 16th March 1934; it was not heard in the city again until the Sedlak-Winter Quartet performed it in November 1937 the last time any of Korngold’s music was publicly performed in the city before, quite literally at 24 hours’ notice, he set sail for the USA to score a Hollywood movie, and remained there for the rest of his life.

The Quartet opens with a richly melodious and almost playful 1st movement. Carroll suggests that in this movement “one can clearly feel the profound influence of the spectacular Austrian countryside” – Korngold wrote it mostly during the Summer of 1933 whilst staying at his country home at Gmunden in the Alps. If the 1st movement had something of a playful atmosphere, the 2nd movement is genuinely humorous, with two cheerful themes dancing around the quartet with an almost carefree abandon, and leaping with almost clownish glee across a whole range of keys. The 3rd movement opens with eerie harmonics and carefully treading chords from the lower strings, but the movement itself exudes a mood of deep calm with touches of sentimentality, as if Korngold is looking back nostalgically to a time when he was neither troubled by adult concerns nor political interference.

Heindl wrote of the Second String Quartet; “Without being superficial, it is unadulterated Viennese music in one of the most beautiful manifestations of that time”. That is most obvious in the 4th movement, a magnificent tribute to the Viennese Waltz which, again to quote Heindl evokes “an idyllic world, which, however, at that time, as before and since, was anything but idyllic”. And to quote Carroll;” Unlike Ravel, who believed the waltz was a decadent symbol of a dying civilisation, Korngold revelled in its heady rhythm”. The Waltz theme goes through a whole series of ever more lavish variations before ending with a gloriously extrovert flourish.
Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quintet in C, D.956
Allegro ma non troppo
Adagio
Scherzo (Presto) – Trio (Andante sostenuto)
Allegretto

Schubert died on 19th November 1828. While we might normally begin a note about a composer’s work by stating when he was born, Schubert’s death date is rather more relevant here since the String Quintet was completed just two months earlier. He was just 31, but he certainly knew of his impending death. In 1822 Schubert contracted syphilis and in 1823 was told the news – which in those pre-penicillin days meant an unavoidable early and agonising death. However, while such a death sentence would probably shock any of us today, early death was much more common in the unsanitary conditions of early 19th century Vienna; according to a paper written by Andreas Schaefer of the University of Leipzig Institute of Theoretical Economics/Macroeconomics, life-expectancy among adult males in early 19th century Vienna stood at 28 years.

Whether or not the String Quintet presages death, indicates a heightened sense of emotional self-reflection, or is merely the last flowering of an exceptionally precocious genius, it is widely recognised today as one of the truly great works in the pantheon of chamber music literature. In his epic 1929 *Cyclopaedia of Chamber Music* W W Cobbett declared that “nothing so ideally perfect has been written for strings as this inexpressibly lovely work”. In more recent times, Peter Watchorn has written; “There is no greater work of chamber music in existence than this piece, which inhabits a world of mystical and transcendent beauty”. It was not Schubert’s only string quintet – he had composed one in C minor in 1811, which stands as his first recognised chamber work – but it was to be his last ever chamber work and also his last purely instrumental work (three piano sonatas had been written in the weeks before the Quintet). As a summation of a brilliant composing career, it certainly takes some beating.

Sadly, although Schubert wrote in a letter dated 2nd October 1828, that he intended to arrange a performance of the Quintet “in the next few days”, it never materialised, and although the Viennese publisher Diabelli purchased Schubert’s manuscript score from the composer’s brother in 1829, it remained gathering dust in his offices until 1850 when the violinist Josef Hellmesberger discovered it and arranged to perform it with his own string quartet. The premiere took place in Vienna on 17th November 1850, just two days short of the 22nd anniversary of Schubert’s death. We must assume that Hellmesberger returned Schubert’s manuscript to Diabelli, who retired the following year. But Diabelli’s successor was unable to find it, so prepared a version for publication compiled from the parts prepared by copyists for the 1850 performance.
Schubert’s addition of second cello to the string quartet is often said to have originated from the Italian composer Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805). But, as Watchorn writes, it “represents an entirely different world from that of Boccherini. First is the sheer scale of Schubert’s work, with an opening movement that exceeds in length any of the Italian composer’s four movement quintets in their entirety. The second striking contrast is the complexity and breadth of the thematic ideas and the unprecedented expansion of the sonata form model to, as Robert Schumann would later describe it, ‘a heavenly length’, resulting in a first movement of twenty minutes’ duration”. He goes on to point out that “what appear as the five-voice textures equalling the number of instruments in the score are amplified through multiple stopping to often twice that number. Whereas Boccherini adds a genuine second bass part to the string quartet, Schubert often places the first cello high in its range, as a melodic voice in direct dialogue with the viola, or even one of the violin parts. Although, on paper a second bass instrument has been added, Schubert is exquisitely careful to maintain transparency”.

The 1st movement opens with a sustained C major chord which then side-slips on to a diminished chord before the music speeds up, establishes its tonal centre and sets off on its long but eventful journey. Of note is the wonderful duet for the cellos which marks the second subject group and the frequent shifts to exotic remote keys. In the view of the present writer, the 2nd movement is the most sublime creation in the entire chamber repertory. Brian Newbould, in his highly authoritative biography of the composer, suggests that in the course of this movement “divine peace confronts and dispels human Angst”. Against pizzicato cello notes and little interjections from the first violin, the three central instruments intone a divine theme which reveals its glories at such a slow pace that Newbould describes it as “statuesque”. Others have noted that the key of E major in which this movement is written represented for Schubert “heavenly Gates – the serenity of eternal life”. A complete change of mood comes with hunting-style 3rd movement which ebulliently gallops along before pulling itself up abruptly for the dark and at times desolate Trio. As with the Korngold Quartet, the 4th movement clearly evokes the dance music of Vienna, albeit with a decidedly Hungarian twist and a distinctly slippery ending.